



Religion & Forced Migration Initiative

Princeton University's Office of Religious Life

Working with Oral Histories

Getting started: Questions for discussion

1. Is there a difference between working with a written source like a newspaper or letter, and an oral history?
2. Oral histories are often presented in two forms: as an audio recording of the interview, and as a written transcription. Are these different sources? Why or why not?

What is an oral history?

Generally, an oral history is a free-flowing or semi-structured interview. This means that, unlike in a survey or some other forms of interview, the questions the interviewer asks will change based on the conversation and what the narrator (that is, the person being interviewed) says. The interviewer may have a list of questions prepared, but they will often diverge from these questions over the course of the interview. Oral historian Lynn Abrams writes that oral history is “a creative, interactive methodology that forces us to get to grips with many layers of meaning and interpretation contained within people’s memories.”¹

What makes oral history different from written sources?

In oral histories, the narrator and interviewer co-produce the interview: each of them contributes to the final product. Oral histories are also self-consciously historical, as both interviewer and narrator know that they are producing a record for the purpose of creating a historical record. Because oral historians work with living people, they can return to narrators to clarify questions, ask for more information, and seek out other narrators—something that historians working with the records of those long-dead cannot do.

¹ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 38.

Because oral history concerns living people, it poses ethical and legal challenges that other forms of historical research have not grappled with. Interviewers must be sure to obtain informed consent from their narrators, which can include allowing narrators to specify the terms on which their interview is shared. For example, someone may request that their interview is sealed until they die, or that their identity is concealed, etc. Oral historians must also be aware that their scholarship can affect people and communities very directly, and be prepared to take responsibility for this.

How can oral histories be used in historical research?

Just like any other primary source, historians can ask questions of oral histories that help them to understand people's memories, experiences, and subjectivities. Oral histories may be very well-suited to particular kinds of questions, such as questions about memory, family life, religious beliefs, and work experience. Oral history is an important method for understanding experiences and communities that may not appear in written records.

How can I use the Oral History Project on Religion and Resettlement in historical research?

The OHPRR archive is a great resource for people interested in learning more about the experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and advocates in the United States. Of course, its explicit focus is religion, but interviews cover everything from navigating immigration bureaucracy, to family life, to work and play, and much more.

Interviews can be searched by the narrator's place of origin, gender identity, place of resettlement, and so on. You can also search for specific topics and themes, like "discrimination" or "politics." Each interview has a time-stamped summary to accompany the recording, and you can also download a complete transcription. Many historians find transcriptions can be easy to work with because they allow you to more quickly search the material, take notes, and return to key ideas; however, they are no substitute for listening to the original. The audio files capture emotions, pauses, intonation, and other features of speech that can convey a great deal that is not reflected in the transcript.

All of the interviews that appear in the OHPRR online archive are open for use for teaching, research, and other non-commercial purposes. As with any other source, if you choose to use part of an oral history in a research project, you need to cite it. Citing your sources is not just about avoiding plagiarism. It's also about indicating the scholarly community with which you're engaging, and how others' ideas are shaping your own work. Citing sources both gives credit to the narrator and interviewer, and allows your audience to understand how you obtained information. Historical scholarship generally uses footnotes and bibliographies formatted in

[Chicago Style](#). The rest of this guide focuses specifically on citing oral histories; for other kinds of sources, refer to the Chicago Manual of Style, linked above.

Footnotes

In every sentence with a direct quotation, paraphrase, or piece of information from an interview, you must include a footnote specifying the source. Here is an example.

Ruth Delgado, from Guatemala, shared that when she faces hardship, “my eyes are set on the Lord. He's my provider, you know, my circumstance, it could, yes, sometimes it could take a hold of me, but it's not who I am.”¹

¹ Ruth Delgado, interview by Rosmeilyn Jerez, June 29, 2020, Hialeah, FL, Oral History Project on Religion and Resettlement, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, <https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/ruth-delgado> -.

Notice that the citation provides us not only with information about who said this quote, to whom, when, and where, but also information about where to locate the interview recording. If the person reading wanted to, they could locate the original interview very easily!

If you are citing many interviews from the same archive, you can abbreviate to make your citations slightly more compact. For instance:

Ruth Delgado, from Guatemala, shared that when she faces hardship, “my eyes are set on the Lord. He's my provider, you know, my circumstance, it could, yes, sometimes it could take a hold of me, but it's not who I am.”¹ Thang Mun Sum, from Burma, likewise found his faith a source of perseverance: “I think it's been Christianity...that helps me, like, that gives me the strength that I need to live day, day by day, like, like I said, I, I had it, I was very discouraged when I was in Malaysia. But I always know that it's just like, I always pray but you know, the prayer is not answered in one or two days, so I, I got discouraged, because of like that situation but I always believe that God will make a way from me.”²

¹ Ruth Delgado, interview by Rosmeilyn Jerez, June 29, 2020, Hialeah, FL, Oral History Project on Religion and Resettlement, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ (OHPRR), <https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/ruth-delgado> -.

² Thang Mun Sum, interview by Chesley Chan, July 18, 2020, Dallas, TX, OHPRR, <https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/thang-mun-sum--%28sumpi%29>.

Occasionally, you may want to cite longer chunks of an interview in which both the narrator and interviewer speak. For that, use a block quote: indent the block of text with a new line when the speaker changes. Don't use quotation marks, but place a footnote at the end of the quoted section.

Sometimes, interviewers and narrators found moments of connection, even in heartbreaking loss.

Chesley (interviewer): You were very young, you said six years old?

Merry: Yeah, six years old. I - this one - I can't remember exactly, but I remember like, mine is the dream or something. But, you know, when we are doing her funeral.

Chesley: Yeah.

Merry: So just a little bit, but there is a still until now, in my mind or somethings.

Chesley: Wow, so growing up with a big family without your mom, what was that experience like?

Merry: Um... After my mom's was not there, our family is very sad family become this.

Chesley: I'm sorry, Merry. I also want to let you know that I lost my mom when I was 12, so I can't relate to you exactly, but I just want you to know that I'm with you. Thank you for sharing that.

Merry: Yeah. In one family, no mother...no mom, that means you break your leg or your hand - one hands or you know, so my - My dad is doing the best as much as he can, but we are very big family. So we have - we are just trouble and trouble every day.¹

While we often think of archives as serving preservatory functions, the process of creating the OHPRR archive was also one of forging interpersonal relationships from unexpected places of common ground.

¹ Merry Seing Pai, interview by Chesley Chan, July 10, 2020, Stone Mountain, GA, OHPRR, <https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/merry-seing-pai>.

Bibliography

Every source that you cite in a footnote should also appear in your bibliography. Bibliographies are usually divided into sections by kind of source; oral histories can be grouped in their own section and organized alphabetically by narrator name.

Bibliography

Oral Histories

- Delgado, Ruth. Interview by Rosmeilyn Jerez. June 29, 2020, Hialeah, FL. OHPRR.
<https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/ruth-delgado> (accessed April 22, 2022).
- Pai, Merry Seing. Interview by Chesley Chan. July 10, 2020, Stone Mountain, GA. OHPRR.
<https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/merry-seing-pai> (accessed April 22, 2022).
- Thang Mun Sum. Interview by Chesley Chan. July 18, 2020, Dallas, TX. OHPRR.
<https://princeton-university.wixsite.com/oral-history-project/oral-archive/thang-mun-sum--%28sumpi%29> (accessed April 22, 2022).

Some tips

- If the interviewer and narrator are in different places, use the narrator's location.
- After you cite an interview for the first time, all subsequent footnotes can use abbreviated form. For Ruth's interview, that would look like this:
Ruth Delgado, interview by Rosmeilyn Jerez.
However, if there is any ambiguity—for instance, if there are two interviews with the same narrator on different dates—make sure to include enough information in the shortened citation so that readers can understand which interview is being referenced.
- When in doubt, cite!