

Module 2

Defining Oral History

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Supporting Questions

What is an oral history and who participates in it?

What is the relationship between counter-narratives and oral history?

What are the four components that define an oral history?

1. Can collecting community histories confront the silencing of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders?

Community historians have many tools to document the past including collecting photos or other community documents and researching government records like the census, birth records, or housing records. However, perhaps the most important tool available to a community historian is oral history.

One of the easiest ways to begin documenting **counter-narratives** in history is to conduct oral histories. An oral history is a planned and recorded conversation with a person focused on that person's memories of their life. Over the last fifty years, oral history has been one of the key tools used by community historians to tell Asian Americans and Pacific Islander history. In an oral history, the person who shares their memories is called the **historical narrator**. The person who asks the questions and records the interview is called the **interviewer**.

We define an oral history as a planned, collaborative conversation about personal life

experiences that is recorded and shared with other members of the community.

2. How Is Oral History Defined?

Oral histories are guided by a specific set of principles. An oral history is more than simply a conversation with a community member or relative about the past. You might regularly talk to your grandmother at the dinner table about her time growing up in the Pacific or your neighbor about his family in Korea, but these conversations are not oral histories. In community history, oral histories are defined by four central components: (1) Community oral histories are collaborative; (2) Community oral histories are planned; (3) Community oral histories are recorded; and (4) Community oral histories are shared with members of the community whose history is being documented.

Oral Histories Are Collaborative

More so than other types of interviews, an oral history interview is shaped by the collaboration between the interviewer and the narrator. The purpose of an oral history interview is NOT to record some facts about the life of your community narrator or to trick them into telling you an interesting story that will captivate audiences but that they will regret sharing. Rather, the purpose of an oral history interview is to work with your narrator to record a version of the narrator's life history that they feel comfortable sharing with the public.

All of us have aspects of our lives that are intriguing, but community historians should not try to record or share a narrator's private regrets or poor decisions without the narrator's permission. If a narrator wants to share these aspects of their lives with the public, then community historians should work with them to record and share them. If, on the other hand, they do not wish to share some aspects of their past, then an oral history interview should not include these stories.

To restate: when you work on an oral history, you are collaborating with the narrator to help them record a version of their memories they feel comfortable sharing with the community. This principle should guide all your actions as an interviewer. This approach is especially important in community histories, where we work with narrators from marginalized communities for whom this might become the only version of their life history recorded for

future generations.

Oral Histories Are Collaborative

Oral histories take careful planning on the part of both the interviewer and the narrator. Unlike everyday conversation that we have with elders or others in our lives, both the narrator and the interviewer prepare in advance which topics they will discuss and record. This planning process often takes the form of working together to create an **interview guide** that lists major topics and sample questions that the interview will cover.

Oral Histories Are Recorded

Oral histories are always recorded so that oral histories can be shared with their community. This distinguishes oral histories from the informal conversations you have with your relatives about their past. Recording also makes it possible for the interviewer to create a transcript that can be checked and edited. A **transcript** is a written version of the words spoken in the recording.

Without a recording, a transcript would not be possible. A transcript makes it easier for the narrator to check their oral history to make sure that the version of the story being told is the version they want shared with the public. In short, recording facilitates the process of transforming a person's memories into a primary source that can be used in retelling history. Without a recording, you have not conducted an oral history.

Oral Histories Are Shared with the Community

The goal of a community history is to challenge dominant narratives of the past in order to produce a more inclusive understanding of history. As such, a community history is almost always a form of counter-narrative. However, community histories can only challenge **dominant historical narratives** if the oral histories they produce are later shared with others. If the recordings are kept in a drawer and never shared, they will never become counter-narratives. Community historians conduct oral histories in order to share them with the community.

The sharing of oral histories usually takes two forms. First, community historians share their work by depositing oral history recordings and transcripts in a community library or archive,

making them available to members of the community with the narrator's approval. Second, community historians can create edited versions of their recordings to share with different audiences.

For example, I run the Sacramento COVID-19 Asian American Oral History Project at Sacramento State. Students in my classes interview local Asian Americans about their experiences during the pandemic with the goal of challenging dominant narratives that often portrayed Asian Americans as only victims of violence during the pandemic.

Students produce two public versions of their projects: (1) transcripts for archiving and (2) short video documentaries. The archived interviews are 30-40 minutes and their transcripts are twenty or more pages. The short video documentaries are capped at 8 minutes and are shown at venues like Sacramento State's Asian American Studies Art and Media Showcase and the Sacramento Asian Pacific Film Festival. Producing two versions helps these oral histories reach different audiences.