



Archiving and Exhibiting Oral Histories

Saturday, May 20, 2006

10:00 am to 11:30 am

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

At the first meeting to organize Rainbow History, we set collecting community oral histories as our top priority. Rainbow History's need was particularly acute because there were no centrally collected records of the Washington, DC LGBTQ community's history.

Before getting to how we conduct the oral history interview, let me describe what we collect and the structuring of interviews.

Life Stories

Our first and primary target has been to collect life stories, or as we phrase it to potential narrators, stories of what it has been like to be us in the metro DC area.

Unlike interviews, these life-stories are relatively free-form. The narrators themselves guide the content and the documenter simply helps them along the way. Most narrators follow a chronology and, in fact, we often start them on this path by asking them to describe when and why they came to DC (if they aren't natives) or when and how they first made contact with others like them (if they are natives).

Our documenters take notes that help with later indexing but also are useful for restarting the narrative flow when the narrator runs out of steam or content. Just asking a question or for further detail will often bring the narrative back to life.

Some narrators will actually prepare for a session by making detailed notes of what they want to cover. Most will speak as they are moved by the flow of the session. The majority follow a chronology, instigated no doubt by the way we start the session. However, some, especially those who prepare for the session, will proceed topically, which often leads to digressions and free associations during the recording session.

Rainbow History works very hard to ensure that its collection reflects the demographics of its community. At present, African-Americans represent 40% of the narrations, Caucasians represent 50%, and Hispanics represent 7%. Male

and female narrators are at parity. We have had the most difficulty in getting bisexuals and the transgendered to share their stories.

We also work to ensure that the collection is not just about the “important people” in the community. Everyone has a story to tell and we work to get everyone to tell their story.

Targeted Interviews

Rainbow History does, of course, do targeted interviews, often with people identified as topical sources in the course of recording their life stories. These interviews work to specific needs for information for research and for backgrounding documents or online exhibits.

Panel Discussions

Over the past six years, Rainbow History has sponsored more than thirty topical discussions of our local history. Because we tape every discussion, each of these panels becomes a stealthy topically-focused oral history. As public events, publicly taped, the recordings are available for use as audio clips in our online documentation of aspects of our history and are more readily released to researchers. These ‘stealthy’ oral histories provide important insights and corroboration of incidents and developments in the creation of our local LGBTQ community.

Access to Recordings

Each narrator of a life story signs a release giving Rainbow History full rights to the tape and its contents. These rights can and often are limited in writing on the release by the narrator. We never release a tape or a transcript, even if we have the right to do so, without first contacting the narrator for his or her permission. Many times we put the narrator in touch with the person who has requested the tape so that they can discuss how the tape is to be used and what the purpose of the research might be.

Online Information

Rainbow History doesn’t make transcripts of oral histories freely available via its website. However, we do maintain a list of tapes available, both life stories and topical discussions. Researchers and students can easily identify which oral histories or topical discussions could be of use to them by running through the online lists.

The list of life story narrators indicates their ethnic background, major events or groups with which they were involved, and the decades that their story covers.

Interview Techniques

Setting the Scene

Creating a friendly supportive environment and a feeling of trust is crucial to any recording session, whether it is of a life story, a targeted interview, or a topical discussion.

We first agree with the narrators on a place where they will feel comfortable telling their stories. If it seems more convenient or comfortable, we go to their homes. More often, though, we meet in a relatively quiet neutral location.

Before each recording session, the narrators are invited to read and sign the release form and are specifically urged to add whatever restrictions they feel they need. Sometimes the restrictions concern use of names or a period during which the recording is closed to access. This sense of control is important to building the trust that makes for a successful oral history session.

When possible, we do a bit of a background refresher for topics or events that may come up in a person's life story. The sense that the documenter has thought about the narrator also contributes to a positive atmosphere.

The Session

We try to set up the physical setting so that it is not threatening. Most often, if the furniture allows it, we do not sit directly across from the narrator. To some that direct opposition can be threatening or too intimate. It often makes it easier for a narrator to share very personal aspects of his or her life if they don't have to look directly at the documenter.

We explain at the outset that we will take notes so that if they get stuck we can prompt them about something they have already mentioned. Taking notes also seems to validate the importance of a person's story: if you're writing it down, it must be worth telling.

Because we try to get 'ordinary' people (who often think they have nothing to share) to tell their stories and because we are always emphasizing that everyone has a tale to tell, note-taking underscores the significance of the story.

Listening

Another way to support the narrator, especially when they are telling personal and/or disturbing aspects of their story, is to demonstrate active listening. This involves

- nodding in support,
- offering supportive interjections and agreement,

- asking for clarification, and
- repeating back to them key parts of what he or she has just said.

The atmosphere of trust, interest, and support can sometimes lead to narrators sharing disturbing parts of their life stories. In the intimacy of a recording session, particularly in a private setting, it is not unusual to hear about personal traumas of abuse, loss of partners, and even attempts at suicide.

Winding Up

When the session ends, it is important to reinforce the narrator's access to and control of their story. We often make a copy of the tape for them to keep and will share the transcript with them once it is completed.

Narrators are always invited to add to their taping at a later date if they wish.

Keeping a collection of oral histories is an incredible responsibility. It not only provides important first person accounts of life in our communities but for the individual and her or his family it constitutes a legacy, a legacy that we accord high respect. For some people it may be the only record of their passing through this world.