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Ethics and Interpersonal Relationships in Oral History Research

Valerie Yow

As oral historians, we enter a home or workplace and ask people questions that can make them see their lives differently. We come in a special role—as collectors and preservers of accounts of human experience for generations to come—that can inspire people to speak honestly and fully about their experiences. They may entrust us with information they would not normally tell a stranger because they see us as having a special relationship to them, as someone who will tell their story to a wider audience or future generations, as they have told it to us.

How do we handle this trust? The Oral History Association's Principles and Standards state succinctly: "Interviewers should guard against possible exploitation of interviewees and be sensitive to the ways in which their interviews might be used."¹ The American Historical Association's statements on professional conduct are also clear in insisting on the interviewer's obligation to protect narrators: "The interviewer should guard against possible social injury to or exploitation of interviewees and should conduct interviews with respect for human dignity."² Along similar lines, codes of ethics in sociology, anthropology, and psychology emphasize the researcher's responsibility to avoid harm to human

VALERIE YOW is the author of the recently published *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1994).

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Sally Smith Hughes and Lu-Ann Jones, and an insightful critique by Linda Shopes.

¹ *Principles and Standards of the Oral History Association*, Section "Responsibility to Interviewees," 2, item 7.

² American Historical Association, *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct*, Section "Statement on Interviewing for Historical Documentation," item 4, 1992.

subjects. Indeed, the stance has become pro-active, admonishing researchers to protect subjects.³

At the same time, social scientists are commanded by the guidelines of their professions not to distort or suppress research findings. As historians, we are aware that evasiveness and omissions of documented evidence destroy the credibility of the history we write, rendering it useless as a contribution to understanding the historical phenomenon under scrutiny.

Because of the nature of oral history research, specifically the one-on-one contact with living persons, dilemmas often arise over which takes priority—the narrator’s well-being or the respect for evidence. What happens when consideration for the narrator’s well-being conflicts with the presentation of important evidence? When telling the truth about the past (as we see it from the evidence) might damage the reputation of someone who has moved on in a life and now confronts different dilemmas? When the researcher’s good feelings about a community or awareness of its needs competes with the obligation to tell a truth that might harm that community in some way? When the goal of a full account prompts the interviewer to ask questions that might cause the narrator pain? What happens when the narrator’s feelings are hurt because the interviewer he or she thought was a friend has gotten the needed information and ended contact? When is the interviewer/writer justified in manipulating, deceiving, or inflicting harm on the narrator in the interests of a presumably “greater truth?”

We can follow with certainty the professional guidelines in most interviewing situations, but in many cases solutions are anything but clear-cut. This essay considers some of the subtle, puzzling ethical issues that so often complicate our work, blurring the hard edges of certainty about what is the right thing to do. I will discuss these in the context of specific problems encountered in the course of interviewing, preparing a document for publication, or publishing a history based on interviews.

My framework for considering these dilemmas derives from

³ American Psychological Association, *Ethical Principles of Psychologists* (Amended June 2, 1989), Principle 9, “Research with Human Participants.” American Sociological Association, *Code of Ethics*, Section I, “The Practice of Sociology,” Subsection B, “Disclosure and Respect for the Rights of Research Populations.” The Council of the American Anthropological Association, *Statements on Ethics, Principles of Professional Responsibility*, Section 1, “Relations With Those Studied.”

current writing and practice emphasizing awareness of the complexity of context in this kind of interviewing. Humanists in the social sciences have been very much concerned with relationships between researcher and the researched.⁴ Feminist scholars across social science disciplines have called attention to the possibility of exploitation of researched persons.⁵ This new methodology demands that we be mindful of the effects of the research both on ourselves and on the people researched. We seek to become more aware of the political situation in the interpersonal relationship and of the political context within which interviews can be used. We analyze the effects of differences in gender, race, class, status, age, and culture. The stance that there is a researcher and there is a subject is replaced by the conviction that two people, each bringing a different kind of knowledge to the interview, share equally in a process of discovery.

With this paradigm in mind, I discuss here ethical issues common enough in oral history research that many will seem generally familiar to this journal's readers. But each oral history is the product of a unique and dynamic relationship between narrator and interviewer, and there is no one answer for how a dilemma should be handled. By considering a number of specific cases, I hope to suggest some possible approaches to dealing with conflicting responsibilities.

Presentation of the Narrator in Published Writing

As we pry into our narrators' private lives or the secrets of their public or professional lives, we often have to consider the effects of making public the whole story. When I was researching

⁴See, for example, Herbert C. Kelman, "Privacy and Research With Human Beings," *Journal of Social Issues* 33 (1977): 169-95. For reflections on effects of the research process on the researcher, see Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

⁵Daphne Patai, in "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" *International Journal of Oral History* 8 (February 1987): 5-27, goes beyond professional guidelines in raising questions about possible exploitation of narrators. See also Judith Stacey, "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?" in Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) 111-119. Arlene Daniels, "Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Field Work," *Qualitative Sociology* 6: 3 (1983): 195-214. Kathryn Anderson, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner, "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring, 1987): 102-127.

the history of a hospital, I encountered a situation involving a negative presentation of personalities that I thought I could solve in a way at once ethical and compassionate. The institution had a dual headship: medical director and administrative director. There were personality clashes between the two, as I soon found out in sly innuendos offered on-the-record, or in whispered conversations after the tape recorder was turned off. I respected the general rule: one must not suppress evidence, but on the other hand, one cannot use information told confidentially and without a release form. Therefore, I did not feel I could make specific use of this information. Furthermore, I came to believe that personal animosity was not so to blame for these confrontations so much as a structure that did not clearly delineate powers clearly. Thus the history I wrote suggested that the lack of clarity in the structure of authority did not permit smooth functioning.⁶ I told the truth as I saw it, in a way that I damaged no individual's reputation. I admit that I took some comfort in that, and here my own emotional needs may have impinged: I was dimly aware that in coming to a more structural conclusion I had been swayed to some extent by my desire to avoid individual characterizations or judgments. But still, I thought that conclusion was the closest to the truth that I could get.

In another situation, I soon realized from the accounts told to me that an individual's personality had indeed had consequences for the institution. Arrogant and insensitive, this individual had on several occasions exacerbated conflicts that might have been solved quietly and amicably. I approached the testimony critically: social groups—work groups, families, communities—always have some gossip floating around. But when someone in power behaves destructively, as indicated by corroborating evidence, that's more than gossip. In this case, narrators had recounted their observations on tape and I had release forms. In writing the history, however, I knew that the individual was in the midst of a career and I was reluctant to discuss his personal failings, or his psychological problems, lest my published history damage his reputation outside the institution. Moreover, I was aware that I disliked the man and I did not want to let my feelings intrude on the writing

⁶ Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1994) 97.

of the history by presenting him in what might be an unnecessarily negative light. And I did not want to risk involving the institution in a law suit over something I had written. All of these considerations probably informed my decisions. I chose to write about his research without discussing in detail his participation in an event where his behavior had negative consequences for the institution. I continued to have nagging thoughts that I was wrong not to tell the whole truth, yet I felt that I acted compassionately and responsibly concerning a narrator and the institution. In the process, however, my responsibility as a historian had undergone a subtle redefinition—tell as much of the truth as you can without hurting anybody living now. In retrospect, I would handle this differently: I think the rule-of-thumb must be that if an individual's behavior proved to have significant consequences in the institution's history, then it should not be omitted or down-played.⁷

Unconscious Advocacy

In a similar situation—one not involving a single individual but a group—I worry that I was affected too greatly by my respect for an institution in the public presentation of the oral history evidence. For a commissioned history of a psychiatric hospital, I had an office in the hospital (across the courtyard from the emergency room) during the oral history interviewing period and the document search. On weekends, I had lunch in the patients' cafeteria; during the week, I ate with staff. I went to different offices to record oral histories—to the occupational therapy unit, to the social work wing, to the research offices, etc. I was thus able to observe patients and staff in a variety of settings. Everyone, from maintenance workers to psychiatrists, discussed with me their hopes, goals, problems, and feelings. I began to identify with the work community, and although state law forbade me to know the names of patients or to interview them, I began to identify with them as well. In talking with the psychiatrist in charge of the women's unit, for example, I heard myself taking the role of patient in the questions I asked about procedures.⁸

Unconscious advocacy, or to use Carl Ryant's term, "good-

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

will advocacy,”⁹ undoubtedly affected my interviews. Many individuals who had worked at the hospital for thirty years or more unconsciously slanted their accounts because they had such strong identification with the place. And some probably refrained from discussing negative incidents because they thought their loyalty might be questioned and their jobs placed in jeopardy.

My concern here, however, centers on my own behavior as an historian. I did seek testimony from people who no longer worked in the hospital and from a few who had never worked there but had had dealings with hospital staff. I asked hospital personnel some hard questions, particularly in regard to unionization and such matters as the failure of a neighborhood clinic set up in the seventies. But the question I ask myself now is whether I approached the recorded testimony in a sufficiently critical manner, since I liked the individuals, respected the work the hospital does, and would not have wanted to publish anything that might harm the reputation of this work community. I would have viewed conscious suppression of information as unethical, of course, but my feelings may have unconsciously influenced my research questions and my handling of evidence. Re-reading the history now, for example, I realize that I failed to confront or explore the fact that the hospital was slow to implement a certain treatment proven to be of help and already in use at some other major university hospitals. I know of no other way to cope with “goodwill advocacy” except to maintain continuously a self-reflective and self-critical stance, especially during the interviewing period when it may be so tempting to refrain from challenging questions. Later, in reviewing the narrative based on the interviews, historians need to be aggressive in questioning what has been omitted and what downplayed. An interviewer’s retrospective comments included in a tape collection, or an author’s preface to a published work can alert the reader to possible bias.¹⁰

⁹Carl Ryant, “The Public Historian and Business History: A Question of Ethics,” in Theodore J. Karamanski, ed., *Ethics and Public History: An Anthology*, (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger, 1990), 57-64, esp. 60-61.

¹⁰Ronald C. Tobey, “The Public Historian as Advocate: Is Special Attention to Professional Ethics Necessary?” in Phyllis K. Leffler and Joseph Brent, eds., *Public History Readings* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing, 1992), 132. Donald Page, “Ethics and the Publication of Commissioned History,” in Karamanski, *Ethics and Public History*, 66. Ryant, “The Public Historian and Business History,” 62.

Professional Relationship vs. Friendship

Consider another aspect of the interpersonal relationship. Attraction to individuals is perhaps inevitable in research where one comes to know well the course of narrators' lives, their fears and their dreams, their moments of happiness and of pain. Narrators are inclined to feel close to someone who has listened understandingly, and they begin to think of the interviewer as a friend. The interviewer thinks of herself or himself as a researcher and yet soon becomes aware that a real liking is developing. How can this relationship between interviewer and narrator be defined and managed so that no one feels used? How can boundaries be maintained and expectations clarified so that no one is taken advantage of, no one's feelings are hurt?

Sociologist Arlene Daniels found herself fascinated by two narrators, one a psychiatrist in the military, and another, in a later project, a woman who was a leader in volunteer work in her community. "It was difficult to see how the glitter of interesting personality that surrounded these figures was a product of how much I needed them," Daniels reflected.¹¹ Later, the military man's wife was to complain that Daniels had not come to see them once the research was completed. In a similar situation, Lynwood Montell asked a seventy-five-year old woman, Ina Gilpin, to accompany him to some interviews with people whom she knew. "Having Ina along provided a natural entre to narrators who would have been difficult if not impossible for me as a stranger in the area to approach in successful terms," he explained.¹² Montell was clear that this was a professional relationship, but Ina believed it was a friendship. Sensing her expectations, he tried to keep in touch by sending birthday cards and Christmas cards as well as occasional letters, but Ina felt neglected and said so.¹³

Ethically, we oral historians must explain clearly the purpose of the research. A friendship may develop after the research project comes to a close, but in an on-going project the researcher wants to get something from the narrator to further a purpose outside

¹¹ Arlene Daniels, "Self-Deception and Self-Discovery in Field Work," *Qualitative Sociology* 6:3 (1983): 195-214, esp. 209.

¹² Lynwood Montell, "Me 'n Ina: Dual Viewpoints on the Fieldwork Relationship," *Southern Folklore* 47:1 (1990): 51-56, esp. 52.

¹³ *Ibid.* 53 and 56.

the relationship, and therefore this is not a disinterested friendship. I believe that we are obligated to indicate that this is a professional relationship which will end when the project is completed. Often, for example, in interviewing professionals, I find myself saying something like, "When we end our work together as this project nears completion, I will send you a copy of the tape. And I want you to know that I appreciate your contribution and value the time you are giving me, even though we may not always keep in touch." And I often sense by the narrator's behavior that such a clear distinction between friend and co-researcher is clearly understood, expected, and appreciated.

Both prior experience and social class impinge here, however: many people we interview do not have a concept of "professional relationship." While some middle-class people may distinguish between friendship and professional relationship, many others, including many middle-class individuals, live and work in cultures where business relationships are also friendships.¹⁴ I think this was the case with Ina Gilpin and with Daniels' narrators even though they came from different social backgrounds.

As the quote from Arlene Daniels reminds us, the other side of the coin to this attraction between interviewer and narrator is interviewer's need. For Daniels and Montell, the narrator answered a need not directly involved in giving information in their own interviews—whether providing access to a culture or to other narrators. I encountered a somewhat different situation in a project on mill workers, during which I interviewed the women while my male co-researchers Brent Glass and Hugh Brinton interviewed mostly men. I justified this by saying that women will talk more readily to another woman about personal issues, but really I enjoyed sitting in their kitchens, talking to them. The experience reminded me of being in my mother's kitchen as a child, of the security in feeling "we are women in this together." This influenced my interviewing style as well, possibly leading me to shy away from distressing questions.¹⁵

This certainly made it difficult to define this simply as a professional relationship because my own need impinged. Although I always stressed the professional nature of the interviewer/narrator

¹⁴Linda Shopes, communication to author, January 31, 1994.

¹⁵Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 178.

relationship, I have gone back to visit the narrators whose company I enjoyed especially, and told them I had missed them. This expression of feeling when the research was finished put the relationship in a different category—friendship. I hope. Again, the only way I know to correct for this is to be aware of some perhaps inherent and unavoidable tensions, and to maintain a constantly reflexive stance about their influence on the research.

Trust in the Interviewer/Narrator Relationship

Another ethical issue is closely related to those discussed so far: the use of this liking and trust to get the narrator to reveal things that might be harmful to her or his own interests. Most narrators protect themselves, but not everyone.¹⁶ Judith Stacey in her essay, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?” warned against leading the narrator to “tell all” by being such a good confidante and defining the relationship as one between equals that all defenses are removed.¹⁷

An elderly person or very trusting person, for instance, may sign a release form without understanding its full implications. He or she likes you and believes that you, the interviewer, will not use information in a way that might be harmful. Often this is implied rather than spoken. But if, after reviewing the tapes, you become aware of statements that might harm the narrator or someone else, I believe it is ethically if not legally necessary to return the release form and tape to the narrator and discuss possible consequences.¹⁸ Pointing out alternatives, such as sealing a portion of the tape, might be helpful to the narrator. Some might feel this tantamount to encouraging suppression of evidence, but by limiting only the time the evidence is withheld, I hope we still act within the guidelines of our profession.

Once, for a college history project, I was recording the memories of famous alumnae. One woman, who had become a well-known physician and administrator, began to criticize specific faculty members for not providing the rigorous courses in science she needed to have had in preparation for medical school. I stopped

¹⁶Harriet Nathan, communication to Sally Hughes, March 1994.

¹⁷Judith Stacey, “Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?” *Women's Words*, 113.

¹⁸I am indebted to Sally Smith Hughes who reminded me of this situation, letter to author, December 4, 1992.

the recording to inform her that faculty sometimes came into the oral history office to listen to their now-famous former students. In response, she decided not to be so specific, but to frame her words as advice for curriculum improvement. She clarified her objectives and got her meaning across, but without hurting anyone's feelings.¹⁹

Sometimes, of course, it is difficult to guess what a narrator might find objectionable, even when you feel his or her implicit trust in your protection. Oral historian LuAnn Jones recounts taking care to ask a narrator, before making the tape accessible to others, how she felt about the interview's revelations of stories about fights over her husband's drinking. The narrator did not mind making this public at all—but surprised Jones by asking her to be sure to seal lines that implied she thought a particular relative was stingy. This suggests the importance of active checking: the narrator knows better than the interviewer what might have an undesired impact in her or his world.²⁰

What happens when you no longer have access to the narrator? Sally Smith Hughes points to situations in which a sudden decline in health prevented the narrator from completing the transcript review. If the narrator had been able, he or she might have removed certain offensive remarks from the published transcript. In two cases, the oral histories were part of a series co-sponsored and published by a prominent medical society. Hughes knew they would be read by a number of the narrator's colleagues, some of whom were bound to be hurt or offended by indiscrete remarks about certain colleagues.

In one instance, an able spouse stepped in to finish the review and in the process eliminated most controversial statements while preserving the information essential to the history.²¹ In the second case, the review was up to Hughes because there was no close relative to take the responsibility. In both histories, the off-the-cuff remarks were characteristic of the narrators' conversation style and seemed directed to Hughes rather than intended for a wider audience. She asked herself the question, "Do the edited accounts paint a less-than-faithful portrait of the narrators?" and concluded

¹⁹ Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 95.

²⁰ LuAnn Jones, communication to author, February 8, 1994.

²¹ Sally Smith Hughes, communication to author, March 1994.

that in these cases there were other indications of narrator personality remaining in the text. The other crucial question was, “Is the deleted material necessary to the historical record?” Since the indiscreet remarks directed against individuals seemed personal asides and not important historical information, Hughes concluded that she could delete them from the publicly available transcript—while advising the reader of her editing—without damaging the historical record.²²

The Potentially Painful Question

In trying to get the “whole truth,” we often realize we need to ask questions in an oral history interview that may cause the narrator some emotional pain. If the information is needed and can be gleaned in no other way, we have to consider ways to diminish the narrator’s discomfort as much as possible. Sociologist Jack Douglas has advised waiting until the narrator is at ease in the interview situation and “circling” around the painful question. He points out that a comfortable narrator will often refer to the topic without being asked.²³ The interviewer can take this as a cue that the narrator expects to discuss the topic and is ready for questions about it. And sometimes the narrator discusses the topic without even being asked a specific question.

If the narrator avoids the topic entirely, however, the interviewer can create a context in which the question can be asked. Sally Smith Hughes stresses the necessity of creating an ambiance of frank and open dialogue. She prefaces questions on a difficult topic with a reminder that the main purpose is to set the record straight, and then frames the question by telling the narrator that he or she has “a chance to explain his or her point-of-view on an issue that has several possible perspectives.”²⁴

This approach arises from Hughes’s experience interviewing important scientists. In one interview, the time came to ask a difficult question: “What do you think of the ethics of making corporate profit from scientific discoveries based on publicly funded university research?” After a lengthy pause, her subject responded, phras-

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jack Douglas, *Creative Interviewing* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1985), 138.

²⁴ Hughes, communication to author, March 1994.

ing his answer with extreme care. Hughes then followed with more specific, probing questions which he answered cautiously. Later, the recording finished, he remarked that her questions indicated hostility to his point-of-view. She explained that the question gave him an opportunity to present a contrary opinion on an important but controversial topic. Clearly, although he had taken some offense at her line of questioning, Hughes had established an ambiance of mutual respect and trust, and so he contained his discomfort.²⁵

In this instance, the implication that the subject was involved in actions whose ethics were under question may have made the discussion troublesome for him. But in other cases, questions might cause not just discomfort but real emotional pain. Even though the aim of the researcher is to cover all historically significant aspects of a topic, I am reluctant to push delicate questions without talking first about such questions with the narrator. A frank discussion about feelings around the topic—my own and the narrator’s—can help the narrator understand that my intention is not to harm. I also give an assurance that we can end discussion on a sensitive topic for a while and return to it a little later when each of us has had some time to deal with feelings aroused by the situation under discussion.

Sometimes, of course, the interviewer asks a question thought to be innocuous, but which unexpectedly brings up painful memories for the narrator. A seemingly innocent statement I once made in an interview, “So, you had three children at the time?” evoked a response about a fourth child who had just died. The interviewer must be sensitive to the narrator’s inner struggle and try to discern, often from nonverbal cues, what to do next. I usually stay silent for a few minutes and then ask the narrator if he or she needs some time to think silently about this. If there is much distress, I ask if the narrator wants to discontinue the interview for a brief time.

Use of the Oral History for the Narrator’s Purpose

Another ethical dilemma arises from the frequent assumption that narrators are empowered by oral history’s insistence on the importance of their participation in an historical event and by the

²⁵ *Ibid.*

implied audience of generations that it offers. As long as we are researching individuals and communities we love, or movements we approve of, this makes oral history a very satisfying endeavor. The ethical issue arises in interviewing people with values you hate.

Kathleen Blee, drawing lessons from her oral history research with Ku Klux Klan members, emphasizes the importance of not letting disgust blind you to a questioning process that would permit systematic and deep analysis. She regarded the study of the Klan as a contribution to the understanding of our history. She decided to explore women's actions on behalf of the Klan, proceeding on the hunch that although women had not attracted the attention of historians who assumed they were only passive followers, they might have been quite significant in the history of the Klan. She had feelings of disdain about this group of women, but once into the interviewing project, Blee found to her surprise that "rapport with politically abhorrent informants can be surprisingly, and disturbingly, easy to achieve." By constructing a positive interpersonal relationship and giving them the opportunity to tell their stories in that context, she enabled them to strengthen their belief that theirs was a harmless movement of ordinary people who got a lot of good from membership.²⁶ Blee rightly ponders the ethical implications of thus empowering people who have been "active in the politics of intolerance, bigotry, or hatred."²⁷

Certainly we cannot shut our eyes to the negative aspects of our history and we must do whatever research is necessary to understand where we have been. In the past, I have advised, "Be conscious that your proper role is that of listener. . . . Remind yourself that the narrator has to live with the mistakes that he or she has made, while you do not—you live with your own."²⁸ But a good listener gives the narrator the opportunity and encouragement to justify his or her actions, to come to terms with deeds in the past, making sense of them in as favorable a light as possible (if that is what the narrator needs to do). This may be the consequence, but we cannot presume to control our narrator's thoughts. And in the writing that we do, we have to take a critical approach to sources

²⁶Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *The Journal of American History* 80:2 (September 1993): 596-606, esp. 605-606.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 597.

²⁸Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 127.

of information. Furthermore, as historians, we present the consequences of our narrator's actions as we see them, regardless of how the narrator sees them.

Misrepresentation of the Research to the Narrator

Blee listened, accepted the situation in which her narrators assumed that she felt as they did about race, and on the basis of this rapport obtained useful information. This is a grey area: she did not exactly misrepresent the research but she opened herself to the charge of lying by omission about her own views. I am certain that if a narrator asks directly, "Do you believe as I do?" we have to tell the truth. And even an omission that creates a false impression seems to me a violation of trust.

This leads to the question of when a researcher is justified in misrepresenting the objective of the research to the researched. Social scientists often excuse misrepresentation by arguing that they cannot get the information any other way and that after the research is concluded, they inform their subjects of their actual purpose. This may be acceptable in experiments in psychology or sociology, but an oral history interview has got to be founded on trust even as the research goes on.

Perhaps the most troubling example of misrepresentation to the narrator is Claude Lanzmann's videotaped interviews with former Nazi extermination camp officials. For the film *Shoah* he used hidden videotaping equipment, recording both voice and visual images. His narrators would not have spoken had they known they were being recorded. Former Nazi officials may not deserve respect or any kind of protection, and it has been argued that this releases the historian from an obligation. Yet, I interpret our profession's guidelines to mean that even if the individual before you does not deserve respect, the interviewer participates in a process in which one must act honestly.

Still, when the historical topic is of such consequence, when understanding how this mass extermination of human lives could occur is so crucial to our definition of ourselves, there is a temptation to justify Lanzmann's methods. We need all the information, all the insight we can get. In this situation, we confront directly the issue of whether a greater good—the revelation of information about the death camps—takes precedence over rules governing our relationship with the individual narrator. Does the enormity of

the Holocaust place it beyond our attempts to comply with our profession's standards for interview behavior? George Steiner argued that the Holocaust is even beyond language, is outside of the domain of rational discourse and presumably even our moral universe: "It may be that the Auschwitz-universe, for it was that, precisely marks that realm of potential—now realized— human bestiality, or rather, abandonment of the human and regression to bestiality, which both precedes language, as it does in the animal, and comes after language as it does in death."²⁹

And yet, we have only our words—even though the phenomenon itself is so monstrous it defies adequate description—and our purpose as historians. The oral historian is a facilitator for the revelation of information of historical significance, but at the same time is in a relationship of trust with the individual narrator. In the end I conclude that it comes down to the importance of trust—the trust the narrator places in the historian, the trust the historian places in the narrator for a full, honest testimony. History is too important for historians to play tricks on the witnesses. We will get the information, but we must get it without lying or misrepresentation.

Some Tentative Conclusions

Oral historians are often faced with difficult judgment calls. We must weigh the sometimes conflicting claims of individual welfare and of historical accuracy and completeness. Advising the narrator to remove harmful remarks is a drastic solution advisable only when the remarks have no real historical significance. Whenever possible, sealing the tapes and transcripts (of parts of them) for a specified time is the preferred solution. In publications, the possible injury is magnified a thousand times. Yet, in situations where we edit, what we do has a disturbing similarity to censorship. From an historical point of view as opposed to one focused on protection of the narrator and associates, we have to ask when, if ever, potentially harmful statements in the publicly available oral history should be eliminated. I argue that only if the statement would deliver *certain* harm to the narrator would such an omission be justified and even then the reader should be informed that there has been an omission in the published transcript. This includes,

²⁹George Steiner. "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to 'the Shoah,'" *Encounter* 68 (1987): 55-61, esp. 55.

of course, the consideration of certain harm for individuals outside of the interviewer/narrator relationship who have been named and discussed in the oral history.

In the interviewing situation, the interviewer must define the nature of the interviewer/narrator relationship and act according to that definition, while being sensitive to the narrator's feelings. The hard questions necessary to an understanding of the history cannot be omitted, but damage to the narrator can be kept to a minimum. The questions can be asked at a point at which the narrator realizes the main purpose is to set the historical record straight. They can be phrased in such a way that the narrator does not feel attacked but rather sees the exchange as a chance to explain his or her point-of-view. Questions on extremely sensitive issues can themselves be discussed with the narrator before the questioning process begins, with feelings both interviewer and narrator have about them expressed. And failing to inform the narrator that he or she is being taped, or misrepresenting the aim of the oral history interviewing, is a violation of trust.

Always, the interviewer must look critically at his or her own feelings about the narrator or group of narrators, asking how these feelings have affected the questioning process and the selection of topics for publication. In all of this, oral history is the research method that demands the highest level of both self-awareness and sensitivity to others.