

***Recording Oral History: a Practical Guide for Social Scientists.***  
**By Valerie Raleigh Yow. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994. Pp. xi + 283, bibliography, ISBN 0-8039-5578-2 cloth, 0-8039-5579-0 pbk.)**

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they began to build in the established style: the Gothic Revival, or a variant of it.

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Aside from one important omission, this is a thorough and well-organized compendium of how-to hints and thoughtful reflections, based upon the author's very considerable experience and her acquaintance with the writings of American oral historians.

The book is aimed at practitioners of the in-depth interview. This is defined here as being not the diagnostic nor the focussed type of interview, but one which is more open-ended, less directed: the kind of interchange which gives an interviewer maximum opportunity to learn the varied, often unique ways in which respondents recall and contextualize their memories. Technical chapters follow the introduction, dealing with preparations for an oral history project — selecting and contacting narrators, assembling the equipment — and interviewing techniques. A section on “Building Rapport” with respondents is wisely twinned with one on “Diminishing Rapport”, something the unwary interviewer can also manage to produce if he or she is not careful enough. Several “how-not-to” examples are highlighted. The major guideline is always to show interest in what a narrator is telling you, but never to judge.

Linked to these ideas is her very successful chapter on “Interpersonal Relations in the Interview”. It succinctly outlines the effects of race, gender, age, class, ethnicity and subculture on how questions will be heard, how therefore they should be posed, and the answers interpreted.

Then, writes Yow, one must step “with full attention” into the matter of legalities and ethics, “like a cat about to go into a yard full of dogs” (p. 84). We do not want to step in anything, nor be chased or bitten. She makes it clear that ethical dilemmas — consent, anonymity, advocacy, reputations — are more important and more difficult than legal issues of copyright, privacy or libel. Her mastery of the whole continuum from popular culture to arcane scholarship is most evident in examples cited here. They range from the high-profile finding of libel against Janet Malcolm, after she had conducted 40 hours of interviews, for misquoting Jeffrey Masson in her 1983 *New Yorker* articles, to difficulties Memorial University anthropologist Jean Briggs had in

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reaching the decision to identify a specific Inuit group her research discussed, despite the fact that the principle of informed consent had been applied only imperfectly. Although welcomed back later to the same community, “she had nagging feelings that some had been offended” (p. 88, 92).

In separate chapters, Yow categorizes three varieties of oral history projects. In ascending order of the number of people that could be offended, they include the biography or life-story, family research, and community studies. She finishes with a strong chapter on the “Conclusion of the Project”: content analysis of interviews, indexing, transcriptions and how to use them most efficiently in preparing to write your study, and feedback to informants.

Some readers will think that a few small features of her approach, and of the book, could still be improved. The sample release forms she offers in an appendix contain too much legal jargon, the problem of fitting your tape recorder’s three-prong plug into a two-hole receptacle is not addressed, and the ethics chapter does not show enough solicitude about the reputations of third parties. The Author Index which she provides — listing an amazing 350 names, most referred to more than once — somehow manages to omit Edward Ives’ rather-well-known *The Tape-Recorded Interview* (1974). Yow is however protected by her opening disclaimer: “The writer of this kind of manual is a guide, not an unquestionable authority” (p. x).

Throughout, she builds reader confidence by providing literally dozens of references to her own extensive experience in documenting oral histories of clerical and mill workers, ethnic groups, farm families, hospitals, colleges and an art gallery. For example, among the factors that can deflect an interview is sexual attraction. “I am reminded of the occasion when a 92-year-old man patted my knee and said, ‘You’re not married, are you?’” (p.134). Whatever the problem might be — samples biased by self-selection, skeletons rattling in ancestral closets, institutions that want to maintain a veto over what might come out of the study, use of a vacuum cleaner in a distant room ruining interview tapes by electrical interference, or ancient informants risking heart attacks in the service of scholarship — she has encountered and knows how to handle it, the next time at any rate.

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