

ICAP – Oral History Troubleshooting

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Even the most seasoned oral historian will occasionally come across a problem when conducting oral interviews. The best way to resolve any issues that may come your way is to anticipate and prepare for them. Below is a short guide on how to handle some of the most common issues you may face when conducting oral interviews.

What do I do if...

...my interviewee rescinds their consent?

The most important ethical consideration in oral history (and in any research conducted “with human participants”) is free and informed consent. No one can give their consent if they do not know what they are consenting to. Informed consent includes giving participants a plain language description of the project/interview goals; clearly described rights & responsibilities of interviewers, interviewee; the right to anonymity (i.e.: pseudonyms, hiding identifying characteristics etc.); accessibility of records- i.e.: records will exist and/be archived; the right to refuse participation at any time; and the right to withdraw at any time with no fear of consequences. Sometimes interview participants change their mind and no longer want to be part of your project. If this happens, you should return to them the original (and any copies) of the interview, the release/consent form and any transcripts or indexes.

...my participant is emotionally distressed?

Oral history interviews can sometimes bring up strong emotions in interviewees. This can result in emotional distress, or crisis. Before the interview begins, let the interviewee know that they can take a break anytime they wish, and place a box of Kleenex and water close to them. Always remember to highlight to the participant that they lead the decision-making around the interview process; that they are in control of the topics discussed in the interview and that they can stop and walk away at any point. If a participant begins to cry you can gently ask them if they would like a break. Some people will want a bit of time to collect themselves, others will prefer to keep going. Honour their preference. If someone is showing signs of an emotional crisis (crying increasing in intensity, mounting anger etc) it is best to stop the interview. You can ask them if there is anyone to call so they don't have to drive home alone. Ask orienting questions (ie: what date is it today? What city are we in?), repeat that they are safe and where they are to help ground them. On the other hand, sometimes things shared with us during oral history interviews can deeply affect us. Remember to take care of your own emotional and mental well-being. Speak with a colleague, friend, or counsellor about what you are feeling so you can work on processing the stories you heard. It can be challenging to hold so many peoples' stories within you, especially when they deal with difficult subject matters.

...my equipment fails?

Equipment will fail, batteries will die. The best way to troubleshoot this is to arrive prepared with contingencies. Always have extra batteries, microphones, SD cards on hand for interviews. Try out your equipment before an interview to make sure everything is working as it should. If there is a malfunction and postponing the interview is not possible, the simplest thing to do is to let the participant know that you will be taking copious notes while they talk. Giving them a head's up that you will be taking notes is so that they don't think you are being rude or ignoring them. Writing detailed notes during an interview is difficult because it takes you out of being able to actively listen, but writing in note-form or shorthand can help. You can even resort to using your phone to record but be aware that the format phones tend to record in are not considered archival quality since they are extremely compressed.

...there is a clash or conflict of personalities?

As oral historians, our role is to support the interviewee and create space for them to share their story. This kind of work does sometimes put you in close proximity to people whose personalities and/or beliefs may clash with yours. It's important to remember a few key things: 1) the interview is not about you, so try as much as possible to focus on the interviewee. Everyone has a story to tell and it's your job to help them tell it. 2) if someone shares beliefs that you don't agree with, this is not the time to debate them. You don't need to agree with or even like their opinions. You don't need to dwell on these beliefs during the interview either. Simply ask a question to redirect them to another topic. 3) if their beliefs make you feel unsafe, you can try to steer the interview away from this topic or if that does not work, end the interview. Your safety (mental and physical) is just as important as that of the interviewee.

...my interviewee who won't let me ask any questions?

Some people have a very defined narrative arc of their story and they do not deviate from it. You will recognise these types of interviews when you ask the first question and the interviewee speaks for 10+ minutes straight without stopping. These types of interviews can be a challenge because you aren't easily able to ask follow-up questions or shape the interview much. In these scenarios, the simplest way is to allow them to tell you their story in the way they want to tell it, and then once they are done, go back and ask specific follow up questions ("I'd like to go back to when you spoke about XYZ, can you tell me a bit more about ..."). Try to avoid interrupting them to ask questions as it can set up a negative dynamic between you.