

# Some Reflections on the Problems of Oral Biographical Research

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The crux of successful biographical research using the methods of oral history is to gain candid interviews. Some problems faced by this researcher included: (1) the subject's reaction to tape recorders, (2) gaining the subject's trust, (3) getting too close to the subject to maintain objectivity, and (4) keeping records of interviews. Some persons "freeze" around tape recorders, giving interviews which do not always reflect their normal views. Trusting the interviewer may not solve this problem. Hidden tape recorders create ethical concerns, so the more viable alternative is to dispense with the recorder and take notes as thoroughly as possible. If this alternative is the only way to get a relaxed, candid subject, it is preferable to the taped document.

The more informal method of interviewing had the advantage of getting closer to the subject, aiding in gaining his trust and getting more candid information than might otherwise have been possible. However, the scholarly process is less clearly delineated in this area, increasing the risks of haphazard scholarship. The greatest risk of the method is that of getting too close to the subject and losing one's objectivity.

The researcher might try to assess his objectivity by considering the following questions: (1) are there two sides to this issue; (2) if there are two sides, can my version be considered to show bias on either side; (3) if I took sides, was it for a justifiable reason; (4) did I also present the other side of the question; and (5) does the paper read like a defense of the person or an attack upon him? If it does, does the title indicate that it is a paper of that nature? Few types of research make bias harder for the researcher to detect in himself than biographical research conducted using the methods of oral history.



Seward Staley Luncheon at Oregon's Bean Hall