

Oral History: Everywoman's Sports History

MARGARET TOOHEY

California State University — Long Beach

Oral history, the creation of a new “document” through the tape recorded interview, traditionally has been divided into three types: topical, biographical, and autobiographical. The topical interview is, in many ways, most akin to the open-ended sociological interview; the interviewer brings in a specific focus in order to gain information about a particular event. It might center on something which applies to both women and men, or it might focus on those experiences particular to women only. The biographical oral history interview is characterized by this same kind of specificity, but the focus is on a specific individual instead, usually a public figure such as Babe Didrikson.

In the autobiographical interview, the course of the individual interviewee's life is what determines both the form and content of the oral history. Even when one interviews a group of women who participated in the same kind of activity, the questions will be tailored to each individual's experience, and the information will be recorded as part of a total memoir. In other words, in biographical and topical interviews, a slice of the interviewee's life is explored; in the autobiographical interview, the total life history is recorded.

In reality there is a great deal of overlapping among the three forms. In both the topical and biographical interview, enough autobiographical material must be recorded to establish the specific relationship of the interviewee to the event of the individual being researched. On the other hand, when autobiographical interviews are collected from a group of women who shared a similar activity, for example, participation in the team sports, some common questions would be explored with all. Further, in our efforts to revise women's historiography, there are certain areas which should be explored with all women as part of their autobiographical accounts, such as the effect of menses on participation.

The so-called autobiographical oral history should be as complete a document as possible so that a variety of uses can be made of it. Much like the anthropological life history, it should reflect the experiences, values, attitudes, and relationships of the interviewee—the patterns and rhythms of her life and times. It can stand on its own, as an autobiography of an individual, or sections can be extracted from it for analysis or use in documentation.

As with any source, questions about the validity of the material must be raised. Despite their awareness of the obvious bias of contemporary newspaper reports, historians traditionally have relied on journalistic accounts as primary sources. The same criteria should be used to assess the validity of any source, written or oral: how does it “fit” with what we know about the subject? The usual questions about the reliability of memory and the problem of retrospective interpretation must be raised, as they would be for any autobiographical account.

The autobiographical oral history, however, is a rather strange hybrid, not like conventional autobiography, which is usually characterized by a certain amount of studied reconsideration by the “author” and by her self-selection of both form and content. The so-called autobiographical oral history is a collaborative effort of the interviewer (archivist/historian) and the interviewee (source/history). This very collaboration makes the oral history memoir unique. Based on face-to-face interaction, during which the source can be both questioned and evaluated, it becomes more than the sound of one voice.

Based on the background research and the historical perspective which the interviewer brings to the process, the life of the interviewee is reconstructed within a broader social context — a context not ordinarily provided by the self-recorded memorist. An understanding of this context guides the interviewer in deciding which spontaneous material should be elaborated on more fully. Though the best interviewer will encourage spontaneity and self-direction, it is intellectually dishonest to discount the interviewer's role in creating the oral history. The advantages derived from her knowledge and perspective can, ideally, sensitize her to personal and cultural inconsistencies in the content of the interview. Such inconsistencies might be indicative of a highly idiosyncratic woman; they might be an important source of information about the complex patterns in sports women's lives; or they might raise questions about memory and candor.

Besides subtle nuances in the content of the interview and voice inflections - which are captured on tape — there are nonverbal gestures which only the sensitive interviewer (or — if the interview is being filmed or video-taped — the sensitive photographer) will observe. These nonverbal cues reveal the emotional tone of the interview and should be carefully noted afterwards; they will become part of the record used by both the interviewee and others to evaluate the validity and reliability of the material recorded.

Despite the obvious advantages of the collaborative reconstruction of the interviewee's life, there are, of course, drawbacks. The perspective of the interviewer cannot help but influence, even subtly, the content of the material, particularly what the interviewee will judge as "important." After we completed an interview, one woman commented that she could tell by the way my eyes sparkled at various times that I was particularly interested in the problems she faced as a woman in the male world of sport. Although we can console ourselves with the knowledge that there is no such thing as "objective" reporting, we must recognize our own influence in the interview process and make a concerted effort to maintain a balance between what we, as sport historians, think is important and what the women we are interviewing think was important about their own lives.



The art display was well attended.