American Folklife Center
Ethnographic Interviewing Workshop

Conducting Interviews for Folklife and Oral History Projects

Workshop Overview

❖ **Lecture Part I**

❖ **5 minute Q&A break**

❖ **Lecture Part II**

❖ **Activity 1: crafting questions**

❖ **5 minute debrief**

❖ **Breaking into activity groups**

❖ **Activity 2: model interviews**

❖ **Wrap up: Q&A + discussion**

John Ole Tingoi (center) and Edwin Kissio (right) of the Laikipia Maasai community interview a herder about drought in the Rift Valley, Kenya, during the 2009 Cultural Documentation Training by AFC, WIPO, and Duke U. Photo: Guha Shankar, 2009.

What We'll learn

❖ **How to Identify Promising Interviewees**

❖ **How to Choose and Use Technology**

❖ **How to Create and Use Release Forms**

❖ **How to Create Effective Interview Questions**

❖ **How to Conduct the Interview**

❖ **What to Do After the Interview**

Interviews as Documentation and as Part of a Project

Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

- Usefulness for the project
- Value for the future

Interviews as Documentation and as Part of a Project

Techniques to Complement Interviews

- Fieldnotes
- Participant observation
- Photography
- Video or audio recording of culture and landscape
- Archival research

Finding Your Interviewees

Finding Your Interviewees

Real Spaces

- Local libraries
- Stores, cafes & other hangouts
- Hobby groups
- Places where people volunteer
- Retirees' & veterans' groups

Virtual Spaces

- Community & neighborhood lists
- Facebook groups and pages

Choosing Your Interviewees

Project Needs

- Your project's focus
- Overall coverage of the topic
- Knowledge of aspects of the topic

Project and Community Needs

- Diversity of opinion about the topic
- Outright disagreement within the community
- Diversity of people in the community

Choosing Your Technology

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Choosing Your Technology

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Choosing Your Technology

Project Questions

- Is Video or audio ideal?
- What quality or resolution is ideal?

Logistical Questions

- In-person or remote?
- What can I afford?
- What bandwidth do I have?

Archival Questions

- What are their standards?

Ethical Considerations

Interviewees are sharing *their* knowledge, stories, and memories with you. There is a level of trust at play in allowing that to happen. How can you respect that trust, honor their ownership over what they share, and proceed ethically?

As a hypothetical interviewee, what would you want to know before the interview?

- Basic logistical info (when, where, will it be recorded, how long it may be, etc.)

- Who the interviewer is and what their intentions are (i.e. project aims, why I am being interviewed)

- What's going to happen with the information I give the interviewer? (Where will the documentation go, and *what will it be used for*? Can I see it/listen to it at any point?)

Ethical Considerations

In seeking their *permission* to proceed forward, you enter a consent process. Ethically, you want to ensure that they provide their free, prior, and informed consent ("FPIC").

Free: they were not forced to comply, nor pushed to provide anything they did not want to

Prior: their permission is given, their consent is obtained *before* the interview (and again at beginning of recorded event)

Informed: they understand what their interview will be used for; this information was provided in full and transparently

Consent processes can begin during early conversations and be formally finalized when discussing an actual written agreement ("consent form") in which they provide permission (signature + other info)

Release Forms

Written consent/permission agreement

- *Thinking ahead to the future life of the interview*: release forms focus on where the documentation will go / how it will be used post-interview (e.g. archives, website, etc.)

- They discuss legal *ownership* of materials (e.g. copyright of the intellectual property they shared with you)

- Discussion of what should be kept private and what can be made public

RELEASE FORM

I,_____, am a participant in the _____ project, (hereinafter "project"). I understand that the purpose of the project is to collect audio- and video-tapes and selected related documentary materials (such as photographs and manuscripts) that may be deposited in the permanent collections of _____. The deposited documentary materials may be used for scholarly, educational, and other purposes. I understand that the _____ plans to retain the product of my participation as part of its permanent collection and that the materials may be used for exhibition, publication, presentation on the World Wide Web and successor technologies, and for promotion of the institution and its activities in any medium.

I hereby grant to _____ ownership of the physical property delivered to the institution and the right to use the property that is the product of my participation (for example, my interview, performance, photographs, and written materials) as stated above. By giving permission, I understand that I do not give up any copyright or performance rights that I may hold.

I also grant to_____ my absolute and irrevocable consent for any photograph(s) provided by me or taken of me in the course of my participation in the project to be used, published, and copied by _____ and its assignees in any medium.

I agree that_____ may use my name, video or photographic image or likeness, statements, performance, and voice reproduction, or other sound effects without further approval on my part.

ACCEPTED AND AGREED

Signature_____
Date_____
Printed name_____
Address _____
_____Zip_____-_____
Telephone (   )_____-_____
Fax (   )_____-_____
Email_____

5 minute break for questions

Thinking about your interview agenda: creating your questions

Oral history interviews are qualitative. As interviewers, we are most interested in learning about people's experiences *in their words* and *on their terms*. We want to foster their telling of stories and their sharing of memories in as much *depth* as they can provide. So, the questions we ask are important! They serve to bring the conversation into the interviewee's world, *their* life history and memories.

Qualitative interviewing is an art; it's a balancing act of *listening* and also thinking of the next question to ask in response. It's about creating/maintaining a *flow* where the interviewee is made to feel comfortable and in control and, yet, you are mindful of keeping to your agenda.

Creating Your Questions: your interview structure

Luckily, questions are crafted in advance, so you can prepare for fostering an in-depth, *semi-structured* interview.

Questions should:

- Serve to meet the aims of the project (focused on the topic + research questions)

- Be more 'open' than 'closed,' especially in beginning

  Was tobacco farming hard? –vs—
  What was it like growing up on a tobacco farm?

  What's your favorite memory of growing up? –vs—
  Take me through a typical day on the farm?

Creating Your Questions: More Tips

Questions should:

- Avoid "leading the witness"
- Avoid asking questions you don't understand
- Avoid complicated, multi-part questions
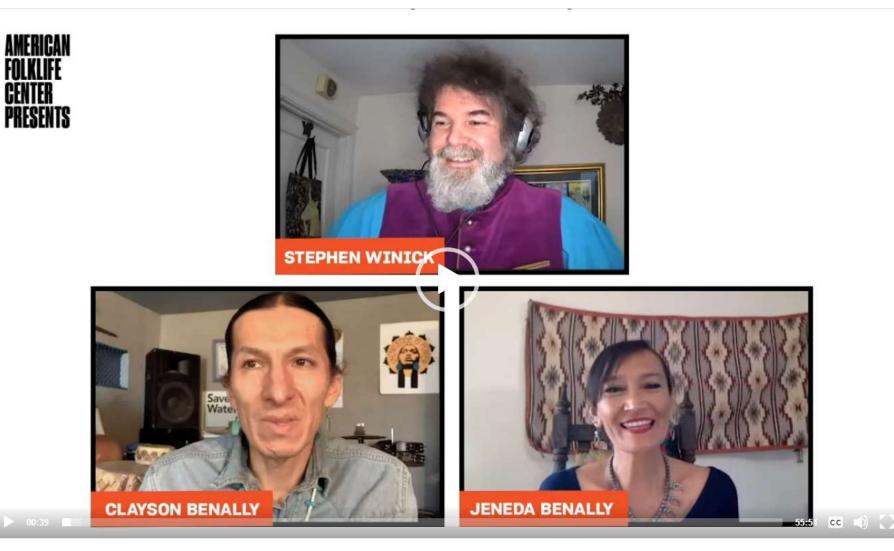- Save controversial topics for later in an interview

Learning Your Tech

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Learning Your Tech

General Tips

- Read the manual
- Practice all aspects you plan to use
- Do a practice interview

Conducting Your Interview

Conducting Your Interview

Interpersonal Tips for Online Interviews

- Acknowledge the weirdness
- Ask how they're doing
- Express sympathy
- Thank them early & often
- When this is all done, segue into the tech set-up

Conducting Your Interview

Technical Tips for Online Interviews

- Have a pad and pen handy to jot things down
- Get mobile number of interviewee
- Silence ringers & reduce noise
- Reduce possibility of interruption
- Use external or headset mic
- Start recording and confirm the counter is moving
- Do sound and video checks
- Segue into the interview

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Conducting Your Interview

Conversation Tips for Online Interviews

- Be relaxed
- Open with a brief announcement
- Welcome and thank your interviewee
- Make sure to listen!
- Don't say "yeah" or "uh-huh" too often
- If an answer brings a follow-up question to mind, jot it down and ask it when you can
- When it seems natural to do so, wrap it up
- Thank your interviewee again

After Your Interview

After Your Interview

Immediately After the Interview

- Name the file according to the system you use
- Save to a safe location and backup location
- Write some brief notes about what was covered
- Listen back to part of the interview to assess sound/video
- Send a quick thank-you note

Then, as Soon as Is Practical

- Listen and create a log

Let's Practice Interviewing!

Ann Tome (right) interviews a Maasai community member during fieldwork training exercises for the AFC-WIPO-Duke U. Community Cultural Documentation program, Il Ngwesi, Kenya. Photo by Guha Shankar, 2009.