

## **Oral Histories and Sensitive Subjects**

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When we interview or engage in any type of discussion with other people, there is always the chance that our conversation may touch on a subject that one person or the other feels is sensitive. In the case of oral histories, it is often the case that historians and digital humanists are collecting stories specifically because they relate to a significant event, such as a natural disaster, a war, or other difficult period in history. In these cases, we can assume that trauma will be present, and interviewers will need to take special precautions to avoid creating complex trauma, which occurs when a person is re-traumatized.

### **Defining trauma**

Trauma is an emotional response to any event that a person perceives as so stressful as to be overwhelming<sup>1</sup>. In the past, it was believed that trauma only resulted from obvious events, such as rape, accidents, war, or natural disasters. However, it is now understood that trauma can result from a variety of emotionally stressful events, including recalling an original traumatic event.

Trauma effects a person's:

- i. Emotional well-being
- ii. Physical health
- iii. Spiritual well-being
- iv. Mental health
- v. Social life

These effects are all-encompassing which is why it is important that interviewers “do no harm” when working with their narrators. Interviewers can potentially affect positive outcomes for narrators with trauma in both the emotional and social categories listed above. The next sections will discuss how to do this and how to mediate the risk of re-traumatizing narrators during the interview process.

### **Pre-Interview risk assessment**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.isst-d.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Fact-Sheet-1-Trauma-and-Complex-Trauma-An-Overview-1.pdf>

Before the day of the interview be sure the interviewer is aware of any potential past or current trauma relating to the narrator. A pre-interview conversation should include questions about subjects, events, or people that the narrator will not be able to discuss or will find difficult to share. At this stage, the interviewer should also determine what information will need to be kept private and how this will be done, either by not discussing topics in the interview or editing out details later. If possible, determine the type of trauma the narrator may be dealing with as this will help in avoiding triggers. The interviewer should also ascertain whether there has been criminal activity, such as a stalker, or if the narrator has received threats. Once the oral history is accessible these types of threats may not only further traumatize the narrator but also place them in real danger.

The narrator should be assured that their privacy will be respected throughout the entire process. Loss of privacy can not only harm trauma survivors, but in some instances, can place them in danger either from themselves or others who wish to do them harm (physical or emotional). Keep in mind that everyone responds to trauma differently and what may be routine for one person may be trauma-inducing for another.

**Best practices for interviewers dealing with sensitive subjects and traumatized narrators:**

- i. Practice empathy at all stages of the interview, from pre-interview to the editing and publishing phase.
- ii. Listen and watch closely for any re-traumatizing topics that may be unexpected.
- iii. Be flexible! Be ready to change the subject or move on if the topic is too difficult for the narrator
- iv. Assure the narrator of their privacy at all stages, this will help put them at ease.

Two areas where interviewers can have a positive impact on the lives of narrators during an interview are on their emotional and social well-being. The act of sharing a story is often a cathartic experience when approached from a place of empathy by the interviewer. Simply sharing their story can improve a narrator's social well-being in some cases. Interviewers can also have a positive impact on

emotional well-being by assuring narrators that their privacy will be protected throughout the process and that the narrator will have the final say on what is made public, when, and for how long. This returns a sense of control to narrators who have suffered a loss of control through traumatic experiences.

After the pre-interview where sensitive topics and traumas have been made clear, the interviewer will need to carefully draft questions to avoid triggers and protect privacy. Privacy is a central concern and risks to privacy are sometimes easily missed. A good starting point for understanding privacy is to review the 7 basic principles of the GDPR ([General Data Protection Regulation](#)) of the European Union.

## **Privacy**

Privacy experts generally model their practice after the GDPR since it provides the strongest and most complete privacy laws in the world at this time. Currently, in the U.S., the state of California has the strongest privacy laws with the [California Privacy Rights Act](#), which was modeled on the GDPR. Other states are following California's lead and it is expected that eventually the U.S. will have a federal privacy policy akin to the GDPR in the EU.

## **Basic Principles of the GDPR:**

1. Processing must be lawful, fair and transparent.
  1. Be clear with the narrator about the intended use, usage, discoverability, and future preservation and access of the oral history.
2. Data can only be processed for legitimate reasons that have been clearly spelled out
3. Data minimization
  1. Only collect absolutely necessary information! Do you need an exact age or exact address (past or current) from the narrator? Any personal information not absolutely critical to understanding the story should not be collected or shared.
4. Data accuracy and timeliness
5. Storage limitation and purpose limitation
  1. Be sure you are clear about how an oral history will be preserved going forward and what access will look like. It is important to be

flexible with narrators and if circumstances change or they become uncomfortable, they should always have control of the content and the ability to have access removed.

6. All processing of data and data flows must ensure security, confidentiality, and integrity
  1. Protecting not only the privacy of the narrator, but any individuals they may include in their stories is essential.
7. Compliance with all laws
  1. The interviewer is accountable for compliance with privacy laws.
  2. Your state may or may not have strong privacy laws at this point in time. You can check your state laws [here](#). Whether or not your state has privacy laws, it is highly recommended that you follow the guidelines put forth by the GDPR.

### **Personally identifiable Information (PII) and Personal (sensitive) information**

Be sure you can identify these two types of information and always avoid collecting personal information (often referred to as sensitive information in the U.S.) if at all possible. If you do need to collect personal information, you will be required to go through the IRB process when working with a university, as well as with many other organizations. In general, oral histories tend to require an IRB, but if no personal information is collected, there are instances where it is not necessary.

#### **Examples of personal information (sensitive):**

- Social security number
- Driver's license number
- Passport information
- Image of a handwritten signature
- Genetic information
- Protected health information
- Biometric data
- Sexual orientation or preferences
- Citizenship or immigration status

narrators in danger. For instance, an oral history exploring the history of the AIDS epidemic may lead to further discrimination or exclusion by family or friends, resulting in further harm to the narrator. This may be true for many hist

**Examples of personally identifiable information:**

- Home address
- Place of employment
- Political affiliation
- Birthdate
- Email
- Phone number

Other data points that can compromise privacy and safety can occur when a narrator mentions organizations, institutions, or previous employers by name, especially if it was a fraught relationship. Likewise, including full names of friends or family without their express consent to the same terms of access and preservation of the oral history can also lead to problems. Be aware of any enforcement agencies that may be interested in the narrator or the overall content of the oral history.

It is important to consider scenarios and topics that may place orically marginalized groups of people as well. Certain groups of people may have specific traumas or generational traumas, such as First Americans that the interviewer will need to cognizant of and familiarize themselves with the related history of an entire demographic to avoid re-traumatizing a narrator.

The Boston College History Archive Project on the conflict in Northern Ireland serves as cautionary tale and good case study material for unforeseen possible harms that can come to narrators in the process of oral history projects.

[Case Study from Boston College](#)

**Dissemination and Release Forms**

One of the guidelines of the GDPR includes being fair and transparent in the processing of data. Being fair and empathetic when dealing with sensitive topics

and trauma survivors requires being flexible and allowing the narrator control over rights and access policies. If your institution has non-flexible rights and dissemination policies, consider not pursuing trauma related oral histories.

### **Dissemination and access policies to cover in the pre-interview**

- i. Clearly spell out your institution's dissemination policy
- ii. Explain who will have access and allow the narrator to determine what they will be comfortable with:
  - a. Who will have access?
  - b. Will it be downloadable?
  - c. Can you use IP restrictions?
- iii. What will be available to the public or a specific audience?
  - a. Video
  - b. Audio
  - c. transcripts

### **The release form**

The release form should allow for the following considerations on the part of the narrator:

- The narrator should be a partner that has final say on the content of the oral history.
- The narrator and interviewer should work together to determine what level of access will be acceptable to both parties.
- The narrator can change their mind regarding content, access, and preservation.

These elements need to be part of the release form to ensure that they are honored should the narrator become uncomfortable with the content being accessible in the future for whatever reason. The interviewer will need to be sure the release form is preserved along with the oral history for future archivists and historians.

Following the privacy guidelines of the GDPR and the best practices listed here for sensitive topics and narrators with traumatic experiences, coupled with an

empathetic and flexible approach to oral history production should allow for a successful and meaningful experience for both the interviewer and narrator.

### **Resources related to this project on trauma and oral history**

1. VIDEO: [Trauma Informed Interviewing Workshop](#)
2. SLIDES: [Trauma Informed Interviewing: Interviewing with Empathy and Protecting Oral History Narrators](#)

### **Other resources related to oral history interviewing and trauma**

1. Interviewing about difficult topics: a case study from Manzanar:  
<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/oral-history-resources-interviewing-difficult-topics.htm>
2. Training for working with veterans:  
<https://www.virtualfootlocker.com/archivist/introduction>
3. BOOK: Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience by Cathy Caruth