

Historically Significant Memories in Social Work: Two Perspectives on Oral History Research and the Helping Professions

This article describes two perspectives about the powerful appeal oral history research projects exert on members of the helping professions. Charles T. Morrissey is an oral history practitioner and consultant who has taught intensive oral history workshops throughout the country as well as oral history courses at several universities. He has conducted oral history research projects for many major organizations, including the Ford Foundation, the presidential libraries of Harry Truman and John Kennedy, and a Washington-based association called Former Members of Congress. John Kayser is a social work educator with a personal and professional interest in narratives and oral histories. Using the experience of attending an oral history workshop at Vermont College in 1996 as a "case example," Kayser describes the application of Morrissey's guidelines in conducting subsequent oral history research on the life stories of retired women social work professionals in Colorado. The importance of using oral history interviews to capture previously undocumented, historically significant memories is illustrated. In the concluding section, the authors reflect on the enduring attraction and value oral history research has for helping professionals. Beneficial outcomes of the attraction appear to be increased self-awareness both for informants who share memories about their life experiences and for professionals conducting oral history research

Our joint authorship of this narrative essay arose from our previous contact in a 1996 summer oral history workshop held at Vermont College in Montpelier, a unit of Norwich University. John Kayser (JK) was the student and Charles Morrissey (CM) was the teacher. JK was one of many students from the helping professions (broadly defined here to include mental health and social service professionals, clergy members, and lay archivists, educators, historians, librarians, and theologians) who have sought specific training in oral history methods. Over the years, helping professionals have comprised the largest group of participants attending workshops. This essay is a joint reflection on the powerful appeal oral history apparently exerts for such professionals, and how oral history interviews capture important, previously undocumented information about individuals and events in the life of the profession.

by
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From Charles T. Morrissey:

Since 1975, I have been professionally self-employed as an oral history practitioner and consultant. Currently, my clients include Baylor College of Medicine, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Oregon Health Sciences University. In addition to the annual Vermont College workshops, I offer yearly workshops in San Francisco and at Portland State University. Occasionally, I have taught oral history courses at other institutions, such as University of California—Santa Bar-

bara, Wayne State University, and Clark-Atlanta University. Although not holding a conventional academic position, I frequently instruct faculty members such as John Kayser as well as a wide range of helping professionals in oral history methods. The workshops usually are taught in an intensive one-week format, involving between five and twenty-five participants. The workshops cover both theoretical perspectives about oral history within the larger context of historical research as well as practical concerns, such as how actually to conduct an oral history interview (e.g., phrasing

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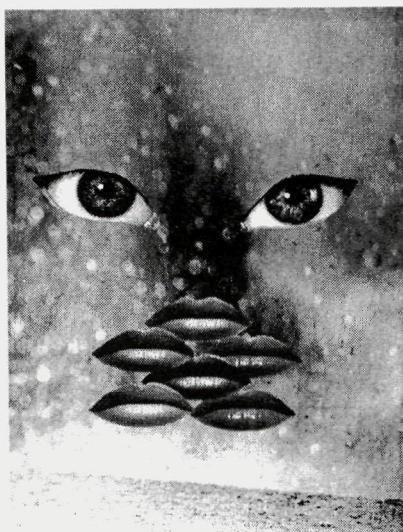
questions, confronting sensitivities, etc.) and how to design, structure, manage, and seek funding for oral history research projects.

In the workshop, I emphasize that people, unfortunately, often wait a generation before they begin to think about capturing oral histories. Usually this occurs when there is a recognition of "history being lost"—that is, knowledgeable informants' memories have begun to fail, or key informants have died, or important documentation may be lost and unrecoverable unless prompt action is taken. However, using the "History Now" rubric, I emphasize that if you move quickly on the heels of events, you can double the quality of an oral history at half the cost. If you wait a generation before beginning, it is much more difficult and expensive work.

From John A. Kayser:

My interest in narratives and oral histories has many beginnings. As a child, for example, I remember pestering my mother often to tell her autobiographical history. Her experience in growing up in a large extended farming family in the rural Midwest was so different from the small, urban-situated, nuclear family I was growing up in that I was constantly amazed at hearing the differences. The most recent impetus for learning about oral histories began several years ago when I composed a biographical tribute for the alumni newsletter of my MSW program

describing Betty Hutchinson, a social work teacher and mentor who recently had died (Kayser, 1992). I recounted the impact she exerted on me as a young graduate student, feeling displaced and far from home, uncertain about whether I was a good fit for the field of social work. I shared the advice she



subsequently gave me as I moved into my post-master's practice career, and then later, the help she gave when I was contemplating going on for doctoral education.

What I did not write about in that biographical sketch, however, has become the more significant force propelling my interest in oral history research. Betty died my first year on faculty. I knew she was ill. I kept meaning to call. I had every intention of visiting. But, I kept putting it off. I had preparation to do for upcoming classes. Then, it was too late. She died. All of the questions I had wanted to ask her about her experiences as a teacher, all of the things I wanted to share

about my own educational beginnings as a faculty member, would remain forever unspoken. The sense of loss and disconnectedness to my professional roots was profound and overwhelming. I began to realize that—first and foremost—oral history is an urgent activity.

"Paper Trail First, Memory Trail Second"

From CM:

When JK came to the 1996 Vermont College workshop, he was representative of the dominant cohort of participants who previously had attended my workshops. What brings these mental health and social service practitioners and educators to seek oral history training? Why them, as opposed to—say—members of the business community? I still am waiting for the first representative from a Fortune 500 company to register for one of my oral history workshops. Significantly, businesses executives do not experience the same felt imperatives about recording and preserving their own careers or organizational histories as do individuals from ostensibly more humanistic organizations and/or altruistic career preferences.

What I remember most about JK from that week in Montpelier was his constant note taking during the daily sessions. When we first discussed collaborating on this article, I was pleased to learn that after the workshop he subsequently had followed one of the key oral

history principles stressed in the workshop—using the paper trail as a parallel or tandem approach to gathering oral history recollections. In this case, JK had created his own paper trail by taking the time to transform his handwritten notes about workshop sessions into an extended typewritten field memorandum. In the section which follows, JK draws from these notes and summary to share one person's experience of how oral history can be beneficial for the helping professions.

From JK:

What brought me to the Vermont College oral history workshop was my own research interest in gathering the lived experience of contemporary social workers regarding their personal and professional development. One of my main questions concerned how narrative theory might connect with oral history research methods. I had just completed a set of oral history interviews with social work practitioners currently in the field and was hoping to extend that work further by interviewing a set of retired women social workers who were alumnae or faculty members from the University of Denver. I knew I needed more formal training in conducting oral history interviews.

One of the things I quickly discovered is that attending an oral history workshop promotes the sharing of stories. As CM facilitated the initial introductions and interactions among participants throughout the week, partici-

pants shared information about their backgrounds and interests in oral histories. There were six of us at this particular workshop—four women and two men. One person was African-American and the rest Caucasian. Workshop members were employed variously as urban ethnographer, historian-archivist, history teacher, MA student in history, librarian, and social worker. Most lived in the eastern United States; I was the lone representative from west of the Mississippi River. Two participants were interested in the oral histories of women in the military during WW II; one was interested in the oral histories of people who lived in the "Ruffled Shirt District" in Rochester, New York (where all of the old buildings and structures had been razed and former residents dispersed as part of "urban renewal" in the 1970s); one person was interested in teaching oral history methods to college students as part of an environmental history course; one person was conducting an ethnographic study about the "underground economy" in a historically black neighborhood near Chicago and was interested in comparing ethnographic interview approaches with oral history interviewing.

CM began the workshop by defining oral history as "recorded interviews which preserve historically significant memories for future use." These interviews are recorded dialogues between knowledgeable informants and oral interviewers/historians. Also helpful as part of the oral history method

is a recorded memorandum that an interviewer can dictate shortly after the completion of an interview in which the interviewer details the environment in which the interview was conducted and notes aspects of the dialogue that might warrant subsequent clarification. Oral history researchers act as surrogates for future scholars who will reference oral history interviews along with other materials and evidence in their forthcoming investigations.

The question of what constitutes "historically significant memories" was particularly intriguing to me. As a narrator (and before that, a clinical social worker), I was accustomed to exploring informants' lived experiences—seeing their life story as being important in and of itself. However, I had not given much thought to whether an individual had recollections which could be considered "historically significant." Nor had I thought at all about "starting with the paper trail" (e.g., researching relevant written documentation including public records, grade sheets, yearbooks, daily news accounts, personal correspondence, curriculum vitae, college bulletins, photographs, etc.) prior to conducting the oral history interview. As CM instructed, some reluctant interviewees may be more forthcoming when they appreciate the extent to which you have diligently done your homework. In addition, being familiar with written documentation may assist interviewers in eliciting more accurate memories from interviewees. This

helps to increase credibility and trustworthiness as opposed to spontaneous, unstructured, unpursued recall.

The value of these workshop lessons was realized immediately upon my return to Colorado. Prior to beginning the second oral history project with the retired social work alumni and women faculty members, I reviewed several written documents, including the school's course bulletins for the years they were enrolled or taught, both for my own preparation and as a prompt for their recollections. As a result, I was able to explore specific details of informants' lived experiences in greater depth, thereby acting on CM's tenet that broad generalizations are the curse of oral history, and "pursuing for details" is one of its best strategies.

"Oral histories are essential for documenting the undocumented"

From CM:

One of the points I stress in workshops is the idea that oral histories restore the sense of uncertainty to history. If historians rely only on written documentation in examining the past, we may learn only about the outcomes that were made or decisions that were recorded. The outcomes, in fact, may determine the recollections. As a result, we may get a skewed view that the outcome somehow was inevitable or preordained. Unfortunately, this approach reveals little or nothing about the ambiguity facing people at the

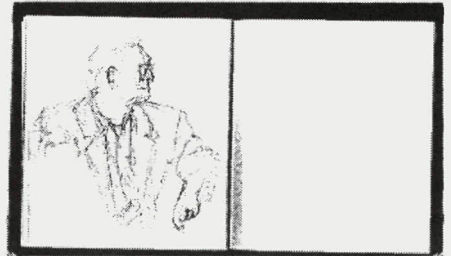
time choices are confronted. Thus, oral histories are essential for documenting what heretofore had been undocumented—that is, knowledge which earlier had been omitted, marginalized, suppressed, subjugated, or repressed. This is especially true if the person providing the oral history is representative of others whose memories of similar experiences have been neglected.

As the following segment illustrates, JK discovered the importance of how an oral history can unexpectedly capture historically significant events that had been undocumented or ignored.

From JK:

One of my oral history interviews was with a hesitant informant. This retired social worker—a person of color—had backed out of several scheduled appointments and, at times, seemed uncertain about the purpose of the project. Following CM's emphasis on the importance of collaborative rapport-building (i.e., anticipating the tensions which silently might divide an interviewer and informant), I began to suspect that one source of the reluctance might be rooted in the cultural differences between us. We differed not only in gender, race, and age, but also in the geographic location and historical time in which we grew up. (In the earlier set of oral history interviews, another social worker of color had told me how wary he had become in sharing his story because of how his personal information had been distorted. He strongly objected to

members of the dominant culture who treated his unique story as if he was the universal spokesperson for the "African-American experience.") Thus, I could appreciate her caution with an unfamiliar White male and did not personalize it.



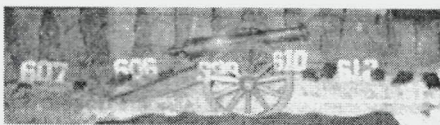
Hoping to show myself as a trustworthy individual genuinely interested in hearing her story, I raised the issue directly of the cultural differences between us, asking whether she had questions about whether I would be able to understand what her life was like. Quoting CM's words from the workshop, I said: "No one knows your life like you do. If you don't tell your story, no one will. History belongs to the articulate." Without acknowledging my question about cultural differences, she began to show greater interest in this project. She asked me how I got started on this project. I answered by sharing some of my own personal and professional life journey. This further appeared to strengthen our rapport and her willingness to participate in the project.

Once I turned the tape recorder on, she told me several important episodes about her experiences of being discriminated against as a woman and an African-American. What made her account noteworthy

was the fact that, in the stories she selected to tell, the racism and oppression involved the actions of other helping professionals. She recalled, for example, applying to a graduate social work school in the deep south, only to discover that at the time (late 1950s and early 1960s) the university did not admit people of color. As I listened to her account, I realized I was hearing a "historically significant memory." Here was an apparently hidden piece of the history of social work—an earlier time in which some students of color were denied equal entry to the profession because of their race. It suddenly became much clearer why this student eventually decided to apply to schools outside of the south. I began to see her journey to Colorado in a completely different fashion.

Some months later, I did an oral history interview with another retired African-American social worker and then, a few weeks afterwards, had informal contact with a third retired social worker, also African-American. Both of these sources confirmed that the experience of suffering discrimination by schools of social work was not unique to the respondent I had interviewed previously. These individuals also reported similar experiences. While the numbers of this sample are too small and non-random to claim that these accounts are representative of a larger population, nonetheless their oral histories are instructive. They disclose an ugly chapter in our profession's history—one apparently not ad-

ressed in contemporary histories of social welfare or social work education (Austin, 1986; Axinn & Levin, 1992; Hollis & Taylor, 1951, Trolander, 1997). Perhaps, we would rather not know about this grim side since it does not fit the fabric of social justice with which social workers usually adorn their professional identities and self-images. Nonetheless, incorporating this history into our institutional narrative about the development of a profession may help us appreciate the courage it took for individuals (in and out of the profession), schools, and professional associations to eventually confront and dismantle these barriers. Using oral history methods suggests that the history of racial and ethnic minorities seeking civil rights may not solely be their struggle against narrow-minded, bigoted "others." We may have to look honestly in the mirror and recognize, however painfully, that prejudice and discrimination also have been part and parcel of our own profession's history.



Conclusions

From CM:

Oral history and the helping professions clearly have a remarkable affinity for each other. One need look no further than previous issues of *Reflections*, which have contained oral history interviews with key historical figures in the develop-

ment of social work practice as well as several articles which feature reminiscences about professional development and practice. This symbiosis deserves to be strengthened and broadened because a self-reflective profession is one always mindful of how it has shaped itself over time and been shaped through interaction with the world it inhabits. Times may change for social work professionals, but affirming identity through oral history interviews can serve as a continuing source of cross-generational rejuvenation.

From JK:

At the conclusion of oral history interviews, I ask respondents what it was like for them to tell their life stories. Thus far, reactions have ranged from pleasure to enlightenment. Most of the social workers interviewed actively enjoyed telling their life stories and seemed pleased that their personal and professional histories were being recorded and preserved. Some individuals, possibly more action-oriented than reflective, discovered that the oral history interviews afforded welcome opportunities to examine their lives as a whole. In sharing their memories, they appeared to see formative aspects of their development more clearly than before.

There have been numerous changes to me as well resulting from my work as an oral history interviewer. Attending CM's workshop has allowed me to explore the connections between narrative theory and oral history research methods. I no

longer see history as something that happened "long ago and far away" to someone else. Rather, I have come to view it as an unfolding, often untidy, set of individual and collective experiences and events which continually shape and reshape the contours and contexts of life, constantly altering the meanings ascribed to the past, present, and future. As Howard (1989) notes, one way to conceptualize history is as the "meta-story" which we live in, live with, and are lived by. Gathering oral histories has allowed me to understand the vicissitudes of how individual life stories contribute to building the meta-story. Each person I have interviewed has added to my understanding of what it means—and has meant—to be a social worker. It allows me to see my profession, other practitioners, and myself in an expanded, richer, and deeper stream of experience. □

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