

WGST 111  
Women in Culture  
Dr. Hammond  
Spring 2009  
Paper 1

## Oral History Project: Women's Personal Histories

In place of the second group project, we will complete a project interviewing women in our communities to get a sense of how things have changed for women over the past several years. Each of you will complete an interview with one woman, to explore your subject's ideas about her life as a woman—ranging from her childhood to her raising her own children, if she had them, to the present. What expectations did she feel were important in her decision making over the course of her life? How are things different for women today than when she was a child or a young woman? Think back about the questions you considered at the beginning of the semester in your Personal and Political paper. What is unique about this woman's experience? And what is universal about her experience?

### The paper

The paper you write based on this interview should attempt to address several issues. You should explain your relationship to the subject of the interview and introduce her to the reader being sure to describe her for us. The paper's primary focus should address how your subject feels about her life as a woman; always remember the broad purpose of the project, discovering through a woman's personal experience how change has affected women's lives over the years. Finally, you will want to spend some time in the conclusion reflecting on what you have learned, and perhaps even exploring how the process of the interview has affected you, changed your ideas about being a woman or a man. What messages can we draw from reading about the life of the woman you have interviewed?

The paper should be 4-6 double-spaced typewritten pages long (or about 1000-1500 words). When you submit your paper, please also email me a copy of a photograph of your subject, preferably one taken in her youth, and one current picture.

### Choosing an interview subject

You will need to interview a mature woman who can give you some perspective into the general question of how societal expectations for women have changed over time. The older your interview subject, the more insight she can offer you about the past. Your grandmother is an excellent candidate for this interview, but you may also choose another family member, a neighbor, or a woman living in a retirement center, for instance. The woman you choose to interview may have lived a very traditional life, marrying relatively young and raising children while maintaining the house, or she may have been (or may yet be!) a career woman, or both. Your objective in selecting an interview subject is to choose a wise older woman, one respected for her knowledge, experience, and insights.

## Preparation for the interview

Ask your subject for an interview, explaining the purpose of the project and letting her know why you selected her as a possible subject. At this time, ask permission to record the interview; ask her to bring along or locate old photographs of herself as well.

- Schedule an appointment with your interview subject; you should plan at least one one-hour interview session, and it is best to arrange the session ahead of time.
- Collect whatever equipment you need to record the interview: a video or audio recorder is ideal. Be sure your batteries are charged or that you have extra batteries and that you have enough tapes and labels available as well. Test your equipment in advance to see how close you need to get with your microphone; the less obtrusive the recording equipment, the better.
- You may also want to take along a camera to get a current photograph of your subject.

## Questions for the interview

- Make a list beforehand of the questions you plan to ask (but don't be surprised if you don't get to them all during the actual interview). You'll want to ask for basic information about the woman's life, but also ask questions about her understanding of her gender, how she feels gender has been a part of her life, etc.
- Write questions that for the most part are open ended, to leave plenty of room for responses. Avoid yes or no questions. Also avoid asking more than one question at a time; follow up on one line of discussion fully before moving to another topic. Be sure to cover basic questions about birth dates, places, etc., but most of your questions should revolve around larger topics.
- While you should plan your questions in advance, you must also be prepared if the conversation should take an unexpected turn. Use follow-up questions to elicit more information on a topic, and be prepared to initiate an entirely new line of questioning.
- Remember that you'll need to ask questions both to establish a rapport between you and the subject and to elicit information. Your subject will direct the conversation where she would like it to go as much as you do, and you should respect her wishes. Should your conversation veer far afield, rather than interrupt, wait until the end of the current thread of discussion, and then redirect your subject back to the questions you want to pursue.

## During the interview

Have your consent form signed before you begin the interview. Explain the form and leave a blank copy with the subject for her future reference.

- Listen with all your attention during the interview.
- Be patient during silences; give your subject a chance to think before you jump in.
- Take some notes as you listen, particularly noting any follow-up questions you would like to ask.

## Writing up the interview

Immediately after the interview, begin the process of transcribing your interview. You will need to listen to your recording several times to get an accurate transcription, and your fresh memories will better help you attain a high level of accuracy.

- Reflect on the purpose of the project; do you have a stronger sense now of how things have changed for women during your subject's lifetime?
- Do you need to do any follow-up research to verify any information in your subject's recollections? Or to get a better sense of a particular time period?
- Whether you know the interview subject well or not at all, follow up with a thank you note.
- Take a look at an interview written for a very similar assignment by a student at the University of Maine at Farmington; the link will take you to an issue of a student magazine, and you'll need to scroll down a bit to reach Mindy Leach's essay, "To Nana With Love..."

<http://studentorgs.umf.maine.edu/~ripple/marchbod.htm>

The whole issue of the magazine is pretty interesting, with many of the essays there generated as assignments in women's studies courses. Feel free to look around at other essays as well.

## Resources

Oral Histories in the Perry Library at Old Dominion

Transcripts and audio recordings of the collection at Old Dominion

<http://www.lib.odu.edu/special/oralhistory/womenhistory/>

Worcester Women's Oral History Project Interview Guide

A good overview of the different types of questions you might ask about a woman's life.

Obviously the regionally specific questions would need modification if you wanted to use them.

[http://www.wwhp.org/files/oral-history-project/Interview\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.wwhp.org/files/oral-history-project/Interview_Guide.pdf)

Sample Oral History Interview Questions, Kentucky Educational Television

These questions are specific to the Civil Rights movement and will give you a good idea how you might think about asking questions regarding women's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<http://www.ket.org/civilrights/questions.htm>