



# Oral Histories as a Research Method



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## Aim of Workshop



Before beginning an oral history project, a researcher should understand:

- what is an oral history?  
(what it is and what it isn't)
- what are its advantages/disadvantages?
- how do we conduct oral histories?  
(with an emphasis today on interviewing)

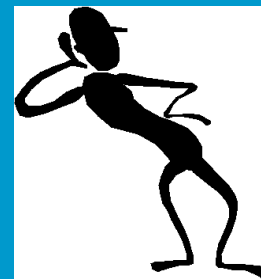
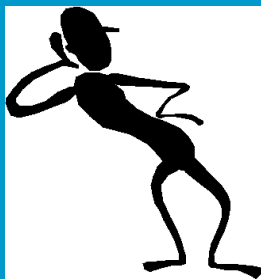
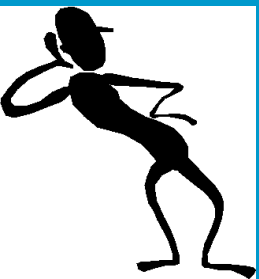


What do YOU understand by “oral  
histories”?

# Defining oral histories

“We all have stories to tell, stories we have lived from the inside out. Oral history listens to these stories. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences. Historians have finally recognized that the everyday memories of everyday people have historical importance. If we do not collect and preserve those memories, those stories, then one day they will disappear forever.”

(also known as oral memoirs and oral testimonies)



# Defining oral histories

## They are NOT:

- folklore
- gossip
- hearsay
- rumour
- oral tradition

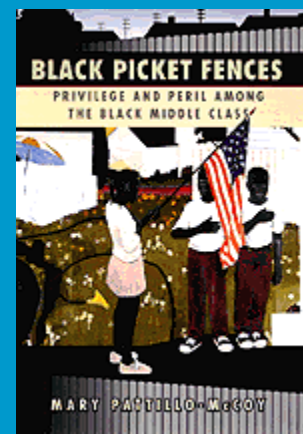
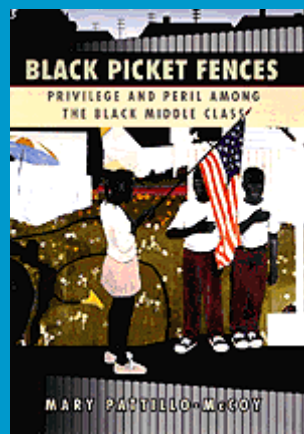
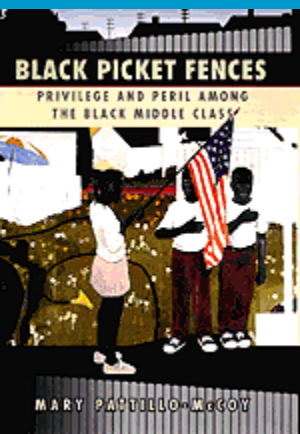


## They ARE:

- verified
- analysed
- placed in an accurate historical context

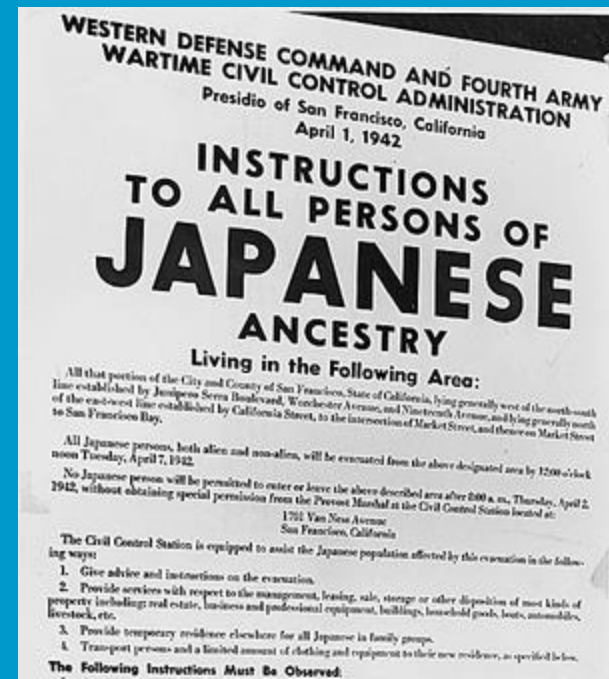
# Different to ethnography

- Ethnography = branch of anthropology that studies peoples and their cultures
- Both oral histories and ethnographies give voice to the voiceless
- But oh = emphasis on individual and e on a group.
- E less concerned with historical events.



# Examples of oral histories

- The Impact of Vietnam War on Refugees from Southeast Asia
- 1940s Film Talk: Oral Histories of Hollywood
- Women and Families : an Oral History 1940-1970
- Women in the Chinese Enlightenment : Oral and Textual Histories
- And Justice For All : an Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps in World War Two



# Why conduct oral histories?

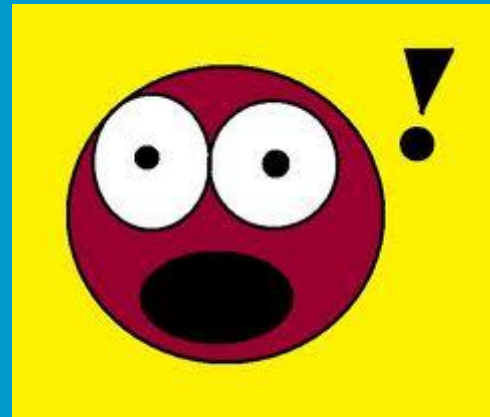
- a valuable source of new knowledge about the past
- can provide new interpretive perspective on that past
- can provide information about everyday life and insights of "ordinary people"
- can make the case for listening to individuals whose lives have been lived under constricted circumstances





# Why are oral histories better than other types of research?

- Dramatic! - first hand view of history
- Fascinating! - storytelling approach and sense of personal experience
- Making ordinary people extraordinary!



# Benefits of oral histories

- can discover and preserve history no matter how large or small
- v flexible: can include all ages
- history no longer limited to the powerful, rich and famous
- history no longer limited to the literate
- see UM's Race Relations Resource [Centre](#)



# Pitfalls of oral histories

- Finding subjects
- Finding appropriate subjects
- Labour intensive: hard work & time consuming
- Large number of unforeseeable problems resulting in poor results



# More pitfalls of oral histories

- Problems with memory
- Humans prone to bias and exaggeration
- Interviewees tell you what they think you want to hear
- Sensitive topics leading to inaccurate answers
- Can be emotionally draining for interviewer as well as interviewee



# Even more pitfalls of oral histories

- Complicated to write down what has been said

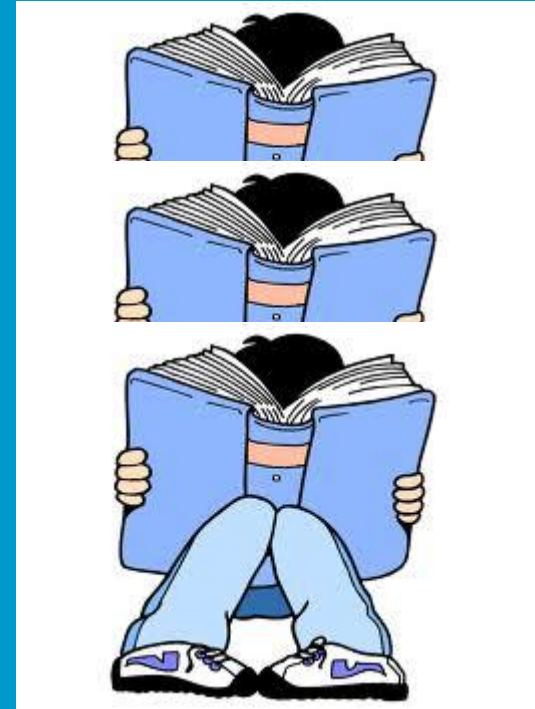
Transcripts do not carry inflections of voice and body language

- BUT as long as you are aware of pitfalls you will be FINE!



# How to plan oral histories

- read a sample oral history (see bibliography in pack or go to RRRC)
- what makes that example valuable & interesting?
- familiarise yourself with your subject
- in essence, **PLAN! PLAN! PLAN!**
- also need to consider ethics issues...



# What are Ethics Considerations?



- what are ethics and why do they affect me?
- why do we need approval from the ethics committee?
- what ethical forms do you need to write?
- sample forms in your packs
- training day on ethics
- see university ethics [webpage](#)



# Conducting oral histories



- what do you want to find out?
- plan the project
- conduct interviews
- process interviews (transcribing)
- present results; evaluate results
- store materials archivally





# Conducting oral histories

## - Archiving

- [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
- Need co-operative relationship
- Probs with digitalisation of interviews (and their availability on internet)
- Make copies even if digital



# Case Study

- Gillian Mawson historian
- Book: *Guernsey Evacuees – The Forgotten Evacuees of the Second World War*
- See [video link](#)
- Twitter @guernseyevacuee

