

Science Studio vol 026 - (Guest: Nathaniel Comfort)

Oral history: the embrace of subjective understanding

An interview technique used by folklorists, sociologists, historians, and public health experts, professor Nathaniel Comfort offers insight about how to conduct oral histories and shows how their “co-creation,” as historical documents or a cradle-to-grave family narratives, can enrich present thinking and future understanding of the past.

Peggy Coulombe: Hi, this is Peggy Coulombe with Science Studio. We're sitting down with Nathaniel Comfort, an Associate Professor in the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University.

He's going to talk a little more with us about the techniques and use of oral histories. Why did you focus on this particular medium?

Nathaniel Comfort: I guess there are two answers. Practically, I've spent some time in science journalism interviewing people in a journalistic context, and so it sort of came naturally to me. But, intellectually I do twentieth century history, and these people are around.

It just struck me as neglectful to ignore these people's memories. My colleagues who do early modern history - what would they give for a time machine to take them back to 17th century England? When I walk out of my office at Johns Hopkins and walk over to the Basic Science buildings I walk into my time machine. These guys are walking down the hall, and I can plumb their memories and find out things that scholars of dead people could never hope to get at.

Peggy: How do you approach doing an interview?

Nathaniel: There are a lot of ways to approach interviews. A lot of different people interview people for a living. Journalists do, anthropologists do, social scientists do, people in public health, epidemiology, folklorists and they all bring different kinds of techniques. Some are more formal about it; some are more loose and open-ended.

The formal discipline of oral history, sort of sitting down with your grandmother and saying, "Tell me about your life," is another approach. As a historian, oral history is a relatively new set of techniques for us. I can pick and choose among all of those different methods.

I begin with a relatively structured set of questions, but then I always let it run kind of free form within that structure when I'm actually talking to somebody. I try to have the benefit of some structure that I can use to compare one interview to another, but I always have to leave lots of room for the surprise stories that I was not expecting.

Peggy: What do you consider the most important features in conducting a good interview?

Nathaniel: Preparation and empathy. You really have to do your homework because if you haven't spent hours and hours with a person's CV and their publications and reading about the history of the period that they were living in and working in, if you haven't read the other scholar's work on that body of research you don't have any hope of getting at the interesting stuff.

A lot of these people I talk to are fairly famous, and they've told their stories before. They push a button and they pop in the right cassette tape, and they tell you the story they've told 50 times. How do you get past that to the really juicy, gossipy stories about what people felt about the other graduate students or how they did their science - what techniques they used that are long lost and no one remembers.

You have to do your homework so that's the preparation part, but when you are actually in the interview you have to really listen and you have to be kind of quick on your feet. You have to hear what someone's really saying which is sometimes different from what they're literally saying.

You can see, if you look at their eyes, and their facial expressions cues that may be, if you're alert, will tell you to follow up here or back off there or rephrase the question or come back to it in a different way. You really have to try to understand where the other person's coming from so that they feel comfortable enough to tell you their stories.

Peggy: You said there are qualities, such as the person's mannerism or the state of mind or, say, they are angry or sad or candid, do play a role in how the interviews then are interpreted.

Nathaniel: Absolutely, they do. It can be difficult to translate some of that on to the page. When we use interview material in scholarship typically we're working from the printed transcript rather than the... you know it just takes too long to listen through six hours of audio. It's nice and in well run projects you do have access to that audio so you can hear the inflection. If you tell me something and I say, "Really?" that's means one thing and if I say, "*Really*" it means something else... "*Really*"...

And so, as an interviewer I have a responsibility to try to clarify those - Do I detect a note of skepticism in your voice when you say that, or to try to follow up so that the printed page does reflect some of the meaning that I'm getting through eye contact and listening.

Peggy: How do you use oral interviews in historical writing?

Nathaniel: I use them in lots of different ways, and the more I do the more ways I find to use them. An interview can expose you to ideas that you didn't glean from your reading.

This happened to me with the very first historical interview I did with Barbara McClintock. The first person that I talked to I had my set of ideas about what I wanted him to tell me about. He said, the first thing you have to understand about her is blah, blah, blah. It just completely rocked my world.

It turned upside down what I thought Barbara McClintock was about, and that gave me

something to follow up on. You can't just take that and say, "Well, this is true because he said" but it gave me some leads. You start looking into the published literature and her research notes and talking to other people and saying, "Is that really true?" with a good skeptical eye but eventually, if you're lucky, the evidence becomes so overwhelming you think, Yeah, this is actually true. No one knew this before except him and a few other people that weren't telling. You get a lot of ideas that might either take you longer to get otherwise or you might never even find.

Also, people are wonderful storehouses of, what scholars like to call, tacit knowledge which is a big, fancy term for stuff that most people don't talk about but everybody knows.

What techniques did people use in the 1960s in the lab? How was your lab laid out? What did you do on a typical Monday morning? What was it like? What is science really like? Has does it work on a day-to-day basis?

A published scientific article is a highly processed document. It is very formalized, and it's written in a way that scientists are trained to read to get meaning from. The actual historical processes that lead to a given scientific result are masked in the published work.

Some of it is encoded in the lab notebooks, if you're lucky enough to look at those. The books are often highly coded themselves and often shorthand. They are often difficult or impossible to read without some help interpreting them, so there's another way that you can get at them.

Sometimes, you can get the person to sit down with you and look at documents together and say, "What does this mean? What were you guys doing? What were you thinking? Who was important here? What are the relationships between the people involved? How did this person get to be an author on this paper?"

A lot of stuff that is buried- still remains in people's heads so the subjective impressions, objective facts that would be hard to find otherwise, a lot of things like that.

Peggy: so you're kind of like a detective really?

Nathaniel: Yes, historians are basically detectives of one sort or another. That is what you do when you go into a conventional archive too. You are rummaging around through correspondence and lab notebooks and trying to pull out meaning. But with oral history you have to have some diplomatic skills that you don't have to have in a dusty archive. You can be ruthless in a way in an archive that you can't afford to be when you're talking to people, for one because they'll clam up on you and you'll stop getting information from them.

I mean, an oral history, this is important, an oral history is a special kind of historical document because it is one the historian creates with the historical actor. So I participate in the creation of a historical document. I mean in most areas of history that is considered cheating. So what kind of document am I going to create? How candid am I going to get this person to be? How revealing will they be? A lot of that depends on me.

Peggy: How do you manage to come into this with an objective perspective? Is that even possible?

Nathaniel: No, it is not possible. So I abandon that in favor of trying to have an empathetic subjective understanding of people who disagree with each other. So, if I get all sides of an example or a case, then I can step back when I get into the next phase, which is the analysis and the writing, and then I can put my objective hat on and try to mediate among the different opinions and find out where I think the truth lies, where my interpretation falls.

Peggy: Now if you had a student come to you and say they wanted to do an oral history project but they had no idea how to approach it, what are the first things that you would tell them?

Nathaniel: First of all, read and listen to a lot of interviews. Learn Chomsky. There are some real pros out there. And I'm not snobbish about it. Listen to NPR. Read Studs Terkel. Great interviewers. We can learn a whole lot from these guys. I'm not saying emulate them, but learn from them. And second, read up on the theory. I emphasize the scholarly side of it as well. There is a substantial body of scholarly literature about interviewing techniques and methods and so forth and some very interesting ideas about what the relationship is between an interviewer and an interview subject. So I make them ground themselves, because I'm at a University and that's what professors are taught to do- ground yourself in the deeper ideas. And third, practice. Get out there and interview people. Record them. Listen to them. Transcribe them. Something as mechanical sounding as recording an interview turns out to be really challenging and full of all sorts of decisions you didn't realize you were going to have to make.

And when I make my students do it, at first they say, "ah geez, can I do just a couple pages, and I get it"... no... you've got to do more than that, and second of all you've got to do it a couple of times with different approaches. First time write down everything you hear on the tape. Absolutely everything. The second time go back and make it readable, make it into a conversation, and tell me what you think works and where you would fall in that spectrum. How many broken sentences and elliptical statements, and ums and errs do you leave in? If you leave them all in, it's going to be unreadable.

If you take them all out, it's going to be sterile. You lose the character or the person's voice; you lose a lot of meaning. If someone gets nervous when you ask a certain pointed question there will be vocal traces that indicate that. So where are you going to fall? I have my graduate students record and transcribe and interpret an interview and it's just revelatory to them. I can't believe I did all this stuff... I had no idea.

Peggy: When you go to do an oral history interview you're kind of like a Mo-Jo, which is a mobile journalist for those of you not in the know. You have to handle your video equipment and recording equipment. How do you set these things up so you can do a mobile interview?

Nathaniel: Well, if I'm lucky I have a graduate student with me and we can do it together and one person can run the recorder or the camera, but often it is just me. I have decent equipment that gives me nice recordings, but the production values are fairly low

by broadcast standards. But they're historical documents; we're not going for Ken Burns here, so as long as the basic information is captured, that is usually sufficient.

Peggy: How does an interview for an oral history differ from say this interview, doing a podcast or an interview you are doing for print or some other kind of medium, or video for that matter?

Nathaniel: I'm tempted to say I have an agenda when I do my interviews. I'm looking for certain kinds of information. Let me say that I'm not doing it for an audience. I'm doing it as a method of scholarly inquiry, and we do make our interviews publicly available for this Oral History of Human Genetics project. It is a collaboration between us at Johns Hopkins and my colleagues at UCLA. We're putting them on a website so that they will be freely available.

So they're not private documents, although sometimes historians do. Journalists don't share their interviews, that's like giving away your sources, that's your Deep Throat. Ours are public, but we're letting the public listen in on our scholarly methods. When I'm doing the interview I'm not thinking about the 12th grader who might be interested in this someday for a project on the history of genetics.

I hope that 12th grader will find useful material there, but when I'm talking to this scientist, my focus is on probing them, on establishing a relationship, making that person feel comfortable with me so that he or she will reveal to me things that they might not have talked about for years and years, maybe not ever. And if I'm lucky, in the good interviews this happens, they realize things that they didn't know before and they come out of the interview saying that was really interesting, I hadn't thought about things that way. And then I've got something no other scholar can get. Again it's back to the empathy and the preparation.

Peggy: Nathaniel, I want to thank you so much for sitting down and talking with us today and giving us your own sort of oral history.

Nathaniel: It's been a pleasure. It is sort of fun to be interviewed about interviewing.

[laughter]

Peggy: This is Peggy Coulombe and you've been listening to School of Life Science podcast Science Studio. Our theme music comes from the website "Magnatunes" and was composed by Yongen from the collection "Moonrise." School of Life Sciences is in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences on the Tempe campus of Arizona State University.
[theme music]