Dialoguing with Retired Nurses: Involving Interview Participants in the Interpretation Process in South Africa

Leslie Anne Hadfield

Abstract: The African Studies community has reinvigorated discussions about the racial and power dynamics of the field in the past few years. A core question has been how to Africanize knowledge production. Hadfield's practical example as a white American historian involving Black South African oral history interview participants in different stages of the research process shows that successfully including interview participants in the interpretation stage requires clarity and transparency throughout. If meaningful dialogue is employed and human connections prioritized, the result should be a more accurate and inclusive process that satisfies all, even if scholars and participants disagree.

Résumé : Au cours des dernières années, la communauté des études africaines a relancé les discussions sur les dynamiques raciales et le pouvoir de son héritage. Une question fondamentale a été de savoir comment africaniser la production de connaissances. Hadfield propose un cas pratique en tant qu'historien américain blanc engageant, tout au long du processus de recherche, des participants noirs sud-africains à des entrevues sur l'histoire orale. Le résultat montre que la collaboration réussie des participants à l'étape d'interprétation nécessite clarté et

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African Studies Review, Volume 66, Number 2 (June 2023), pp. 352–372

Leslie Anne Hadfield is a professor of history and the Africana Studies program coordinator at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah, USA). She primarily studies South African contemporary social and political history. Oral history is an important part of her work. Extensive interviews formed the basis for her books, *Liberation and Development: Black Consciousness Community Programs in South Africa* (2016) and *A Bold Profession: African Nurses in Rural Apartheid South Africa* (2021). Email: leslie_hadfield@byu.edu.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2022.140

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transparence. Si un dialogue constructif est établi et que les liens humains sont priorisés, le résultat devient plus précis et inclusif ce qui rend une satisfaction unanime, même si les chercheurs et les participants n'arrivent pas aux mêmes conclusions.

Resumo : Nos últimos anos, a comunidade dos Estudos Africanos tem dado novo fôlego aos debates sobre as dinâmicas raciais e de poder neste domínio académico. Uma das principais questões tem sido como africanizar a produção de conhecimento. Hadfield – enquanto exemplo prático de historiador americano branco que envolve, nas diferentes etapas do seu trabalho de investigação, os sul-africanos negros que participaram em entrevistas de história oral – demonstra que, para que o envolvimento dos entrevistados na etapa de interpretação seja bem-sucedido, é preciso que haja transparência e clareza em todos os momentos. Se for empreendido um diálogo significativo e se for atribuída prioridade às ligações humanas, deverá obter-se um processo mais rigoroso e inclusivo que a todos satisfaça, mesmo que não haja consenso entre académicos e participantes.

Keywords: oral history; shared authority; South Africa; nurses; research ethics; race and equity in African Studies

(Received 1 February 2022 – Revised 31 August 2022 – Accepted 21 September 2022)

Retired nurse Buyiswa Vakalisa loved history and community work. In her retirement, which she spent in the town of Middledrift (or Xesi) in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, she led a retired nurses' association, contributed to historical projects such as commemorations of the Healdtown Mission Institute, and assisted foreign researchers like me. When she took me around parts of the Eastern Cape in 2013, she affectionately and jokingly introduced me to possible interview participants as "my last-born daughter" (all her children were daughters). When the day came for me to present my conclusions to other retired nurses five years later, Vakalisa was eighty-one years old. As she was walking to board the transportation to make the forty-minute drive from Middledrift to Ginsberg, she fell. For a moment she was not sure she would be able to make it to the event. However, other women planning to travel with her persuaded her to still attend the meeting. Both Vakalisa and I were glad she made it. I was happy to include her in this important part of what she had been involved in and to show respect and gratitude for her help. I could also see that she enjoyed meeting with her friends and former colleagues. Like others, she told me it was like a "debriefing session" for them to remember and process their own life histories together.

Scholars drawing on oral history have recognized that their work is much richer, more accurate, and more ethical if interview participants play a greater role in the production of the final product. Some refer to those they interview as collaborators or partners to recognize their contributions

to the history that is constructed out of the interviews. Collaboration, or "sharing authority," can also include giving research advice, tips, and connections, editing transcripts, co-authoring, and creating collaborative community histories (Frisch 1990). All these approaches have their benefits and complications and different power dynamics that can come into play. Researchers can be outsiders and insiders, depending on specific contexts (Liu 2006). Scholars and research participants can pursue their own agendas to varying degrees. At a time when discussions about the racial and power dynamics in African Studies have been reinvigorated, it is important to examine African contributions at different stages of the research process (Grosz-Ngaté 2020).[1] Doing this can help scholars originating from outside Africa employ more equitable and ethical practices and arrive at more accurate results. Similar to the work of African scholars who have provided insights from their own academy-community engagement, practical examples can illuminate important general principles to follow in centering African knowledge production.

In this article, I share lessons learned from my own efforts to involve research participants like Vakalisa and her colleagues in the post-interview interpretation stage as a white American doing research with Black South Africans. By sharing interview recordings and my written analysis with those I interviewed, along with other retired nurses, I gained further valuable information and insights, fostered mutual understanding, and showed respect to the people I had interviewed. The process also gave the women who had participated an opportunity to connect and converse with each other as they more collectively made sense of their past, which was a cathartic experience for some. I learned that involving research participants works best when the researcher has a clear and transparent method, all involved have a shared understanding about the roles of both the scholar and those being interviewed, and expectations of ownership and the end product are clear from the beginning. Finally, dialogue throughout is key. If the process is done well, all should be satisfied and respect the work, even if the scholar and participants disagree in their interpretations. Concern for the human connections involved can act as a guiding principle.

Conducting the Interviews

My purpose in conducting interviews with South African retired nurses was to explore the history of nurses who had worked in rural clinics in the former ethnically segregated Ciskei region of the Eastern Cape in the 1960s through the 1980s. I was interested both in information about what actually happened in the past as well as how these nurses remembered their own histories. My interest in this history was sparked by the prevalence of documents in local government archives and an interview I conducted with Nontsikelelo Biko and Zotshi Mcako while exploring the history of Black Consciousness health initiatives in the 1970s (Hadfield 2016). At the end of our interview, Biko and

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mcako informed me that they had just helped form a retired nurses' association and would help me if I wanted to interview more nurses. My academic resources allowed me to pursue this topic; I received funding from my university and decided to synthesize the history of nurses who had worked in rural clinics after more historiographical exploration. Thus, the project was shaped from the beginning by Biko and Mcako as well as the academic historical field and my own interests.

The interviews I subsequently conducted served as the basis for a book that takes the experiences of these nurses as a focal point for addressing the impact of apartheid politics on health care in the rural Eastern Cape, exchanges between different healing systems, and the intersection of nurses' careers and their personal lives (Hadfield 2021). While these nurses wielded remarkable influence in the rural communities they served, their individual stories and contributions, as well as an analysis of their engagement with African medical systems and the intersection of their careers and private lives, remained largely unexplored in academic history. The oral histories of retired nurses were crucial to understanding and writing this history. Preliminary interviews helped shape my subsequent research. All the interviews provided insights and personal stories unobtainable in archives or other written records. The sixty-seven retired nurses I interviewed between 2011 and 2013 were a small number of those who worked in the Ciskei (in 1991 the Ciskeian Nursing Council counted 3,668 on its register.[2]) However, together, the interviews covered the various backgrounds of African women working across the region, as I strived for geographic representation. Although I particularly sought out women who had worked in rural clinics, I interviewed women who had worked in a range of locations and had different training and career trajectories. Most of the women were members of the dominant ethnic group in the region, the Xhosa, and had significant ties to rural areas in the former Ciskei (either through their work or family), but they also came from different socio-economic backgrounds. I recruited participants through three retired nurses' associations based in King William's Town (the Nightingales), Middledrift, and Alice, through other participants, and my own friends. Three retired nurses played significant roles in introducing me to these associations and other nurses: Biko and Mcako (the Nightingales), and Vakalisa (Middledrift, with connections to Alice and Peddie).

I approached each interview as a history of the woman's career as it related to her broader life history. Attempts to interview a number of women with a wide range of experiences and my focus on their nursing careers meant that I did not conduct full life histories with each woman.[3] Although I sought to allow them to direct the narrative, I put boundaries on the histories of these women by framing my project as a history of their work as nurses in the 1960s through the 1980s. For those in retired nurses' associations, I shared a list of general, open-ended questions ahead of time to alert them to possible questions I would ask. Within that framework, I worked to conduct the

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

interviews with predominantly open-ended invitations to the women to share with me what they found most important and to include the personal or private aspects of these women's lives. As feminist historians have argued, in order to fully understand women's history or allow women to shape the construction of history, we must listen to how women interpret the past in the context of their own full lives, where aspects of everyday life are given significant consideration (Gluck & Patai 1991; Gluck 2006; Cohen 2014). In conducting and analyzing the interviews, I paid attention to issues relating to a woman's experience, emotion, and meaning. In doing so, I was not only informed by feminist history work but also influenced by work on the importance of emotion in oral histories (Bornat 2010).

I was also cognizant of the cross-cultural, racial, linguistic, and class dynamics of the interviews as well as the political context within which we spoke. I am a white, female American university professor. At the time I conducted most of the interviews, I was in my early thirties, yet I already had over a decade of engagement in the Eastern Cape. I knew friends and colleagues of many of those I interviewed and spoke Xhosa well enough to conduct an interview in the language if the participant desired. My race, perceived education, and class differences could have led to mistrust, skepticism, or deference on the part of the Black women I interviewed. These women came of age during the height of white supremacy in South Africa as manifested in apartheid. These dynamics could have skewed interview outcomes. I was also sensitive to the fact that as a white, American stranger, I was asking women about the details of their intimate relationships and cultural practices which had been previously disdained by white European society. At the same time, while the presence of an outsider can make some more reticent to talk about private information, an ignorant outsider can also gain basic information from interview participants about which others may not think to ask. An outsider may also make a participant feel comfortable sharing information she thinks the outsider would not disclose to anyone close to her. In other ways, my referrals and characteristics connected me with the women I interviewed. My shared female gender, younger age, my ability to speak the Xhosa language, and the relationships I had with trusted women who referred me to others (sometimes introducing me in person) likely helped some women feel comfortable speaking with me. Moreover, the women belonged to an educated, professional group in South Africa. Some had acquired multiple trainings and degrees. Some had completed research projects themselves, so they understood the process and may have seen me as a peer. Almost all understood the need for informed consent and read the interview agreement closely before signing it. As an American digging into South African history, I have also often been seen as a sympathetic listener to the racial strife in the country's past. Participant personalities, interests, and memories influence what comes out of interviews as well (Hale 1991; White et al. 2001). Some women I approached refused to be interviewed (one because the racial discrimination among nurses in South African public hospitals was too painful for her to revisit). Three did not want to be audio

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recorded but allowed me to take notes. Thus, there were a variety of personal power dynamics as well as connections at play across the interviews.

Furthermore, at the time I interviewed the women, nurses in public hospitals had a reputation for treating patients rudely or neglecting patients in favor of striking for better work conditions. The public health care system in the Eastern Cape was often under fire from the media for misuse of funds and failures to deliver. Former Ciskei nurses felt slighted by the ANC-led government when they did not receive their pensions after the incorporation of apartheid homelands (ethnically segregated regions) into the new South African republic. In fact, the King William's Town retired nurses' association was founded in part to take care of nurses who felt forgotten by society and to offer their services to the current system. I also heard some tension expressed between those who had worked in South Africa in apartheid homelands and ANC leaders who had been in exile and possibly looked down on former homeland employees as corrupt apartheid collaborators. This context meant that while one or two nurses declined an interview, perhaps skeptical of an American's motives, most participants exhibited an urge to reaffirm the standards and respectability of the profession at the height of their careers. Some praised the Ciskei's health care system as "excellent," "wonderful, wonderful, wonderful," and "number one." Since most participants belonged to one of three retired nurses' associations that celebrated their careers, they may have been more inclined to focus on the positive aspects of nursing in the Ciskei at the expense of other aspects. The lack of discussion of racism by the nurses was also initially surprising; yet this made more sense as I considered that many had worked in rural clinics alone or in segregated settings dominated by Black professionals. In this post-apartheid period, the racial politics of the past weighed on the present, but in ways more complex than Black-white divisions (Witz, Minkley, & Rassool 2017:38). The developments of the twenty years beyond apartheid informed the interview context as well.

With all these dynamics in mind, I employed various strategies to probe participants and explore different aspects of their experiences, memories, and personal interpretations of their past. For example, I asked questions about emotions and motivations to offer the women different avenues of expression. I signaled to the nurses that I viewed Xhosa medical practices as possibly effective by asking leading questions about the merits of Xhosa medicine. When a woman was reluctant to speak about her own marriage relationship, I asked what she had heard about other nurses' relationships to allow her to speak of the issues generally. At the same time, out of respect for sensitive personal information, I also did not want to probe too much, so likely did not obtain as much information as I could have. (After reading Susanne Klausen [2015], I realized there was a great silence about abortion as well. It was likely quite prevalent, but it was only mentioned in three interviews). Certainly, an interview conducted between two of these nurses would have looked different from my interviews with them. Yet, certain aspects stood out as independent of my presence. As other scholars have demonstrated,

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analyzing the way people remember the past is also telling. Comments about how important it was to view nursing as a calling were directed more to young nurses at times than they were to me. These comments revealed not only how these nurses felt about the direction the profession was going, but how they had constructed their own professional identity in the past. Complaints about inadequate salaries and pensions or the negative effects of their work on their children demonstrated that the women were willing to talk about the not-so-glamorous aspects of nursing as well. Overall, the memories shared help us understand what was significant to these women about their careers in the context of their fuller lives, as they were lived in the past and as they were shaped by the present context. By looking to their interviews as the main source for the book I would subsequently write, I sought to let them guide me in constructing the history of the actual and remembered past, even as I imposed a structure and determined the research questions.

Giving Back and Inviting Feedback

As I conducted interviews and wrote the book I planned to publish, I sought to also give something back to those I had interviewed and to involve them in the interpretation process. I did this for three reasons. First, I wanted to reciprocate. I hoped that each woman I interviewed would gain something from giving of herself to my project. I hoped that she would recognize the importance of adding her part to the historical record; however, I also wanted the interview itself to be a fulfilling and meaningful experience for each one personally in a tangible way. Thus, I decided to give each woman a copy of her interview. I did this mostly in audio form as CDs I made on my computer and then hand-delivered or mailed soon after we had met for the interview (this was back when people still used CDs). As opposed to monetary compensation or some other material gift (which could compromise the interview process), giving the participants a copy of their interview gave them something priceless they could remember and share with their families. Second, I gave back and included the participants in the interpretation process as a way to respect their role in the interview process. I generated the interviews—I initiated them, asked many questions, and did the recording—but viewed the interview participants as equal owners of the interview. Although the consent forms could have more explicitly named them as co-owners, the forms did promise participants a copy of the interview and gave them opportunities to modify or withdraw from the interview at any time. In other words, the form recognized their power to determine what would happen to the interview and allowed them to use their copy as they pleased, even as they gave me consent to use the interview for scholarly publications and to open it to the public as part of an archival collection. I also sought to gain their feedback on my written analysis to give them a chance to comment on how I had used the interviews before I published my interpretation for general audiences. The analysis and writing were largely mine, but I wanted to give them an opportunity to evaluate and approve or disapprove of what I had written. Finally, I

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sought feedback about the interviews and my analysis to ensure accuracy. Considering my position as outlined above, I wanted to be sure I had interpreted what they said correctly, even if collectively.

My desire to present my findings to those I interviewed was in part inspired by my previous personal relationships in South Africa and in part by Nwando Achebe's introduction to *Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (Achebe 2005). I first engaged with South Africans in East London as an undergraduate international student who was cared for by a host family for four months, as a fellow church member, and a friend. The relationships I made in that first experience drew me back to the place. Those continued relationships made me question how my interpretation of South Africa would be received by my friends and host family there. Could I confidently present the same paper I shared at a student conference to them? I read Achebe's work in graduate school. Achebe described how she considered the Nsukka women in modern-day Nigeria whom she interviewed as her collaborators and conducted the interviews according to feminist oral history methods. She also wrote about presenting her findings to two different audiences of indigenous scholars in the Nsukka region as a way to dialogue with those about whom she had researched and written. She did this to refine her work in conversation with them, but also as a practical measure. As she later told me at an African Studies Association meeting in 2018, she knew she would be going back to that community and had to be sure the community accepted or at least respected her work. Inspired by her work, I similarly presented my findings to groups of people I interviewed and other residents in two villages where I had conducted interviews for my first book. At the end of a year of doctoral dissertation research, I presented a brief summary of my research and roughly edited videos I had compiled of clips from the interviews and asked them to respond. These sessions reinforced what people had already said, but also brought out further insights that influenced my interpretations, including my recognition of emotion as important to oral history. They also engendered respect between the interview participants and myself. Having seen the benefits of this approach, I sought to do the same with this new group of research participants who had worked as nurses in the former Ciskei. Working with a smaller, more cohesive group allowed me to have more in-depth discussions about my interpretations.

My main effort to show my appreciation to those I had interviewed and to gain their feedback came at the end of 2018 when I was drafting the book manuscript. I invited all whom I had interviewed and the three local retired nurses' associations to come to a meeting at the Steve Biko Center in Ginsberg, near King William's Town (a central location for my research). There, I presented my book and invited their comments and questions before providing lunch. I consulted Mcako and Vakalisa about which day and time would be best to hold the event. Employees of the Steve Biko Center called all the women for whom I had contact information and extended an invitation to the three retired nurses' associations. The center also arranged

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for transportation for those who lived in Alice, Middledrift, and Peddie, towns a drive of forty-five minutes to an hour away from Ginsberg. I used research funds to pay the Center for the work, the session, and the lunch as well as the transportation. When they called, I asked Center employees to say something to the effect of: "An American historian, Dr. Leslie Hadfield, interviewed you some time back about your nursing career. She has been working on a book about nurses who worked in the Ciskei and would like to present what she has written to you and other people she interviewed for your feedback before the book is published. You are invited to participate in this dialogue on Tuesday, November 6…." The Steve Biko Center employees reported that many of the sixty-seven I had interviewed five or more years earlier either were now too old to attend or their phone numbers did not go through. On the day of the event, however, around thirty-five women arrived.

The meeting began as many of the retired nurses' associations meetings did: women enjoyed tea as they waited for all to arrive and then opened the meeting with a prayer, song, and a welcome by the president of the King William's Town retired nurses' association. We met in a small conference room, where I had written the book's title and chapter titles on a board. I presented the overall purpose and arguments of the book and then discussed the contents with those in attendance, chapter by chapter, with time for feedback and questions on each chapter. We conducted the session in English and Xhosa so that everyone would feel comfortable speaking. I took notes as well as voice recorded the session so that I would be accurate in capturing what they said. We agreed that I would keep the recording for my own personal use and they would not state their names on the recording so that those who wanted to remain anonymous could do so. The session lasted for two hours before we had lunch.

The dialogue was a productive and meaningful exercise. I clarified questions I had and sought feedback on where I should discuss certain issues. For example, I asked the retired nurses where discussions about family planning would fit best in the book, if their contracts changed when clinics shifted from mission hospital to Ciskeian government control, if the local government had an official policy about working with so-called traditional healers, and how I should discuss their salaries. Some questioned my framing of the book when we discussed the terms I used in the titles. I changed the title of one chapter because one nurse pointed out that not all the nurses were Xhosa and the book title was broad, with "African nurses" in the subtitle. Some who had not previously been interviewed made their own contributions, and those I had interviewed reminded me of aspects they felt were important to include. We also talked about broader ideas regarding memory and historical interpretation. For example, some expressed frustrations they had with apartheid racial segregation in health care while at the same time speaking of the pride they felt in the achievements of nurses during the time. This led us to discuss the complexities of Ciskeian history and how nurses still succeeded in improving health care while working for a corrupt government system. One statement by a participant became part of the title of a

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conference paper I presented at an African Studies Association annual meeting: "Homeland Nurses-Independent and Progressive?" After talking about nurses' challenges in marriage, which brought out sensitive personal information, one participant remarked that it was good to discuss both the negative and the positive of nursing. Like Vakalisa, more than one participant later commented that our meeting felt like a "debriefing session" where they could make sense of what happened to them in the past and talk about experiences they may have previously kept to themselves.

After two hours, it was time to take a break. We had covered a lot of ground, but the session had its limitations. The retired nurses' associations and the friendships the nurses had with each other facilitated our meeting. It gave some the organizational endorsement and encouragement to attend. However, there were many who did not attend for various reasons. The women had not read the manuscript draft, so could not comment on everything written there.[4] I faced the challenges that often come with conducting group discussions, with a few vocal women eager to make comments and possibly influencing the thoughts and contributions of others. I tried to give everyone a chance to speak by asking for contributions from those who had not yet spoken, but I also did not want to force participation.

I subsequently met with three interview participants individually in their homes to obtain their particular feedback. Health issues prevented Gamase Mtyeku from attending our group meeting, yet she had wanted to participate. She reached out to me, and we arranged a meeting wherein I briefly presented my book to her and then showed her where I had written about her or quoted her. Mtyeku corrected something I had written which gave a wrong impression about her assessment of working in a certain hospital. It was a minor issue in comparison to the larger work, but clarifying what Mtyeku had told me made the manuscript more accurate, more true to Mtyeku's initial interview.

I also met with two women whose stories I wrote about in more depth when I highlighted different experiences the women had in marriage. Even though I had previously obtained their consent to use their interview, I wanted to gain their approval for what I had written about them because of its personal nature and because it reflected negatively on their former husbands (both deceased). I hoped that my approach would encourage them to speak up if they disagreed with what I had written. In the privacy of their own homes, I read the manuscript out loud with them with the paper in front of us. Both women confirmed that I had represented their stories correctly. Lulu Zuma's forthcoming personality led me to believe that she felt free to correct me. After considering the possibility of many people reading her story, Zuma expressed that she hoped putting her story out in the public would help other women who might find themselves in a similar situation. In fact, she shared that she had participated in a church program that provided counseling to women in abusive relationships. When I met with Theresa Ntonga, we read the paragraph about her relationship with her husband in relation to her career. It explained that she and her husband stayed together

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even when she was stationed in rural clinics because her husband's work with window dressing and then municipal government consulting allowed him to move around easily. The paragraph then continued with dialogue from our interview that reflected her frank communication:

> When asked what her husband thought of her career, Ntonga asked, "You mean assisting?" then broke into laughter. "I'm sorry," she said, "he was useless." Then she laughingly told me I must not get married. When she became more serious, she said, "I wouldn't be struggling like this if… I really struggled, I don't want to lie." Her main problem was that her husband did not contribute much financially…. Unlike Zuma, she denied that her career caused any tension in their marriage. It was just that her husband was irresponsible. She explained, "They see that you can work hard, then they lean on you." She concluded that she was able to survive because God gave her strength. She did give her husband credit for helping in the house—"because he was good, even in cooking at times," she explained, laughing…

After affirming that what I had written was correct, Ntonga reflected that her daughter might not like it, because she really loved her father. She also gave him a little more credit, remarking, "If he wasn't there it would be so hard for me." Ntonga thought out loud that perhaps it did not matter if this was published because her daughter probably would not read the academic book. Respecting these various perspectives posed a dilemma. In response, I suggested that I include how Ntonga's daughter felt about her father to represent the full story and respect her daughter's feelings. I also included Ntonga's comment giving her husband more credit in the published version. If I interpreted these interactions correctly, these meetings gave interview participants a further opportunity to decide how they felt about the meaning and impact of sharing their stories. I wanted to respect these women by showing them the product to which they had contributed and by giving them a chance to approve of what I wrote. However, these interactions demonstrate the multiple agendas that can surround interviews and raise questions about who has the final say.

Authorship, Expectations, Dialogue, and Disagreement

Attempting to share ownership and authority of interviews and to collaborate on the resulting analysis is not straightforward. Scholars have explored various aspects of negotiating competing agendas by those involved in the interview, sharing authority, or viewing interview participants as co-authors. They have raised questions about whose focus and interpretation may be privileged, who drives the interview, and who decides what the final product is when those involved disagree (Frisch 1990; Hale 1991; Borland 1991; Brettell 1993; Hamilton 1998; White et al. 2001; Gluck 2006; Sfeftel & Zembrzycki 2010). Some researchers have asked: how does access to which resources

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shape projects throughout their various stages? For whom is the research conducted (Edgar 2021)? Who has power to shape the narrative, or what should one do when the interests of the community conflict with the interests of academia (Brettell 1993:11; Alagoa 2001)? Should oral history projects always stem from and align with the interests of one or the other? What if privileging one over the other raises ethical concerns about the accuracy of representation and interpretation (Ogot 2001; Girdharry 2021:247; Hobbs 2021)? Does the scholar's positionality taint the feedback process as well (Akello 2018)?

The process of weighing different perspectives is part of getting as close to an approximation of the truth as we can, which is a basis of our disciplines, even as scholars have recognized the positionality of the researcher, the limits of oral history, and different definitions of truth. For scholarly works seeking to take into account various perspectives, inviting feedback or engaging in co-authoring can turn into a difficult balancing act. Presenting various perspectives might come across as erroneous to some participants. Yet it is possible for the researcher to be responsive and accurate in interpreting a group's history while still constructing a wider view. Moreover, while academics strive for critical distance, keeping our scholarly view in check can be a good thing. My own experience combined with the work of others shows that the best practices are to maintain a clear and transparent method as well as a shared understanding about the roles of both the scholar and research participants in the project. This should include an honest look at the impact of the resources supporting the project and should be reflected in the end product.

As Mia Martin Hobbs wrote, negotiating the interpretation with interview participants is rarely done, "because it is logistically very difficult and time-consuming" (2021:74). Yet, it is possible at various levels. Some scholars have successfully co-authored with someone from the community about which they are writing or with the community itself. These projects have taken different forms, depending on who was involved, with what resources, and who made the decisions about the direction the projects would take. Dialogue about methods and expectations play an important role. For example, Anne Mager and Phiko Velelo co-authored *House of Tshatshu* (2018) about the Tshatshu chieftaincy in South Africa. Both had conducted research from different vantage points, with their own separate agendas and resources. Mager, a white university-based historian who grew up in the area, came with a different racial and historical relationship to the chieftaincy from that of Velelo, a councilor to the chieftaincy who had done research on contested historical claims for a legal case. They decided to combine their different "perspectives, skills, and knowledges" and "make the best use of what each had to contribute" to create a more credible account of the past, which they published in an academic-leaning book. They knew that in doing so, "successful collaboration would require understanding each other's expectations, accommodating disagreement, accepting difference and building a common approach. It meant taking joint responsibility" (Mager & Velelo

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2018:5). The preface to their book includes a transcript of one of their conversations wherein they did some of this work of co-authoring. Those providing resources for projects can impose control over the research agenda, yet this does not have to be the case if they carry out conscientious dialogue and are responsive to community needs (Edgar 2021; Grosz-Ngaté 2020; Ampofo 2016).

When the Montréal Life Stories project attempted to record the histories of Haitians living in the city, the researchers grappled with how to balance dissonance while at the same time respecting the authorship of those narrating their stories. Throughout the process, they began to abandon "more traditional academic" approaches by letting participants define themselves and their own position within their history (with seemingly few strings attached by those who funded and initiated the project). A group of grieving Haitian women, *Les femmes endeuillées do La Maison d'Haïti*, decided to combine their stories into one collective narrative to which each one contributed anonymously. The women became both the interviewers and interviewees as they worked together to narrate and interpret their history with one combined audio recording. In this case, the participants decided what to do with the end product and, as Stéphane Martelly wrote, "another history, one that was never definitive, suddenly became possible, allowing us to think in an opaque and broken way about opaque and broken things" (Martelly 2018:189; see also Baik 2022 on recognizing different possible forms and methods of oral history).

In my history of Ciskeian nurses, matters of practicality influenced the way I sought direction from the participants. I did not consider those I interviewed as co-authors, in part because co-authoring with sixty-seven women would have been a herculean task. I also recognized my role in carrying out the project. As the tenured historian, I had the grant money, time, and skills to conduct the research. I also generated the interviews and compiled and analyzed the written and oral historical data. Retired nurses such as Mcako, Biko, and Vakalisa acted as research collaborators as they played a significant role in educating me about the topic and terrain of research and introducing me to people to interview. The majority of those I interviewed played the role of contributors of evidence. While the interviews I conducted with these women shaped my analysis and the focus of the resulting book, the project was larger than the interviews and involved documentary research. I sought to synthesize a wide variety of perspectives and historical evidence to construct a wider view they may not have had as those who lived in the past (Gaddis 2002:3; Getz 2013:2). As I made the final decisions about how much they influenced what I wrote, I took full responsibility for the published book.

Still, I sought to represent and interpret the past in a way that reflected the retired nurses' realities and their own historical interpretations as accurately as possible. I wanted them to feel satisfied with the final product, to find my wider view enlightening, not misleading. I asked myself: Does the fact that I have the main share of authorship mean my history is inaccurate? Would the

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women I interviewed recognize my representation as a reflection of their lived experience? That was, after all, one of the main purposes of my research and writing—to represent their experiences. Would they agree with my interpretation? By inviting the women I had interviewed to respond to my synthesis and conclusions, I turned to them for the answers to these questions and gave them another opportunity to influence my interpretation.

Power dynamics and the positionality of the researchers and research participants still play a role in the process of seeking feedback. I had chosen the format of the end product based on my professional skills and interests. That shaped the scope and nature of the feedback I sought. My relationships with certain participants also influenced whom I received feedback from. I had built a friendship with some of these retired nurses—some over a number of years—and many had showed me great kindness. I wanted to reciprocate, even as I tried to be a critical scholar. I also privileged those with more interest and resources, such as better health, which allowed them to participate. The dynamics of the group discussion may have privileged those more comfortable speaking out. Furthermore, I did not provide the full manuscript for them to read closely before our discussion, so they may not have seen everything they would have wanted to comment on. I was dealing with a group whose comments, questions, and own professional experience showed me they were not deterred entirely by my academic position, nationality, or race; however, that will not be the case for everyone who embarks on similar projects. Aspects such as political context and cross-cultural, racial, linguistic, and class dynamics as well as personal agendas should similarly be examined when researchers seek feedback in the interpretation stage (Akello 2018).

Although the process has its limitations, discussing interpretations with participants can still have more benefits than drawbacks. Other scholars who have received feedback from research participants have found the exercise helpful in preventing (or at least illuminating) scholarly distortions. Giving adequate weight to interview participants or people in the communities where research is conducted may be difficult for some who see doing so as contrary to scholarly standards. Yet, as others have argued, those scholarly practices may also take us too far from the lived experience or the legitimate interpretation of the community (Girdharry 2021:248; Mahuika 2019; Hadfield 2015; Ogot 2001; Witz, Minkley, & Rassool 2017). For example, Katherine Borland wrote of the conflicts she and her grandmother had after Borland interpreted her grandmother's experience going to an American horse race as a young woman through a feminist framework. Her grandmother did not see her experience as "a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment" and felt her granddaughter had gutted her original story (Borland 1991:70; 2018). Borland concluded that feminist oral history practice could be contradictory, hoping to empower women by valuing their lives and perspectives while holding "an explicitly political vision" about what explains their contexts and decisions (Borland 1991:64). She advocated for a more sensitive methodology, writing later that

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she still believed that "the researcher's confident 'I understand you,' which emerges partly as a consequence of the rituals of establishing rapport, might well be replaced by the more tentative, 'Do we understand each other?'" (Borland 2018:32). Nancy Scheper-Hughes recounted how an Irish community ran her out of town when she returned after publishing her book about their suffering mental health (Scheper-Hughes 2000). Her difficult experience led her to consider an alternative yet legitimate interpretation of the community that would have been more acceptable to the people, even more accurate and balanced. Perhaps consulting the community in her interpretation process before publication could have helped her avoid the conflict and corrected her initial interpretation.

Of course, even if researchers consult participants in the interpretation phase, they may disagree about the final interpretation. I was working with a relatively cohesive group of interview participants who were easy to call upon. Furthermore, clear trends emerged in the interviews that meant I did not have major disagreements or competing perspectives to balance across the group with whom I spoke. Like Borland and Scheper-Hughes, others have found the process more difficult. For example, in *African Words, African Voices* (2001), E.J. Alagoa addressed the difficulties of writing community history as an African academic, and Luise White examined questions about handling claims the researcher does not believe (White et al. 2001). Achebe (2005) wrote about how she was critiqued—even attacked—by a male professor in the Nsukka region and African feminists alike for her work on Nsukka women.

Discussing these divergences in the interpretation stage can lead to better outcomes. While acknowledging that dialogue could not "resolve all the problems of oral historiography," Alagoa sustained the "general principle of dialogue" as an important piece of oral history methodology, to "return history to its owners and close the gap of communication between the academic historian and the community to which the history he or she writes belongs" (Alagoa 2001:100–101). Presenting these different interpretations in resulting publications is also respectful and instructive. As Achebe wrote, when she had the chance to respond to the professor in Nsukka who challenged her by discussing the evidence that she used to come to her conclusions, she found understanding rather than resistance (2005:10–11). By the time her book was published, she had worked through these responses. By including their views and her own answers in her introduction, she afforded the people space to make their views known and also more fully explained her methods and interpretations. In these incidents, Achebe was dialoguing with indigenous scholars rather than with those she had interviewed. Yet, a similar process and honest writing can help researchers respectfully present various viewpoints from research participants or communities that may have conflicted with their own while still adhering to their own interpretation. Borland's chapter presenting her grandmother's disagreement with her interpretation of her grandmother's history achieved a similar end. Her exchange with her grandmother about what she had written brought them to a greater understanding, and her writing about their exchange gave her grandmother's interpretation a place

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alongside her own. Thus, both voices gained recognition, and all learned through the exchange—Borland, her grandmother, and the readers. More explicitly discussing the exchange Ntonga and I had in the book I published would have accomplished this as well. Another example is *Mother of Writing*, a book about the development of a Hmong writing system in the mid-twentieth century. After presenting their narrative of the history, the authors included a final chapter that respectfully explained various other interpretations (Smalley et al. 1990). This gave the different perspectives among Hmong people recognition, even as the authors made the case for their own interpretation.

Important dialogue can occur at different stages. Clarifying the methodology and each person's role in the whole process from the beginning manages expectations and allows for course corrections. My own approach was clearer to me during the writing process than during the interview process. Luckily, not having this clarity from the beginning did not pose problems for my interactions with those whom I interviewed. The consent forms which the participants signed made it clear that they would obtain a copy of their interview to do with as they wished. The forms also stated that I would also have ownership over the interview, which I would transcribe, deposit into an archive, make available to the public, and use in scholarly and popular publications. I was open about my plans to write a book and told them where I planned to deposit their interviews. I also did not promise anything more than I delivered. I hoped it was clear that I would be the one to make the final choices about what would be included in the book, even though I would ask for their advice and consider their input. However, if I had formulated a clearer view of my approach from the beginning, I could have been more explicit with the women about the process and what they could expect regarding the end product. I may have even asked them about what kind of end product they would have wanted and where they would like me to deposit the interview transcripts (although my relationship with Nontsikelelo Biko led me to deposit the interviews with the Steve Biko Center in addition to the University of Fort Hare). An academic book is valuable, but I could have made other plans or considered other avenues of dissemination if I had addressed this earlier in the project.[5] I also could have impressed upon them the value I placed on their feedback that I planned to seek in the future and explained how I would balance that with my work as a historian. This may have emboldened some who then might have contributed more. If questions about who owns the research, for whom the research is done, where and how resources are used, and what will happen to the research are clarified from the beginning, there should be few surprises. Moreover, a researcher and research participants or a community can work out how to engage in the project for their own purposes so that both goals can be reached satisfactorily.

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Vakalisa passed away two years after the 2018 dialogue, before my book was in print. This made the 2018 meeting even more meaningful than just allowing me to gain her feedback before publication. It gave me a chance to share with her the most synthesized product I could have during her lifetime. It also offered her an opportunity to see long-time colleagues and friends whom she had not seen often since their retirement or because of the restrictions of old age. Some remarked that it was "like a reunion" and clearly enjoyed catching up as they sat and ate lunch together. I took statements about the meeting being a "debriefing session" to mean that some of the women had viewed the session almost as group therapy. Certainly, they talked about their careers often as friends or in retired nurses' associations. Particular phrases I heard repeated in multiple interviews indicated a sentiment was widely held and likely repeated in conversations among themselves. However, other subjects apparently required more courage to process together. Judging by the interest in my chapter about marriage and child-rearing and yet their reluctance to speak when I had finished presenting that chapter, they had not talked about some of these personal aspects much in public. During this session, they learned how others felt and how they had experienced similar aspects of a nurse's life. They could learn from each other and feel connected to others with similar challenges and experiences. Bringing them together became an unintentional way in which I gave back to them.

At the heart of that experience and what I am writing here is human connection. Relationships between researchers and participants, between participants, and within the community are critical elements to researching in any community. Some may fear that close relations compromise critical distance, but relationships also spark and facilitate research (Cole 2001; Scheper-Hughes 2000). Scholars of indigenous oral history elsewhere have argued that in some cultural contexts, oral history is inseparable from relationships (Mahuika 2019; Baik 2022). Balancing different perspectives can be tricky, and seeking feedback takes time. However, making an effort to honor relationships may also be a key to ensuring more respect and equity in our research, particularly when it involves the power and racial dynamics of more privileged scholars doing research in less privileged communities. It is more ethical and equitable because it prioritizes the well-being of the participants and gives adequate weight to the voices and interpretations of those participating in the research. Perhaps attention to human connections should be included more explicitly as a scholarly standard. African American scholar of public history Aleia Brown has advocated for focusing on having an "ethic of care" rather than using the concept of shared authority, a concept that can imply that one's authority can be allocated to another (Girdharry 2021:249). This corresponds with recent calls to transform African Studies, including Africanizing knowledge production and examining traditional value judgements (Grosz-Ngaté 2020; Jeater 2018). Prioritizing relationships and an ethic of care can lead to more meaningful dialogue, responsiveness to community needs, and equitable collaboration (Edgar 2021; Ampofo 2016). I hope that the people I worked with knew I cared about them more than just

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for what they could give me for a publication. I did all I could to carefully interview them and interpret their histories, give back to them, and listen to them again. I hope that if these nurses read the published book, they will still have good feelings about the process and the product. When interview participants are included in a transparent and respectful way, this should be the outcome, along with a more equitable and accurate oral history. I also take comfort in Qawekazi Maqabuka's comment prior to the August 10, 2022, launch of my book in Johannesburg (wherein she served as discussant) that a book is never really finished. I hope the book I published is indeed not the final product, but a springboard to working with the community to further amplify the history therein.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank participants in the BYU Department of Anthropology Seminar of September 30, 2020, and Rocky Mountain Workshop in African History 2020 for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I also thank anonymous reviewers, Jill Kelly (my academic sister and fellow panelist at the Oral History Association annual meeting wherein we shared a panel in 2019), and my colleague Daren Ray.

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Notes

1. See also ASA presidential addresses by Sandra Greene (given in 1998 [1999]), James Pritchett (2014), and Jean Allman (given in 2018 [2019]), as well as *African Studies Review* editorials from 2018 to 2021.
2. The Ciskeian Nursing Council: Report of the Second Council, Term of Office, August 1, 1987, to July 31, 1992, p. 26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. For discussions of life histories of African women and oral history see Alpers 1983; Mirza & Strobel 1989; Bozzoli 1991; Wright 1993; Gengenbach 1993; Achebe 2005:7–8.
4. While it is important to seek input from underrepresented groups, it is also important to not simply expect them to do work for us, without respect to their own lives, interests, and agendas.
5. I published the book first in the United States but encountered delays in securing co-publication in South Africa, which would facilitate local access. I worked with a local scholar, Andile M-Afrika, to create a museum exhibit of Zotshi Mcako's life (which was displayed at the Steve Biko Center in Ginsberg) to highlight her contributions to that community in a way that would reach more people. However, for many academics, institutional requirements must be balanced with community interests. Academics should continue discussions about the value of public engagement in the recognition of scholarly work in the academy to promote such engagement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.140 Published online by Cambridge University Press