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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

A Practical Guide to Oral History

Review by Solaiman M. Fazel

Practicing Oral History in Historical Organizations

by Barbara W. Sommer

Left Coast Press, 2015

Barbara Sommer's (2015) *Practicing Oral History in Historical Organizations* is a welcome addition to the field of qualitative research methodology. Generally the topics that public historians, ethnographers, and other practitioners of oral history probe are fragmented and lack human voice. Sommer's book speaks to practitioners who "collect, archive, and use oral history" (p. 10). Since the second half of the twentieth century when oral history was established as a viable 'bottom-up' research method that can help foster social change, Sommer demonstrates how the field has grown to where it is now practiced by museum curators, librarians, scientists, cultural institutions, activists, and artists. At the same time, some practitioners may not have received any rigorous graduate level training on research methods, but want a practical guide on how to create the best records possible within the realm of their own professions. To fill this gap, Sommer's book offers valuable tips and checklists.

Sommer weaves together a mixed collection of data: seven first-person interviews, twelve historical organizations, fieldwork, and secondary sources. She discusses the Oral History Life Cycle in part three of her book. The individual chapters make effective use of pictures, graphs, outlines, samples, definitions, and forms to help the reader along. The twelve chapters are organized into four sections. Part one provides an overview of the theory and practice of oral theory. Part two examines the theory of oral history in-depth and tells of the special issues that can arise when oral history is practiced. Part three provides a roadmap for planning, implementing, disseminating, and preserving oral histories. The final part includes reflections and advices. Sommer's book ends with a glossary, appendices, and list of further readings on different aspects of oral history.

Chapter two opens with an inclusive definition of oral history and ends with a ten step guide on how to best conduct oral history in a community (p. 30-1). For Sommer oral history is more than merely documenting and preserving data stored in memories. She cites Oral History Association's definition that offers the following points. Oral historians "record spoken information gathered from people's memories, collect first-person information deemed historically significant by those recording it, [and] preserve the recorded interview information and make it accessible to others" (p. 26). For Sommer oral history is no different than "primary source documents like letters or diaries" (p. 26). She claims it can be used in conjunction with surveys, family histories, journalistic interviews, books, folklore, and documentaries to reconstruct a more complete narrative of the past. This understanding of oral history overlaps with Ray DeMallie's description of ethnohistory in which history is not only limited to written primary sources. Ethnohistory uses an eclectic array of sources that give its own particular sense of the past, which encompasses literature, traditions, places, memoirs, maps, artifacts, images, arts, and oral stories.

Sommer's chapter three discusses the five step process of Oral History Life Cycle. It includes: "idea, plan, interview, preservation, and access/use" (p. 33). For Sommer oral history projects are generally inspired by ideas, events, shared experiences, or disappearing histories and cultures. Step two is the Project Design Statement. It is a detailed and flexible roadmap that guides the end-to-end process. It entails having the proper fieldwork equipment(s) and a depository where the recordings are carefully kept. Step three is the interview part, which is considered the central stage in the Oral History Life Cycle. Chapter ten covers the science and art of interviewing in detail. Step four is preservation that includes classification and organization of the fieldwork data. Preservation "moves the lifecycle from creation to curation" (p.36). Step five is when the oral histories are placed in a depository that makes is accessible to public for additional research, museum exhibitions, publications, documentaries, and other educational programs.

Part two covers the copyright laws, ethical guidelines, and legal release agreements. The final part of the book ends with reflections. Sommer concludes by stating "oral histories provide an opportunity for historical organization to bring people into the action" (p. 162). This statement reminded me of Eric Wolf's influential anthropology book, *Europe and the People without History*. Although Sommer's book is written for practitioners of oral history, it remains to be seen if oral history can become a bigger

component of the research methodology courses that are taught in academia.

References Cited

DeMallie, Raymond J. “These Have No Ears”: Narrative and the Ethnohistorical Method.” in *Ethnohistory* 40 (4) (1993): 515-538.

Wolf, Eric R. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

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