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The Trials and Tribulations of Eliciting American Indian Voice

Amber Madoll
Western Michigan University

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF ELICITING
AMERICAN INDIAN VOICE

by

Amber Madoll

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Amber Madoll, M.A.

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In this thesis I explored the application of oral history in the collection, preservation and interpretation of American Indian cultural history. Through the analysis of written ethnographies, published works, oral histories and case studies, this research addresses some of the major debates hindering oral history's admittance as a viable ethnographic and historical resource. The overall intention of this research was to elicit the major methodological issues anthropologists face when employing oral history techniques in American Indian studies so that solid, comprehensive strategies can be created and implemented to strengthen the acceptance and practice of oral history in modern cultural studies.

After laying out the historical framework of oral history and its role in the collection and preservation of American Indian cultural history, the thesis explores some of the prominent challenges faced by historians and anthropologists. Topics include the void of American Indian voice in historical research and the lack of methodological standardization in the practice of oral history. It also addresses the three-dimensional complexity of American Indian cultural history, the impact of Native language and dialect in data collection, and the role of cultural affiliation and identity in choice of participants and interviewers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Accurately eliciting and interpreting American Indian cultural history has remained a challenging task over the past century. With oral traditions as the primary mode of transmission, the use of voice and physical movement has been an integral part in creating a rich, comprehensive three-dimensional history.

Over time, many have tried to conform this history into a two-dimensional written text through the analysis of legal documents, journals and colonial records, the retrieval of material remains, and the practice of participant observation. This process of collection, preservation and interpretation has long been conducted with little insight from Native participants. In part, this has been because there are few Native academics or writers available to represent, much less collect and interpret the innumerable cultural traits and patterns within American Indian communities. But equally important, few Natives have been engaged in this academic pursuit often being treated as actors in a creative drama rather than directors shaping the historical text. As Donald Fixico points out in *Rethinking American Indian History*, over 30,000 books have been written about American Indian cultural history and of those, less than ten percent are written by Natives (Fixico:1997). Native representation is but one of many issues preventing the creation of a comprehensive, historical record.

Though numerous methods of collection are employed to elicit cultural traits and

patterns, there is still the persistent lack of any standardized methodology or interpretive practice for truly eliciting and capturing this complex, diverse and multi-layered history. American Indian cultural history is not unilinear nor two- dimensional. The pressure to conform this history into a flat written document causes voices to be silenced and movements to be stilled. With the loss of chunks of valuable information, the ultimate result is a fragmented product that is only partially, if at all, representational of the community. The question, therefore, remains- How does one take a three-dimensional history and press it into parchment, while still retaining the richness, depth, and accuracy of its original form? Is it even possible? And if not, how do we create a representational, accurate cultural record? There needs to be a synthesis of methodological and interpretive techniques practiced within the fields of anthropology and history that can form a more relative, holistic framework for collecting and preserving American Indian cultural history.

I have pondered many of these questions over the past nine years. I spent my undergraduate years in the departments of anthropology and American Indian studies buried beneath the written and material artifacts heavily depended on for documenting American Indian cultural history. The lack of Native perspective in these materials was evident. However, there was little exploration on how to elicit and create a more accurate record. After spending an internship working within the Fond du Lac tribe in Northern Minnesota at a women's treatment center, I began to see that there was an immense amount of valuable, yet untapped raw data in the voices of the women and their families. Traditions, values, historical accounts and other data was applied in helping the women

and their children re-connect with their community, gain a deeper sense of identity and build a stronger family unit. During my master's program at Western Michigan University, I was introduced to a local historical society interested in creating a community-wide oral history program that would include Pottawatomi oral histories. This thesis is based, in part, on my experiences in creating and running this oral history program. It is also based on the knowledge gained through my academic studies, my role as a board member of the Michigan Oral History Association and my professional experiences over the past three years in working with a national civil rights organization.

In this thesis I explored the application of oral history in the collection, preservation and interpretation of American Indian cultural history. Through the analysis of written ethnographies, published works, oral histories and case studies, this research addresses some of the major debates hindering oral history's admittance as a viable ethnographic and historical resource. The overall intention of this research was to elicit the major methodological issues anthropologists face when employing oral history techniques in American Indian studies so that solid, comprehensive strategies can be created and implemented to strengthen the acceptance and practice of oral history in modern cultural studies.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

The Emergence of Oral History

In order to understand how oral history can impact the preservation of American Indian cultural history, it is imperative that one have a good understanding of how oral history is defined and how it is currently being applied to cultural studies.

Oral history began to develop into a field of academic study under the guidance and input of Louis Starr and Allan Nevins in the mid- 1940s. A by-product of a centuries long effort of passing along historical and cultural information from generation to generation through oral tradition, oral history possesses the desire for collecting and preserving historical information but differs in method and focus from its predecessor (Lummis: 26). Louis Starr provided the first definition of oral history by defining it as "a primary source material obtained by recording the spoken words- generally by means of planned, tape recorded interviews- of persons deemed to harbor hither unavailable information worth preserving" (Dunaway: 3-4).

Traditionally, oral histories have been collected through collaborative efforts, often academic. The first academic oral history program was formed by Nevins at Columbia

University in 1948. He viewed oral history as a descendent of oral tradition but different in that it focused on first-hand experiences rather than traditional lore. Over time oral history programs began to sprout up across the country, each possessing their own understanding of oral history and employing their own unique methodological approach. Some, such as the slave narratives collected under the Works Progress Administration began even before Starr's definition was introduced (Dunaway: 7-12).

For years, oral history has been practiced around the country by both trained and non-trained academics crossing academic disciplines. However, there has been no universal definition accepted by oral practitioners, no standards of ethics and no universal form of methodology practiced. As a result, the quality of work has differed dramatically across the board. It wasn't until 1966 that the first guide book was created by the American Association for State and Local History. Small in stature, it led to numerous other authors who began to step forward in an attempt to define and set boundaries to the field (Dunaway: 13-16).

In this thesis, oral history will be viewed as the process of two or more individuals participating in a dialogue where one is sharing their personal life story and the other posing questions that promote and encourage historical recall that is recorded and preserved through some means. Oral history can occur in group settings were there is a dominant interviewer and multiple individuals sharing their personal reflections on specific historical events. Dialogue, however, is central in creating a comprehensive historical account. The input and guidance of the interviewer significantly influences if

and how recollections are revealed. Unlike other forms of interviewing, oral history is unique in that it necessitates the recording of the experience itself. Through audio, and sometimes video, recording, oral history elicits the human voice. Tone volume and inflection as well as physical expressions and movements can be captured in oral histories. They can, at times, provide more information than words themselves and are invaluable sources for the historical record. Oral history attempts to balance the presence of voice with the presence of silence, in turn revealing a significant amount of cultural and historical information. Its preservation through archival means enables multiple individuals the opportunity to provide their own interpretations. It remains a permanent raw data source that can stand alone over time (Lummis: 94).

In recent years, oral history has become a modern phenomenon appearing in popular literature by authors, such as Stud Terkel, who are using oral history as a way to convey segments of American cultural history. National and international historical events such as the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, the Holocaust and others have been reflected upon through compiled oral histories adding significantly to traditional historical sources. Many collections on smaller subject matters such as one room school houses, neighborhood watering holes and family histories are filling voids where little or no written documentation or material sources are available. These studies, both large and small, continue to be created by professionals and hobbyists using their own conceptualizations of what oral history is and how it should be practiced. Oral history's young status in the fields of history and anthropology coupled with its late development of methodological framework has resulted in the imbalance between structure and

practice and hindered its overall acceptance, in particular in conjunction with ethnic studies (Grele: 132).

Though there are critics that focus on various characteristics of oral history methodology, there has been a consensus that the field needs to address issues surrounding the lack of standardization; the participant's recall ability and the accuracy of their story and the personal biases of both the participant and the interviewer.

A Review of Oral History in American Indian Studies

The emphasis on collecting, preserving and interpreting American Indian cultural history has been a integral part of American anthropology since the late 1800s (Demallie: 3). Focused on evolutionary patterns and the progression of civilized culture, individuals such as Edward Tylor, James Frazer and Lewis Morgan used contemporary cultural traits as correlations to past cultural patterns (Marcus: 17). The intention was to use "savages" and "uncivilized" peoples to explain how people evolve into civilized individuals.

While focusing on these cultural patterns, especially kinship systems, Lewis Morgan laid the foundation for comparing evolutionary progression with the presence of technology and subsistence aptitudes within a society. His life long desire to collect and analyze American Indian culture, in particular, and his willingness to work with diverse tribal communities, marked the beginning of a delicate relationship between anthropologists and American Indians (Bohannan: 31-32).

Anthropologists to this point had leaned on the writings and descriptions of travelers, explorers and missionaries to explain the cultural unknown. Shortly following the turn of the century, ethnography, "the research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture," evolved as an effort to pull anthropologists out of the libraries and into the field so that their interpretations of culture would be based on first-hand experiences rather than the writings of others (Marcus: 18).

As the use of ethnography began to evolve, members of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology began to collect information on American Indian communities using the comparative method to classify and categorize tribal communities based on societal complexity (Demallie: 3). In simplifying these communities to broad groupings, much of their unique defining characteristics were not unveiled.

Franz Boas, one of the major critiques of the comparative method, did not view Indian communities unilineal (Bohannan: 83-84). Rather than organizing tribal communities based on complexity, he focused on each community's historical situation. "Historical particularism" as he later labeled the concept, concentrated on gathering immense amounts of historical data through the employment of ethnographic methodology and using the information collected to better understand the unique dynamics of cultural development within the studied community, avoiding unnecessary comparisons (McGee: 133-134).

Alfred L. Kroeber carried on the emphasis on field ethnography within American Indian communities. Though he examined in depth and compared historical patterns across tribal boundaries, his "age-area" hypothesis, which attempted to date cultural traits based on the breadth of its influence, fell short of explaining the spread of cultural patterns (Demallie: 4). In addition, his belief that culture was "super organic" and above individual human influence, governed rather by general laws, went against the concept of cultural relativism supported by his mentor Boaz (McGee: 144). Kroeber did, however, add to the mounting collections of ethnographic data on tribal communities and to the concept of "culture areas" as methods for organizing research (Demallie: 4). British social anthropology made a mark on American anthropology and American Indian studies through Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown.

Rather than focusing on specific cultural traits, functionalists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, focused on locating general scientific laws within social structure that they believed were the foundation for understanding cultural change. Immensely interested in creating a scientific basis for understanding how culture changed over time, functionalists focused on economics, kinship, political institutions and other broad categories that could be cross-culturally compared (Marcus: 27-28). Radcliffe-Brown, for example, viewed kinship systems as a general law of social organization (Demallie: 6-11).

Other social scientists, such as Frances Densmore, inadvertently collected oral histories while attempting to collect and preserve specific cultural traits, such as American Indian

music. Densmore, who conducted the first serious study of American Indian music under the umbrella of the Bureau of American Ethnology, spent years amongst American Indian tribes in Minnesota with a phonograph and notepad collecting information about music practices and traditions. Inadvertently, through interviews and observation, she also collected an immense amount of information on general cultural practices, especially childrearing customs. Her use of interviewing participants through a Native interpreter added significantly in the understanding of Ojibwa customs and practices (Densmore: 1). 1949 brought the first wire recorders replacing the phonograph used by researchers such as Densmore, and 1960 brought the first professional compilation of oral histories through Columbia University, entitled "The Oral History Collection of Columbia University" (Dunaway: 7-12).

Responding to the challenge presented by Doris Duke to collect "Indian history from the Indian point of view," institutions such as the University of South Dakota began field research amongst area tribal communities. As a result, the original American Indian Research Project created through the university has collected and preserved over 1,900 American Indian oral histories.

This early fieldwork played a unique role framing the oral history approach as it marked one of the earliest formal attempts to collect American Indian cultural history. It also marked one of the earliest attempts to set guidelines on how an American Indian oral history should be collected. For instance, interviewers were encouraged to be knowledgeable about the community and the participant prior to the interview. The

interview itself was to be open and flexible and the interviewer was encouraged to refrain from overly influencing the content gained.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The research for this thesis was based on a compilation of written ethnographies, published works, oral histories and case studies that explore the dynamics of American Indian culture through the use of oral history techniques.

While some of these works completely relied on the use of oral history, others employed more traditional ethnographic methods, such as participant observation. Such collections often inadvertently collected oral histories as they were not the initial focus or intention. Works addressing the history and methodological strengths and weaknesses of oral history, its role as an ethnographic tool and its ability to elicit, collect and preserve, in particular, American Indian cultural history was also examined.

Though this thesis is predominately a literature review, it is also based on my personal experiences and interests in American Indian cultural history. Over the past few years, I have been personally involved with the discussions surrounding cross-cultural oral history collection. Through board meetings, conferences and workshops, I have worked with colleagues to provide support and guidance to oral historians interested in bridging the gaps between communities in order to preserve previously unrecorded cultural data. I also had to address such issues personally when designing and implementing a local community-wide oral history project that could handle cross-cultural interviewing of not

only American Indians, but African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and other cultural communities as well. As a result, many of the issues addressed within this thesis I have personally had to address, though not always with clear resolution. It is important to note that these issues are not easily solvable and will take intense dialogue and, at times, debate in finding resolution. That is why this thesis has focused on eliciting, rather than solving, some of the primary methodological and cultural issues that I personally believe are prohibiting the collection and preservation of American Indian oral histories.

CHAPTER FOUR

ELICITING AMERICAN INDIAN VOICES

Where Are All the Voices?

Oral history, like other forms of social science methodology, has been hindered by the constraints of authority. It not only possessed the overriding assumption that those with the highest education and the most prominent social positions were the most authoritative concerning historical events, it also believed that the best individuals to study these historical events were those from the same or similar social strata (Thompson: 3). For much of oral history's methodological development there has been heavy emphasis on eliciting the voices of the elite, the powerful- those who are above the community rather than within it. As a result, many voices were not included and are missing from the historical record.

As oral history has expanded outside of academia and into the common sector, an awareness of conflicting voices has developed. The inconsistencies between traditional historical sources and current vocal accounts are revealing important gaps and errors within the historical record. As a result, historians are reflecting more on misconceived perceptions of the ideal participant and interviewer. This reflective shift towards illuminating the potential personal biases within not only the participant and interviewer

but also the transcriptionist and/or analyst has resulted in a higher awareness of the possible cultural and social influences of these individuals in resulting products. The ability of the interviewer, in particular, to be reflexive and self- critical is imperative to the overall objectivity of the historical account (Kottak: 11).

Oral history has shifted dramatically over the past few decades refocusing on the commoner (the individual who experienced the historical event first hand) as the ideal participant and the community-based interviewer (an individual from within who can better relate to and therefore better formulate questions that can elicit valuable information) as the ideal interviewer. This shift in perspective has enabled historians to created a more emic, holistic and comprehensive historical account. Historians are also reevaluating their formulas for questioning and the methods for developing hypotheses as well as looking for new methodological techniques for ensuring a more holistic, comprehensive historical record.

As Angela Cavender Wilson points out, in order to create a truly representative history- one that includes native voice, contemporary native sources should be consulted. With few historical records reflecting native perspective and voice, the primary method for obtaining this undocumented information is through the examination of present practices and cultural patterns through the personal perspectives and experiences of contemporary natives. Native voice is integral in understanding how reality is created within their communities and how that reality is expressed. At the same time, many point out, such as Devon Mihesuah, that few tribes possess a collective voice. Members of the same

tribe may possess completely difference views of their collective history. Tribes can be as diverse internally as externally and determining who to approach and in what order can dramatically influence the type of information obtained. How individuals are related or socially aligned with, their position within the community and their access to community history influence their potentiality as a participant. Not everyone has access to historical recollections and not everyone is permitted to share them (Mihesuah: 4).

Authorship of oral histories has remained a significant issue in collecting American Indian cultural histories. Though diverse in cultural practices, beliefs and histories, these communities often share a common consensus that those within the community possess a more innate and deeper understanding of the community. These individuals are the ones actively participating in the creation of the collective history and are therefore natural authorities. Academics have balked against this concept as it insinuates that those from outside a given community lack the authority to collect such histories. Authorship, in oral histories, remains a two pronged debate. It arises in both who is the participant and who is the interviewer (Mihesuah: 106).

In both cases, I believe it depends on what questions are being asked and what information is being sought. I have seen instances where younger interviewers have been viewed by participants as young upstarts, eager beavers, etc. who could not relate to or connect with the history they were trying to collect. On the same note, I have had participant's request these same interviewers in an effort to share their insight and experiences with what they consider the next generation. Other participants have

preferred interviewers who have had similar personal experiences so as to avoid feeling the need to talk down to someone or explain historical events that might not otherwise have been communally shared. Participants have also, at times, requested complete strangers as interviewers with the feeling that anyone from the community might be biased and therefore, unable to relate to their personal story objectively. There were times, when running our community oral history program, that I sent out two or more different interviewers to collect one participant's life story. In every case, the interviewer's came back with significantly different data. In the case of American Indian communities, such a practice may be beneficial. For instance, understanding the dynamics between Natives who live on the reservation versus ones who reside in neighboring cities; ones who are registered versus those who aren't; and ones who practice recognized cultural practices versus those who do not can be an extremely complicated process. Multiple attempts conducted by varying the interviewer might be best in order to collect the true diversity of perspectives and voices.

No matter whether multiple interviewers are used, or not, it is imperative that Native voice be present in all levels of the oral history process, including during interviewing. I agree with Wilson that the best representatives are those who are a part of the community and playing a role in the formulation of its collective history. Oral history depends heavily on firsthand experiences and recollections which necessitates someone from within the community. Again, determining whom within the community one should talk with as a participant or use as an interviewer is completely subjective and should be based on intensive research and dialogue with community leadership prior to the

commencement of interviewing. In my particular case in Southwest Michigan, due to the dynamics of the tribal community I chose to use Native interviewers and participants. I provided the same training in oral history methodology and the same level of technology used in other areas of the oral history program. Many would think of this extra step of including Native interviewers as unnecessary. I can admit it wasn't easy locating people who the councils were comfortable with and who I believed had the knack for eliciting and recording oral histories. Oral history methodology is not structured, nor is it always reliable. It takes a tremendous amount of flexibility to be able to address technology issues such as broken cassettes, disruptions in settings such as background noises and interfering people, knowing when and how to structure questions and how to respond to the answers given. I was blessed, in part, because I had taken the time to engage the elder and tribal councils who were able to make recommendations on potential interviewers from within their community.

Some individuals, like Wilson, believe that one should not work with or interview community elders, stating that such behavior would be "disrespectful and aggressive" (Mihesuah: 109). However, in reality, circumventing Native elders and leaders can reflect disrespect for the community's internal hierarchal structure and protocol. When requesting permission to collect the area Pottawatomi oral, I chose to begin with the elder council over the tribal council. My feelings at the time, which I still stand by, were that the elders were the true historical keepers, protectors and educators within the community. It is a sign of respect to consult those respected by the community before infiltrating a community and is often a step undervalued by scholars anxious to get into a

community. It was therefore important to me to gain their approval before approaching the tribal council or members of the community. It was also important that I had a clear understanding of how I believed the oral history experience would impact their community and the individual members, what the materials would be used for and how I could assist them in preserving their own collection so that the stories remained within the community, as well as to be shared with others. Once I gained their approval through a series of meetings, I gained the tribal council's approval. Only after I had the blessing of both councils did I contact members of the community as potential interviewers and participants. Approaching the councils also gave me a chance to explore potential tribal dynamics and formulate a plan to address them. In the community of which I engaged, there was a huge divide created between particular families, differing ideology and geographic boundaries. Meeting with the councils and then with as many people as possible before conducting interviews is one of the best ways to elicit those dynamics before proceeding into interviewing. Unfortunately, with oral histories, you often only get one chance to collect and individual's life story. Conflicting time schedules, health reasons and just life in general can prohibit or restrict the potential for additional interviews. Therefore, approaching an interview as a one shot deal is the best way to prepare.

The last area of focus that I want to mention is on how data is processed once collected. Criticism has been placed by scholars such as Wilson and Fixico on the process of using Western forms of interpretation on Native oral histories. Traditional practices of collecting, transcription and detailed analysis dissects and breaks down the narrative

format creating a simplistic overview of a complex community (Mihesuah: 112).

Interpretation has also been void of Native voice as most transcriptionists, archivists and scholars are non-Native. As a result, American Indians are absent from the compilation and interpretation of their collective histories. Their missing presence impacts how the histories are viewed and presented to the general public.

The imbalance in Native presence is not only reflective in products ultimately produced by non-Natives but also in the few works that are Native. As Mihesuah points out, Native writings are scrutinized more aggressively, especially those written from a Native viewpoint or that incorporate oral traditions. He goes on to state that as a result, those that incorporate Native views often compromise by framing them by theories created by non-Natives. (Mihesuah: 13).

Wilson, one of the harshest critics of non-Native scholarly works, states that many are filled with "misinterpretations, mistranslations, lack of context and lack of understanding" and that to reduce their negative impact on cultural studies should be discussed with Natives prior to publication to resolve inaccurate interpretations (Mihesuah: 25). There has been a consensus in recent years that collaboration is vital in creating a comprehensive, holistic historical record of cultural communities. I have found that transcribing oral histories verbatim is beneficial in that it sticks closest with the audio version of the interview. However, transcription, in general, fails to truly capture tone and inflection, silences and unnuances that are instrumental in deciphering what the

participant meant.   What may be the key is not only the accurate vocal presence of studied communities, but as Joseph Cash points out, a balancing of multiple forms of methodology.

Standardization of Methodology

As Ronald Grele points out in Envelopes of Sound, oral history has yet to standardize its interviewing formulas nor fully accept its intellectual responsibilities (Grele: 131). As a relatively young form of methodology, oral history has not been consistently viewed or practiced.   How oral history is defined and practiced, the method of recording and preservation and the level of individual roles and responsibility differ dramatically amongst oral historians.

This is a very serious dilemma as numerous professional and amateur oral historians approach participants for their life stories. These requested stories are much more than recollected memories. They also possess the emotions and feelings that are intertwined making oral history a very personal experience. There are numerous ways in which the lack of standardization negatively impacts the oral history experience. For one, the lack of accepted ethical practices opens the participant up to potential harm as they might be cohersed, threatened or intimidated during the interviewing process. The memories they might share could also be twisted, misinterpreted or shared without consent. Though the Oral History Association has approved a set or recommended ethnics, as has many individual social science fields, there are still many oral historians not aware of or

practicing these principals. I know I have personally encountered during MOHA conferences and workshops many individuals who do not inform participants of their rights, explain what will happen to the collections or provide consent and release forms. They feel that the information is either obvious or that the participant should understand the importance of furthering academia over individual concerns. The end result is collections, both large and small, being donated to archives without the consent of participants and their families or without paperwork showing such consent. Many archives, for liability reasons, are hesitating or refusing to use such materials and as a result, they are collecting dust and slowly deteriorating on archival shelves. Thousands of life stories containing valuable historical and cultural information are being lost because interviewers did not understand the importance of obtaining formal consent. I, for one, recommend that the consent be obtained on paper, as well as, on tape in order to insure that if the two are separated then the authorization is still obtainable.

Getting consent to record and preserve the life history does not enable the interviewer to proceed without ethnical standards. They still have the responsibility to maintain a professional, organized and comfortable presence during the interview experience.

The interview process (i.e. how participants are chosen, where the interview takes place, the type of equipment used and how the materials are preserved) has not been standardized. As a result, there is a mish-mosh of practices employed by oral historians. This lack of structure is one of the largest critiques of oral history. There is a centralized belief that standardization lends to authenticity, repeatability and reliability. Because oral history is unrepeatable, it is challenged to prove itself through other means. The more

constant the other characteristics are, the more likely the results will be comparable and hopefully accepted.

At the same time, oral history is an experience- not an experiment. There are a million things that can influence how the data is collected. The personal relationship or dynamics between the interviewer and participant, the type of technology used and how smoothly it operates during the interview, the background chosen and potential background noises, the type of questions posed and whether they derive from a questionnaire, as well as the overarching goal of the oral history and how it is going to be processed, interpreted and used. It is also important to mention briefly that some data is uncollectible solely because it is not meant to be shared with others. There are topics that are religiously or culturally taboo to discuss to others. For instance, when I did an internship at an American Indian treatment center for women I had the opportunity to experience traditional therapies, cultural outing and ceremonies. One of the most moving was a moon ceremony I was invited to. After the ceremony, I asked the woman who had invited me if I would be allowed to discuss the experience with others. She told me that it was something that I would have to decide myself. There wasn't necessarily a cultural taboo on not talking about the experience. But I have found myself, over the years, thankful that I have kept it to myself, not even mentioning the experience to my husband and family. The experience became a very personal part of who I am, one that as a participant, you would find me unwilling to share.

One of oral history's eternal strengths is in its ability to open up new avenues of inquiry

during the interviewing process itself (Thompson: 6). The interviewing process is a fluid, dialogic experience where the questions formulated to guide the interview are created within the context of the interview itself. The malleability of the questioning enables oral historians to reflect, evaluate and form their questions throughout the interviewing process allowing the interview to flow in numerous directions, including ones that might result in the restructuring or reframing of the basic hypothesis itself. Therefore, standardization is no easy task. It is, perhaps, the central issue/limitation/strength of oral history.

Creating A Three-Dimensional History

In a community where oral traditions play a central role in cultural identity, separating them from oral histories is not only challenging, but at times impossible. Though scholars, such as Fixico, believe that separation is necessary, oral traditions are an integral part of modern identity and past legends or lore often constitute a part of current ideology. Because oral traditions are enveloped in modern ideology, oral history inadvertently collects both present and past historical data. Oral traditions create social norms, provide structure for a collective identity and explain the metaphysical. Like oral history, they also express the motivations, morals and beliefs behind cultural practices.

Wilson, like others, suggests that in American Indian studies, the two cannot be separated. That in reality, contemporary incidents become a part of oral traditions (Mihesuah: 103). They are also preserved and handed down through generations through

multiple human forms. Oral tradition uses voice that includes variances in tone and inflections expressed through words, poetry and silence. It also uses physical expression that includes physical movement such as dance, facial expressions, hand movements, etc. It also uses human created sound, such as music. Oral tradition, the foundation of American Indian life, is three dimensional. It is composed of all of these aspects and more. As a result, oral historians, who interview American Indians face the challenge of determining how to preserve this history as holistically as possible. In many cases, aspects, such as music or physical form, have been eliminated through the use of traditional voice recorded interviews. One has to then question the whether the data collected adequately addresses the history of the community. Some interviewers are beginning to experiment with video and digital equipment in an effort to collect the visual, as well as audio, recollections. This is beneficial in better encapsulating the diverse methods of historical transmission. However, many participants are uncomfortable with technology; many interviewers are not properly trained in managing such equipment and there is still few in the field whom have figured out how to interpret information that is not transferable to a transcript format.

In addition, the complexity between oral traditions and oral history creates a large gray area where scholars have to determine where first hand experiences and accounts end and oral traditions begin. For many within American Indian communities, there is no beginning or end in oral traditions and therefore, in their own personal oral histories. Eliminating the ideological foundation of the community eliminates its role within individual cultural identity. In my opinion, oral traditions must be collected as they

naturally occur within the oral history. Based on the compilation of interviews and other forms of research an overall picture has to be developed to assist in determining where the gray areas actually lie. Authenticity and accuracy have always existed in the eye of the beholder. Once the histories are collected as accurately as possible, then whoever wants to interpret the data, whether they chose to eliminate factors or particular information, will be able to do so more on their own personal judgment and expertise.

The Complexities of Voice

Language is more than a communication tool between individuals. It defines the individual, their environment and their place within it. In other words, language is an integral part of society. Yet over 90% of the world's languages will be lost in the next century; replaced with English, Spanish and other large language groups. Originally, according to Encarta Online, there were over 1.5 million American Indians speaking indigenous languages during the time of colonization of North America. Currently, there are only 200,000 speakers left. Of the 135 American Indian languages spoken in the United States, 87% are moribund, which means they are only spoken by adults or elders within the community.

As mentioned earlier, language assists us in communication as well as relates specific concepts, beliefs, and meanings unique to each culture. As Sapir once said, knowing the language of a culture is vital in understanding its customs, traditions, belief systems, and way of thought. In other words, language allows a community to be studied through its

own words, its own thoughts- its own eyes. Without understanding the language an interviewer remains an outsider bound at the wrists and feet by their own language and their own cultural belief system. As Joshua Fishman puts it, "If you take away a culture's language you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers."

In totality, language brings a culture the sense of sanctity, of kinship and of moral imperative. Language expresses what is sacred and non- sacred to a culture. Taboos, rituals, beliefs and customs are all communicated through language. The specific terms and phrases associated to these aspects of society are unique to each culture. There is no universal word for prayer, for fasting, or even for God. Each language has their own way of referring to the sacred that is unique to all others. The boundaries between the sacred and non- sacred are also expressed through languages. Many American Indian cultures believe that all aspects of daily life are part of the sacred. The trees in the forests, the thunder in the sky, how a home is constructed, and even how daily activities are performed reflect the sacred. The American culture, on the other hand, believes in separating, as the saying goes "religion & politics." The church is separate from daily life, the economy and the government. Often it is reserved for specific reserved days or holidays set aside specifically for religious purposes such as Sunday mass. The differences in boundaries between the sacred and non- sacred are important to the structure of the culture and to its belief system.

The way we refer to our relatives, friends and even enemies is also determined by our language. The American culture refers to each relative with a different name such as; niece, nephew, uncle and aunt. However in parts of Africa, relatives are titled according to whether the society is patriarchal or matriarchal. For instance in a patriarchal society there could be many terms for the males within the family while the all the females are referred to as mother. This is due to the importance of the male roles in the community. Depending on the culture and its language the boundaries, definitions and titles for the roles of family members differ dramatically. Without the specific terms, not only do kinship terms become fuzzy and ill defined but so does the responsibilities associated to the titles.

As Jon Reyhner mentions, morals are also defined and expressed through language. Many oral traditions that teach respect, honor, family loyalty as well as bravery are passed down exclusively via language. Without these unwritten words their messages are lost. Even social taboos are taught though language. Stealing, lying, harming others, murder, etc. are all discouraged through oral myths, legends and history that can only be handed down through language. Kenneth Hale from MIT, who specializes in Indigenous languages agrees that this wealth of knowledge handed down from the elders within the communities can only be truly expressed though language.

Many historians would agree that one of the most devastating campaign efforts was assimilation. Many individuals who worked for the state and federal governments were not fond of dealing with the Indians. With their primary focus as land, they were

interested in finding the easiest way to put a permanent end to Indian interference. Their solution was to assimilate all native children into the white culture, so that eventually, there would be no more native civilizations.

The process for this policy involved these children being taken away from their homes and families and sent to boarding schools to be "cleansed" of their Indian languages and customs. It was believed that the younger the child the easier it would be to eliminate their knowledge of Indian language and custom and replace it with English and Euro-American dress. Children's hair was cut, they were forced to wear suits and dresses and their native languages were forbidden to be spoken.

Of course, this campaign failed. However, not before seriously damaging the life line of indigenous languages. Those who survived boarding schools faced serious problems once returning to the reservations. Since they had not been raised with the traditions, customs and well as the language of the culture they could not communicate with the elders nor did they fit in with those who remained on the reservation. They became stuck between the American Indian and Euro- American worlds.

The implementation of assimilation may have had a broad-based impacted on language survival and practice, but it has only emphasized the importance of recognizing and using native language whenever possible for eliciting cultural data. It is imperative that word choice, pronunciation and dialect be noted and explored. Furthermore, choosing an

interviewer capable of eliciting Native voice in its most natural form, whether it be in the form of a completely different language or as a dialect, is equally imperative.

Cultural Affiliation and Identity

Who is interviewed is as important as who conducts the interview. In both cases, the individuals participating in the interviewing experience influence the final product. Their position within the community being studied and how they are viewed by community members impacts the type of questions asked and the types of answers received.

As with most communities, identity is a relative term. It might be defined by genetics, by cultural practices, by geographic area, by language use or by socio-economic status. For American Indians, identity is a potent issue that has divided and merged tribal entities, community residents and families. Understanding the complexity that surrounds Indian identity, helps identify the strongest candidates for the roles of interviewer and participant. Depending on the questions at hand, choices need to be made between using individuals considered outsiders, individuals considered insiders or a combination of both.

American Indian tribes currently identify members by a variety of means. Blood quantum, residency and the exercising of cultural practices are a few of the many choices in determining whether an individual is legally defined as an Indian.

Blood quantum regulations can be defined by the Indian Reorganization Act or through their own constitutions and tribal laws. However, as communities intermarry, descents of these relationships are not meeting the minimum blood quantum requirements mandated by many tribes. Though these descendents may actively participate in tribal social, religious and political events and raise their children with traditional values, they are denied formal tribal membership. Others might be registered under the blood quantum regulations as an "Indian" but not participate in any cultural practices related to the community in which they are registered. Therefore, defining what an "Indian" is and isn't becomes a daunting task.

Blood quantum may be the most scientific way of determining membership through DNA tests, rolls, ancestor birth/ death certificates, etc. It keeps tribes from becoming composed of people who are essentially non- Indian, prevents federal-tribe funds from becoming too dispersed and makes being an Indian "unique." It requires that people prove their Indian roots are close enough in the family line to entitle membership. The Eastern Cherokee, though they have a 1/16th minimum requirement still became so large that they quite accepting enrollment applications after September 15, 1996 for all individuals over three years of age. Some would say, in this instance, that blood quantum was not high enough.

On the same token, blood quantum eligibility is often based on the rolls of a tribe. These rolls were either collected in a United States census, when the tribe's constitution was created, when an act was passed, or by the request of the tribal council. In the

Cherokee's case, there was a new roll collected after their forced removal to Oklahoma in the Trail of Tears. Those who refused to leave North Carolina and adjoining areas, those who died along the way and those who refused to sign the new roll in Oklahoma are not found on the roll. Therefore, their descendants can not be registered with the Cherokee tribe. There were many people who for one reason or another did not make it on the rolls and though their descendants are sometimes up to half- Indian they can not be registered members.

Blood quantum excludes individuals who, at many times, are very involved with the community, participate in political and social events, live on the reservation and/ or carry on the traditional customs within their own family. Due to blood quantum, they are outsiders to the one community they relate most to. There are on the other hand many individuals who are registered members of a tribe who do not participate in political or cultural events of the tribe, who do not live on a reservation and/ or do not carry on the tribe's traditions and values. These individuals receive the benefits of the tribe, including its name, though they contribute nothing to its existence but their genes. One might come to the conclusion, which is more important, biological genes, or the continuance of the tribe's traditions and values.

In the case of oral history, the importance is not in resolving this particular political issue. Rather the importance lays in noting the position of each individual within the given community, being aware of the issues revolving around cultural identity within that

community and being willing to explore the diversity of voices within the community in order to elicit all perspectives and historical versions.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The key to creating a holistic record of American Indian cultural history may lie, not in one method, such as written documents, archaeology or ethnographic methods, such as oral history, but in a compilation of multiple methodologies that allow for different techniques for collecting and interpreting information. Ethnohistory is one such method of compilation currently gaining ground in both history and anthropology. Axtell defines ethno history as "the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and cause of change in a culture (or cultures) defined ethnologically" (Axtell: 12). The objective is to use both historical and anthropological sources to discover cultural patterns within given communities enabling not only the present culture to be better defined but to reconstruct previous cultures that remain elusive to traditional historical processes (Axtell:14).

Ethnographic methods, such as oral history, provide a new take on historical collections by providing insight on how people perceive the world around them. Oral histories, as Axtell points out, elicit the opinions, beliefs and values that shape native ideology. The conventionalization of time and its passing differs amongst communities and the dialogue in oral histories allow time to flow forwards and backwards (Axtell: 17). As R.A. Gould points out, ethnohistorians work to connect human behavior and processes across temporal spaces. They also enable scholars to test human behaviors and cultural

practices against traditional sources of written documents and material culture.

Ethnohistory, however, is not without its critics. Scholars have challenged ethno history for its emphasis on cultural communities. Conrad Kottak and others who define the field specifically in connection to ethnic studies reduce ethno history to a limited field of inquiry that can not incorporate non-exotic cultural histories. This, of course, derived from ethno histories origins as a field born from ethnic studies, but overall is a myth and is simply not true. Ethnohistory can indeed be applied to human studies in general as its foundation is in the collaboration of methodological resources, not as a field applied to one or more particular cultures. Critics also focus on picking apart the individual methodological approaches within the field, i.e. oral history and its reliance on memory or archaeology and its emphasis on materials that are often susceptible to natural decay. The strengths and limitations of such practices are the exact reason why ethno history compiles them. There is no one form of historical collection that is un-biased, complete and without flaws. Each form possesses authorship (i.e. the writer of written texts, the interviewer in an oral history, the archaeologist in a field study) and therefore, are open to imperfections. As Trevor Lummis points out, "Debating the superiority of either documentary or oral evidence is essentially sterile because both have their strengths and weaknesses. Contemporary documents have their 'silences' as often as oral evidence" (Lummis: 155.) As Mihesuah points out, accuracy derives from examining all data from numerous sources- both Native and non-Native and, most importantly, by remaining aware of potential biases (Mihesuah:5).

Oral history is one form of methodology that is well suited for collaboration with other sources. Its process of collection in itself is based on multiple influences. Whether it is pushed under the ideology of ethnohistory, anthropology, history or some other form of social science, the importance is not in the labeling and categorizing of the form, but in how it is used within the community. The true strengths and weaknesses of oral history are found in its implementation within the Native community.

The standardization of methodology is an overall, broad based issue in oral history. In particular, with American Indian oral histories, there is the compounded issue of how to collect a history based on multiple vocal, sound and physical expressions. This complex three-dimensional form of history cannot be ignored or condensed into a two-dimensional transcript of historical events. In addition, addressing the influential roles of oral traditions, language and cultural identity compound the efforts to create a holistic historic record.

This thesis was not created to resolve any or all of these issues impacting oral history methodology or the particular concerns around American Indian cultural history collection and preservation. Instead, it was written to introduce and discuss some of the major issues plaguing the proper collection of American Indian oral histories. What needs to occur from this point on is a thought provoking, multi-cultural dialogue composed of academics from multiple disciplines and Native community leaders and residents to further address and resolve these issues.

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