Oral History

Definition
The Oral History Association (OHA) defines oral history as ‘a method of gathering and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life.’ Oral history is a recorded conversation about the past with named individuals in which knowledge about specific events and individual lives is narrated in story form and made available to the public through deposit in archives. Biographical in nature and historical in scope, the scholarly oral history interview is rooted in particular recollections about history based on the individual perspective of the narrator.

Overview
The Northern Arizona University interpretation is consistent with OHRP’s letter dated September 22, 2003, concurring with the proposed OHA policy, dated August 26, 2003. Both the OHRP letter and the OHA policy are in agreement with the American Historical Association that oral history interviewing activities, in general, are not designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge and, therefore, do not involve ‘research’ as defined by 45 CFR §46.102(d).

However, OHRP clarified in the 2003 letter that some investigators may use oral history interviewing procedures in a manner which would be considered ‘human subjects research’ as defined by 45 CFR §46. These activities must be submitted as a research project to the Northern Arizona IRB for review.

The conduct of all oral history activities undertaken by Northern Arizona University faculty, staff, or students should follow guidelines established by the Oral History Association and the American Historical Association for the ethical and professional practice of oral history.

If a journal editor requires documentation that the oral history does not constitute research, an investigator can complete and submit a “Determination of Human Research.”

When oral histories do NOT require IRB review
Oral history interviews that only document specific historical events or the experiences of individuals or communities over different time periods would not constitute Human Research, as they would not support or lead to the development of a hypothesis in a manner that would have predictive value. The collection of such information, like journalism, generally is considered to be a biography, documentary, or historical record of the individual’s life or experience, or of historical events. Oral history interviews of individuals are not usually intended to be scientific or to produce generalizable information; hence, this usually is not considered research in accordance with the federal regulations Northern Arizona University policy.
Example: Veterans Oral History Project
A student is planning a dissertation on the long-term social impact of the Vietnam War on American culture. The student wants to conduct life histories of a group of veterans for the sake of documenting the broad meaning of the war in the rest of their lives. The interviews will be contributed to the Veterans Oral History Project at the Smithsonian Institution, which offers professional training to oral historians, the costs of which were underwritten by Congress. To ensure that oral histories are conducted in a professional manner, the student will follow the protocols and guidance developed for this project by the Smithsonian, as well as the guidelines of the national Oral History Association.

Rationale: This project does not constitute Human Research because, based on the information provided, the information collected from the interviews does not constitute a systematic investigation (it is not intended to address a hypothesis). Furthermore, it is neither intended nor likely to contribute to generalizable knowledge. Other details, such as the external financial support and following OHA or sponsor guidelines are irrelevant in determining whether IRB approval is required.

When oral histories DO require IRB review
Oral history activities composed of systematic investigations and involving open-ended interviews designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge regarding living individuals are likely to constitute Human Research. Therefore, these oral history activities must be submitted on a “Project Narrative for Application” as a research project to the IRB for review and prospective approval.

Example: Long-term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam War Veterans
A faculty member is planning to conduct oral histories to gain an understanding of the impacts of the Vietnam War on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The faculty member wants to work with a veterans PTSD support group to take life histories to see how the war influenced the rest of the veterans’ lives. The group agrees in writing to allow the faculty member to meet with the members as a part of the group, and individually. One goal of the research, in addition to understanding general ways in which the war affected the subsequent lives of soldiers, is to make assessments that will allow the faculty member to predict what kinds of exposure in war situations leads to the development of PTSD. In order to prepare for this analysis, the faculty member will consult published research done on PTSD with reference to Vietnam veterans, and will use PTSD-related materials specific to the individuals in the group. While the veterans want to contribute their memories to the national Veterans oral history project run by the Smithsonian, they want to keep specific information private that would link PTSD material to their lives. The faculty
member and/or the psychiatrist who runs the group plans to use the data collected through these life histories to prepare a scientific presentation.

**Rationale:** This project does require prospective IRB oversight because, based on the information provided, data that will be collected from interviewees will be designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge.

The veterans’ desire to keep specific information private that would link PTSD material to their life histories is irrelevant to the determination that this project needs IRB oversight. Such consideration would be taken even for projects that do not require IRB oversight.

This section was adapted from Columbia University, which administers the world’s oldest formal university oral history archive open to the public.