



When Do Oral Histories Qualify as Human Subjects Research?

A decision whether oral history or other activities solely consisting of open-ended qualitative type interviews are subject to IRB review is based upon the prospective intent of the investigator. If the activity meets the federal definition of "research", IRB review is required.

The evaluation of such activities depends on whether the investigator is engaged in the creation of "generalizable knowledge", that is, whether the activity represents a systematic investigation in which the investigator engaged in such activities intends to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.

Oral history activities, as described to OHRP by oral history representatives, in general are designed to create a record of specific historical events and, as such, are not intended to contribute to generalizable knowledge.

General principles for evaluating Oral History activities:

- Oral history activities, such as open-ended interviews, that ONLY document a specific historical event or the experiences of individuals without an intent to draw conclusions or generalize findings would NOT constitute "research" and would not require IRB review.
 - **Example:** An oral history video recording of interviews with World Trade Center (WTC) survivors is created for viewing in a museum. The creation of the videotape does NOT intend to draw conclusions, inform policy, or generalize findings. The sole purpose is to create a historical record of specific personal events and experiences related to the attack on the WTC and provide a venue for WTC survivors to tell their stories.
- Systematic investigations involving open-ended interviews that are designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (e.g., designed to draw conclusions, inform policy, or generalize findings) WOULD constitute "research" and require IRB review.
 - **Example:** Open-ended interviews of surviving Gulf War veterans to document their experiences and to draw conclusions about their experiences, inform policy, or generalize findings.
- Oral historians and qualitative investigators may want to create archives for the purpose of providing a resource for others to do research. Since the intent of the archive is to create a repository of information for other investigators to conduct human research, the creation of such an archive WOULD constitute research and require IRB review.



- **Example:** Open ended interviews are conducted with women basketball players in order to create an archive for future research. The creation of such an archive would constitute human subjects research since the intent is to collect data for future research.