

ORAL HISTORY BEST PRACTICES

Tai S. Edwards

History Professor and Director of the Kansas Studies Institute

Johnson County Community College

What is oral history?

- Process and product
 - Oral history encompasses both the interview process and the recorded oral history preserved thereafter.
- Contextualization
 - “The value of oral history lies largely in the way it helps to place people’s experiences within a larger social and historical context.”
- Interactive dynamic
 - Conversation between participant(s) and interviewer is fluid and produces valuable and unique insights.

Why am I/are we collecting oral histories?

- Dignity
 - Affirming the dignity of an individual's knowledge, perspective, experiences, etc.
- Voices
 - Expanding, diversifying the documented voices and perspectives on a given topic.
- Historical preservation
 - Archiving and preserving these materials for future research/use.
- Moral injury
 - Tai S. Edwards, "Big Idea: How Should We Honor Someone's Military Service?"
 - <https://www.humanitieskansas.org/get-involved/kansas-stories/the-big-idea/big-idea-how-should-we-honor-someones-military-service>

Big Idea: How Should We Honor Someone's Military Service? - Kansas Story

By Tai S. Edwards, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Kansas Studies Institute at Johnson County Community College

I have often witnessed civilians greet veterans with a hand shake and say, "Thank you for your service." Online you can find many discussions about veterans' perceptions of this interaction, ranging from appreciative, to awkward, to disingenuous, and beyond.

To justify warfare, political leaders craft simplistic narratives around advancing freedom and defending liberty, ostensibly establishing clear boundaries between American hero and foreign enemy. In contrast, military personnel fulfill the myriad of roles needed to mobilize a complex bureaucracy to achieve a variety of objectives based upon a much more nuanced understanding of geopolitical stability and national security. Thus, a chasm separates veterans' experiences and civilians' expectations. Aggravating the problem is the fact that less than half of one percent of the U.S. population has served in the post-9/11-military and the nation "hasn't really felt war." There is no draft or required service, no specific war tax or economic sacrifice, and news coverage is sporadic at best.

Once veterans return home, many civilians don't know how to talk to them, which only increases moral injury.

All of this has limited public awareness of the moral injury war always inflicts. Philosopher and U.S. Army Lieutenant General (Retired) James M. Dubik has argued that moral injury results from the paradoxical nature of war, "the morally repugnant is the morally permissible, and even the morally necessary...War justifies – more importantly demands – what in peacetime, would be unjustifiable: the destruction of the lives and happiness of others." Other aspects of moral injury include feelings of guilt that one should have done more, especially for those with whom they served, or a sense of betrayal if one's service at the time or later was deemed unjust, imprudent, or unnecessary. Once veterans return home, many civilians don't know how to talk to them, which only increases moral injury. We fear intruding on a veteran's privacy, bringing up bad memories, or more likely, showing our ignorance. "Thank you for your service" seems to be all many can say or do, if that.

So what do we owe veterans? Most Americans can easily articulate that long-term institutional and fiscal support is required. But that's not enough. Dubik challenges everyone to learn more about what veterans have experienced on our behalf, understand them, engage them, and help them live well. "It's not a matter of gratitude; it's a matter of reciprocity." To begin, all one needs to do is listen. Humanities Kansas has recently engaged in such work through the "[Kansas Stories of the Vietnam War](#)" oral history project. My colleague Kena Zumalt and I participated in this project, having student (and post-9/11) veterans interview Vietnam-era veterans. When asked about the significance of his military service and having his oral history recorded, David Svajda (U.S. Navy) responded "national decisions affect real people...When people are in the military, you're giving them the best years of your life...When we make national decisions, [we're] affecting people for their next 60 years." It's not just "their next 60 years," it is all of our next 60 years. Humanities Kansas held a concluding ceremony for this project in April. Surrounded by veterans, their families, partner organizations, and other dignitaries, one veteran's spouse leaned over to me and said "this is better than all the wheelchairs you could give them." I knew what she meant. If we want to begin healing moral injuries, from past and present wars, we have to take responsibility for our shared

role in sending people to war, keeping them there, and reintegrating them after. Thanking someone for their military service requires listening and building relationships; gratitude requires engagement.

About Tai Edwards

Dr. Tai S. Edwards is an Associate professor of history and director of the [Kansas Studies Institute](#) at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. Her teaching focuses on US and Indigenous Peoples history. Her scholarship focuses on US imperialism, Indigenous Peoples, disease, and gender roles. Her recent book [Osage Women and Empire: Gender and Power](#) was published by University Press of Kansas in 2018. With the Kansas Studies Institute, Dr. Edwards has collaborated on many projects including recording veterans' oral histories, documenting the first 50 years of Special Olympics Kansas, and raising funds to help preserve the Quindaro townsite in Kansas City, Kansas.

These views do not necessarily reflect those of Humanities Kansas, its board of directors, or staff.

Spark a Conversation

Read

- James M. Dubik, [“Foreword: Expanding Our Understanding of the Moral Dimension of War,”](#) in Nancy Sherman [Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers](#) (Oxford University Press, 2015).
- Robert Emmet Meagher and Douglas A. Pryer, eds., [War and Moral Injury: A Reader](#) (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).
- Matt Richtel, [“Please Don’t Thank Me for My Service,”](#) *The New York Times*, February 21, 2015.
- Phillip Carter, [“For veterans, is ‘thank you for your service’ enough?”](#) *The Washington Post*, November 4, 2011.
- Max Fisher, [“Why Some Veterans Hate it When You Say ‘Thank You,’”](#) *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2010.

Watch

- [JCCC Vietnam-Era Veterans Panel](#), part of Humanities Kansas Kansas Stories of the Vietnam War
- Video of JCCC Vietnam Veteran interviews:

[Interview with David and Wendy Svajda](#)

[Interview with Larry Stanfield](#)

[Interview with Robert Robins](#)

Preparation

- Consent
 - Clearly explain the purpose, process, and preservation to participant(s).
 - Consent and permission forms.
 - Pre-meetings?
- Location
 - Limit distractions.
 - Welcoming and accessible.
 - Digital options.
 - Amount of time allotted for interview.
- Recording technology
 - Video, audio, and backups.
- Final format
 - Video, audio, or text.
- Archiving
 - Where will the oral histories reside?
 - How will they be accessed by researchers, etc.?



KANSAS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

CENTER FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH
120 West Tenth, Topeka, Kansas 66612-1291

MANUSCRIPTS DEPARTMENT
Manuscripts, Maps, Photographs & Audio Visuals
913-296-2624 FAX 913-296-1005

RELEASE FORM

I have agreed to the interview that took place at 12:30 p.m. 1448 Sheridan St., NW, D.C.
on Sept. 25, 1992. The following conditions are agreed upon:

- (1) I give my permission for the information gathered to be used for educational and scholarly purposes. If a researcher wishes to use the information gathered for other than educational and scholarly purposes, he/she
 may do so without further permission.
 may not do so without further permission.
- (2) When the material is used, proper acknowledgement must be made of the participants.
- (3) The materials gathered will be placed in the Manuscripts Department at the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas. Copies of the audio tapes and transcripts will be deposited, also, at the Washburn University Law School Library and the Brown Foundation.

Any restrictions on the material should be written here.

The Kansas State Historical Society will retain the release and fieldwork data sheets. If requested by a researcher, the Kansas State Historical Society

- may release my address to researchers.
 may not release my address to researchers.

Name of Informant Barbara Gibson
Informant's Address 1448 Sheridan Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20011
Name of Fieldworker Cheryl Brown Henderson

Barbara C. Gibson
Signature of Informant

Cheryl Brown Henderson
Signature of Fieldworker



Oral History Interview Release Form

Date of Interview: _____

Who are you? Interviewer Interviewee Other

Name: _____

Address: _____ City: _____ State: _____ ZIP _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

I understand that my oral history interview is a service of the Kansas City, Kansas Public Library (KCKPL) and no charge is being levied for this service. I hereby give and forever grant KCKCPL the following rights and permissions:

To publish my oral history interview and allow public access to the same

Yes No

To archive my oral history interview on the KCKPL website

Yes No

I wish to place restrictions to access on my oral history:

Yes No

Please specify: _____

I warrant that I am at least 18 years of age (or am the legal guardian thereof) and Have every right to grant the permissions outlined above. Further, I state that I have read this document before signing and understand its provisions.

Signature _____ Date: _____

Parent/Legal Guardian Signature _____ Date: _____

Johnson County Community College Media Authorization & Release Form - Community

I, (*print name*) _____ authorize Johnson County Community College and its employees or agents (collectively, "JCCC") to take photographs, motion pictures and/or audio recordings of me. I agree to my image, voice and/or likeness being used in all forms of print and electronic media recordings and publications and/or audio or video productions for purposes related to the educational mission of JCCC, including research, education (including online courses) and the publicity, marketing and promotion of educational programs for JCCC (the "Material").

I acknowledge that JCCC will be the copyright owner of the Materials and my image, voice and/or likeness becomes the sole and exclusive property of JCCC, and that JCCC may sell, copy, modify, create derivatives, license, assign, transfer, archive and otherwise use my image, voice and/or likeness in any Material. I further authorize JCCC to grant any third party the right to use my image, voice and/or likeness for any lawful commercial or non-commercial purpose related to academics or education. I release JCCC from any and all liability arising out of the use of my image, voice and/or likeness, including without limitation any claims arising out of my right of privacy or right of publicity. I am participating on a voluntary basis and no compensation, fees or royalties will be paid for this use.

Signature

Date

Address City/State/Zip

If the participant is under age 18, the parent or guardian must also complete the following:

I am the parent or guardian of the person whose image or voice may appear in the Materials and I give my consent and authorization as set forth above.

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Relationship

Address City/State/Zip

The Interview

- Set up
 - Recording equipment and backups.
 - For long interviews, make sure everyone has water and is comfortable.
- Start with important details:
 - Name of participant, interviewer.
 - Date of interview.
 - Rank/branch of service.
- Ask open-ended questions
 - Sample questions.
 - Print questions, bring a pen.
- Ask follow-up questions
 - Sample clip.
 - Including reflection.
- Balance your planned questions with following where the participant leads.
- Be an engaged listener.
- Final question: “Is there anything else you would like to add?”
- Thank the participant!

Adapted from “Oral History Best Practices,” <https://oralhistory.org/best-practices/>.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/OUTLINE

Before interview:

- Sign JCCC Media release form [<https://www.jccc.edu/about/leadership-governance/copyright/files/media-release-form-community.pdf>]
- Say:
 - We are here today as part of JCCC's Kansas Studies Institute and Veteran and Military Services Veterans Oral History project.
 - Thank you for participating!
 - We can stop anytime, take breaks, visit the restroom, etc.

Sample Questions (remember you can follow where the speaker leads)

- I) First state your name, your branch of service, and rank.
- II) How did you come to serve in the [branch of service]?
- III) What was your experience in military service?
- IV) How did military service impact relationships with your loved ones?
- V) What was your experience transitioning from military to civilian life?
- VI) How has this service impacted you long-term?
- VII) How do you feel about/reflect upon your service today?
- VIII) Do you have anything you would like to add or any other topics you would like to share?

After interview

- THANK YOU!
- We will share the streaming link with you and would you like a DVD copy of this interview?

Kansas Studies Institutes Veterans Oral Histories on YouTube

YouTube – JCCvideo Channel – Kansas Studies Institute Playlist

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHhe-2tIHRqHJ8rLJOEVnt7p6y9P224sr>

The screenshot shows a YouTube browser window with the address bar displaying the playlist URL. The search bar contains 'jcc video'. On the left, a video player shows a man speaking at a podium with a screen behind him that reads 'Kevin Willmott Friday, February 28 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM'. Below the player, the channel name 'Kansas Studies Institute' and 'JCCvideo' are visible, along with '43 videos 1,173 views Updated 7 days ago'. Playback controls for 'Play all' and 'Shuffle' are shown. The main content area displays a list of 8 video thumbnails, each with a title, view count, and upload time:

- 35 **Vietnam-Era Veterans Oral Histories – Dave and Wendy Svajda**
JCCvideo • 236 views • 6 months ago
2:00:09
- 36 **Vietnam-Era Veterans Oral Histories – Robert Robins**
JCCvideo • 233 views • 6 months ago
1:43:18
- 37 **Vietnam-Era Veterans Oral Histories: Tim Barnhart (Part 1)**
JCCvideo • 223 views • 6 months ago
1:13:52
- 38 **Vietnam-Era Veterans Oral Histories: Tim Barnhart (Part 2)**
JCCvideo • 173 views • 6 months ago
1:35:57
- 39 **Kansas Veterans Oral History: Art Fillmore**
JCCvideo • 58 views • 3 months ago
1:28:55
- 40 **Kansas Veterans Oral History: Bob Ulin**
JCCvideo • 52 views • 3 months ago
1:14:15
- 41 **Kansas Veterans Oral History: Jim Bany**
JCCvideo • 115 views • 3 months ago
1:20:45
- 42 **Kansas Veterans Oral History: Gary Seabaugh**
JCCvideo • 234 views • 3 months ago
1:39:09

Preservation and Use

- Format for preservation
 - Video, audio, or text.
- Editing and transcribing
 - Video, audio, AND text.
 - How to use technology to transcribe.
 - Cleaning up the text.
- Copy for the participant?
- Archive or library?
 - Add to established archival or library collection, with relevant cataloging for future use.
- Preserve oral history with the consent/permission form.
- Make it easy for researchers in the future.
- Any immediate plans for use?
 - Will you post, excerpt, or reproduce oral histories in the near future?
 - Is this the beginning of a larger oral history project?
- CELEBRATE!!

SAMPLE OF EDITING AND CLEANING UP THE TRANSCRIPT TEXT

The original software transcription of the conversation:

My business had done for, I'd done pro bono for many candidates over the years. Oh, okay. Six of that. Yeah. Yeah. Um, um, for a while there, I was kind of just, just do the work. And then I started getting more and more to where I would actually interview them before I would take, you know, yeah, before I would do work for them. Yeah. And so, um, but yeah, over the years I've done quite a few candidates created logos, Susan Osborne, I created her logo and everything. that's awesome she ran yeah just you know that kind of stuff but not really so active that I showed up for the meetings or I showed up for the fundraisers right thing still right I wasn't quite there yet

The final oral history text:

With my business I'd done pro bono work for many candidates over the years. For a while, I would just do the work. And then I started getting more and more to where I would interview the candidates before I did work for them. Over the years I've done quite a few candidates' campaigns, created their logos. Susan Osborne, I created her logo and everything. But I wasn't active, I didn't show up for meetings, I didn't go to fundraisers. I wasn't quite there yet.