Oral Histories and IRB Oversight

Oral histories are in general excluded from IRB oversight because they do not meet the definition of research under 45 CFR 46.102(d) where research is defined as ‘a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.’

However, **IF** an activity meets the following description, IRB review and approval **IS** required as the activity meets the definition of human subject research:

The activity involves 1) a prospective research plan to answer a research question, 2) data collection (qualitative and/or quantitative data) and 3) data analysis, AND it is designed to draw general conclusions, inform policy, or generalize findings to other populations.

Examples of oral history activities that **DO NOT** require IRB oversight include:

a) An oral history documentary that includes interviews with holocaust survivors for viewing in a national history museum. The sole purpose of the video is to create a historical record of specific personal events and experiences of survivors. There is no intention to systematically collect the information, draw conclusions, inform policy or generalize the results.

b) Oral history interviews or compilations of stories from Southeast Asian immigrants who settled in Lowell, MA and are available for viewing at a local museum.

Examples of activities conducted by historians that **DO** require IRB review include activities such as:

a) Creating archives for the purpose of providing a resource for others to do research such as interviewing surviving WWII/Vietnam veterans.

b) Conducting open-ended interviews of Gulf war survivors to document their experiences, draw conclusions from them, inform policy, or generalize findings.

Information from the Oral History Association supports this guidance:

http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/oral-history-and-irb-review/

“most oral history interviewing [is excluded] from IRB review on the grounds that it does not conform to the regulatory definition of research as seeking “generalizable knowledge”.


More recently (January 19, 2017) from the American Historical Assoc.
http://blog.historians.org/2017/01/oral-history-excluded-irb-oversight/

“For purposes of this part, the following activities are deemed not to be research: (1) Scholarly and journalistic activities (e.g., oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal research, and historical scholarship), including the collection and use of information that focus directly on the specific individuals about whom the information is collected.”