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A CASE STUDY IN THE ETHICS OF QUEER ORAL HISTORY

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Abstract

During work on a queer archival project at a small liberal arts university, tension arose when an oral history participant unintentionally misnamed and misgendered a transgender individual. As this case study demonstrates, the project team had to balance the ethics of oral history, which discourage the editing of recordings, with queer ethics that view this type of misnaming as actively harmful. The team created their own solution, taking into account general guidance regarding third-party naming, trans-inclusivity in archives, and the overall goals of the project.

Keywords

oral history, transgender, ethics, archive, misgendering, misnaming

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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A Case Study in the Ethics of Queer Oral History

In 2018, a project focused on documenting institutional history of queer activism began at a small liberal arts university in rural New York. As part of the university's bicentennial celebrations during the 2018-2019 academic year, faculty were encouraged to find ways to engage students in work related to institutional history. This project was created by an LGBTQ Studies professor and was originally imagined as a three-year endeavor. The project is now in its fourth year and is likely to continue to grow for years to come. It began as an archival project, with students in an entry-level LGBTQ Studies course combing through the university's archives to find ephemeral materials that gave a glimpse of past queer life on campus. The next semester, a research assistant synthesized the found information into an interactive digital timeline, shared publicly on the university library's website.

In the fall of 2019, the project expanded into recording oral history interviews with alumni and past and present staff and faculty of the university who contributed to queer activism during their time on campus. These interviews have been the focus of the project ever since, and they are ultimately entered in the university's archive with correlating abstracts and timestamp summaries, available online for public use. The project team has always been committed to doing research in the most ethical and least harmful way possible, while also upholding the academic integrity of the work. Given the sensitive nature of many aspects of queer history, the project has encountered a number of ethical dilemmas. The lack of similar projects currently in existence has meant that the project team, consisting of an LGBTQ Studies professor, an archivist, and two student research assistants, has had to figure out solutions to these dilemmas with limited external guidance.

One issue required particularly careful consideration: what to do when the subject of an oral history mistakenly misnames a trans individual. The project team felt strongly that these instances of misnaming, especially if they were entered into a publicly accessible archive, constituted transphobic violence. However, the project was also held to the general oral history standard of only editing interview recordings when absolutely necessary. This created a dilemma of balancing the interests of archival and academic integrity with the interest of reducing harm done to trans individuals. Through careful deliberation, exploration of the sparse available resources on the topic, and a conversation with the named individual, the team came up with a solution to the situation at hand that would also be applied as a general rule for future similar instances.

A Note about Terminology

We recognize two important truths about language: 1) the words we use carry many layers of meaning and can cause immense amounts of harm if not chosen carefully and 2) no word choice, especially when discussing queer topics, will ever be perfect, nor is it likely to stand the test of time (Stryker 2017, 10). That said, to write about an issue, we must have language for it. We are aware that "birth name" and "deadname" are commonly used when discussing the topics of trans names, and we know that each of these terms carry heavy layers of meaning. We firmly believe that every individual should use the terminology that they are most comfortable with, but, given the complexities of each of these terms, we have intentionally chosen to use neither in this article. After much thought, the project team has decided that for the purposes of this discussion, the name a trans individual currently chooses to go by will be referred to as their "gender-affirming name" and their previously used, not chosen name will be referred to as their "originally assigned name."

The pronouns "they," "them," and "their" are used throughout the article to refer to individuals in the third person in order to maintain as much anonymity as possible. However, we recognize that not all individuals, especially those who transitioned from one binary gender to another,

are comfortable with being referred to using these gender-neutral pronouns. We hope that our intent in using them is understood within the specific context of this project.

Additionally, “trans” is used as an umbrella adjective to describe anyone whose current gender identity and sense of self does not match with those which they were assigned at birth. Finally, “queer” and “LGBTQ” are used interchangeably in this article. The project generally prefers “queer” due to the expansive possibilities of its meaning, but “LGBTQ” is used by the university when naming offices and programs, so that term is used when doing so allows the project’s record and the university’s record to align most clearly.

A Commitment to Ethical Queer Oral History

Since its inception, the project has recognized that queer archival work, and in particular queer oral history, “is an inherently political act” (Tooth Murphy et al. 2022, 7). As other practitioners of queer oral history have experienced, the team was committed to doing its work in a manner in which “both personal identity politics and academic enquiry could be valued and upheld” (Tooth Murphy et al. 2022, 10). We also recognized that archives and metadata reflect the values and biases of those who create them (Reisman 2022, 61). Given the historic and current marginalization of trans individuals even within many queer-focused projects, the team gave extra attention and intention to issues related to trans inclusion within the archive they were creating. Even decisions that seemed small were carefully considered, as “trans exclusion or solidarity happens in uneven, everyday ways, through seemingly minor choices about information design” (McKinney 2020, 24). Finally, the team recognized that even the hardest of decisions had to be made in a timely manner and thus would often be imperfect. It has been recognized by other queer archivists that “[t]he archives will not wait to acquire better technology or settle on a perfect, controlled vocabulary for metadata; these [materials documenting queer history] need to be online because queer communities need them now” (McKinney 2020, 13). It was this nuanced commitment to doing ethical work that guided the project team through many complicated decisions, including the one outlined below.

Ethical Dilemma

In the fall of 2020, the project’s focus was largely on collecting oral histories from previous staff and faculty of the university who had been instrumental in the development of both the LGBTQ Studies academic program and the administrative office that supports LGBTQ-identified students. One of the research assistants conducted an interview with an individual who served as a visiting assistant professor at the university for two years in the early 2000s. As part of this oral history, the interviewee discussed working with the first staff member to serve in a position dedicated to LGBTQ student support at the university. The interviewee named this staff member, using the name they went by at the time both individuals were working at the university. This name was the previous staff member’s originally assigned name. This was not an act of malice, as the two individuals had not been in touch since they both worked at the university and the interviewee was unaware that the person they named had since transitioned. Nonetheless, regardless of the lack of malintent, the project team knew that this misnaming could have a harmful impact, as the misnaming of trans individuals is a form of transphobic violence.

The project team was already aware that the named individual had transitioned since their time at the institution. This individual had been named on the project timeline of queer activism at the university because of work they had done while employed by the university, and a previous oral history interviewee had made it known to the team that the name used on the timeline was not the individual’s gender-affirming name. It took the project team several months and conversations with others to learn the gender-affirming name of the individual, so in the meantime the individual’s name was removed from the timeline entirely and replaced with the title of the position they held. In keeping with

McKinney (2020, 24), this was indicative of the project's commitment to trans inclusion and the team's recognition that using the originally assigned name of a trans individual in and of itself violated that commitment.

By fall 2020 when the interview with the visiting assistant professor was recorded, the project team knew the gender-affirming name of the individual and had recorded an oral history with them. Their originally assigned name had been removed from the timeline but remained on the record in archived school newspapers and other documents. The ethical guidelines of the project, informed by general oral history best practices, prohibited the editing of recordings except for in extreme circumstances (Ritchie 2014, 57). The team recognized that this was an instance in which leaving the recording unedited, which would reenter the originally assigned name into the university archive and give it increased publicity, would cause harm. In general, misnaming and misgendering of trans people is an act of violence that the project was unwilling to perpetuate, despite the conflict of interest with the ethics of leaving oral histories unedited. Additionally, after talking to the individual whose originally assigned name had been used, it was clear on a personal level that the only name they were comfortable with having entered into the archive was their gender-affirming name.

As outlined below, the team attempted to find an answer about best practice for this scenario in the literature about oral history ethics, but little existed talking specifically about trans naming.¹ This meant the team would have to grapple with the ethics and determine their own best practice. There were many questions to consider: Should the gender-affirming name be added to the record, or is the only concern for the originally assigned name to be removed? How would the removal of names impact those attempting to do archival research in the future, and how much weight should this concern carry when being balanced with the goal of not causing harm to trans individuals? Would removing originally assigned names without adding gender-affirming names contribute to trans erasure? On a purely logistical and technological note, how might names be edited out and to what extent was the quality of such editing a concern? These questions and many others allowed the team to explore complex ethical issues while also determining new policies for our project.

Ethical Decision

Since the project began collecting oral histories, the team recognized that the naming of third parties by interviewees could create complicated ethical situations. Because the project's oral histories ultimately become publicly available online, a particularly high level of ethical accountability was necessary, as discussed in Bradley and Puri's "Creating an Oral History Archive" (2016, 84). Since the project is hosted by a prestigious university and the project archive is part of the institution's archive, the project team also felt it was important to set an example for other archives and to not continue the long history of harm caused to marginalized communities by "elite" centers of knowledge (Sarid-Segal 2017, 7). Students of the host institution were typically the ones to conduct oral histories and prepare the accompanying documentation. They were asked to use a traffic light system of marking any third-party name mentioned as either green, yellow, or red based on the level of ethical concern, modeled after the system discussed by Bradley and Puri (2016, 86). Green-coded third-party naming is benign and there are no obvious reasons why it cannot be entered into the archive, such as an interviewee sharing the name of a professor whose class they enjoyed. Yellow-coded situations are

¹ As queer studies is a rapidly growing field, relevant literature, including *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (edited by Summerskill et al. 2022), has been published since the project team encountered and deliberated this situation. While this resource was not available to help guide the team's decision, some discussion is included in this article as it may be instructive to other projects navigating similar situations in the future.

those which require deliberation to determine whether or not it is ethical to enter them into the archive, such as an interviewee providing the full name of a friend along with personal information about them. Red-coded situations are those in which the third-party name cannot ethically be entered into the archive. The use of a third party's originally assigned name was considered a "red" situation.

The team took into consideration the fact that this particular originally assigned name was already in the university's record, as evidenced by the school newspaper article that led to the name being included on the project's timeline. While it is not possible to fully remove an incorrect name from the archive, it is important to prevent it from entering the record when possible (Currier and White 2019, 15). The conversation the team had with the individual also helped to shape the team's decision, particularly because no member of the team at the time themselves identified as trans, and we felt it was important to center the opinions and perspectives of those most directly impacted by the decision. The individual was clear that only their gender-affirming name should be entered into the archive. While the team does not expect that every trans individual would agree with this perspective, it seemed reasonable to believe that many would, and thus this opinion could be used to help shape a standard procedure for the project to follow in future situations as well as this specific one.

The Library of Congress only enters individuals' gender-affirming names into the record, and when an originally assigned name is unavoidable, it is recognized in the record as a "variant" of the gender-affirming name (Currie and White 2019, 15). In theory, this approach minimizes the harm that an originally assigned name causes because if a third party encounters it, they do so with context. The Digital Transgender Archive acknowledges that in queer archives, individuals' names and pronouns may be different in different materials due to name changes as well as stage names and nicknames ("Search Tips & Terms" n.d.). Their website also includes a reminder that regardless of which name may appear in historical documents, gender-affirming names should be used in the present ("Search Tips & Terms" n.d.). For the project in question, removing originally assigned names from certain records, such as archived school newspapers, was not a possibility, but the project team felt a duty to ensure that they were not reinforced in the materials the project was entering into the archive. In a piece published subsequent to this deliberation, Golding (2022, 89) discusses how a trans oral history participant negotiated "artificial borders" of categorization while composing their personal narrative of having "a transitioning identity in a transphobic society." Golding's interviewee walked this line by centering their narrative not on their ever-evolving identity but rather on the "continuity of their sense of self" (2022, 89). Although the situation at hand involved third-party recollections rather than an individual's own, the team felt this tension between continuity of narratives and the fracture created when the words used to describe someone change. The inability to erase all previous records of the individual's originally assigned name meant that including a different name in new records would result in the individual appearing in the record under two distinct names, creating the perception of split in identity even though the individual at hand has always been who they are, regardless of what name they used. Despite the archival inconsistencies that can arise, Golding's (2022, 87) assertion that "self-definition has to be respected absolutely" sums up the principle that guided the team in their efforts to balance the academic interests of telling historical narratives with the ethical interests of trans inclusion.

In addition to avoiding any reiteration of the originally assigned name in the university's archive, the project team felt it was important to have the gender-affirming name be added. One of the purposes of the project was to make sure that queer institutional history and the labor that queer individuals have contributed to the institution is remembered. This included working to ensure that individuals get credit for work they did. Since many instances of third-party naming include the interviewee discussing the activist work done by the third-party, the project team hoped to allow the

third-party, even if they were accidentally misnamed by the interviewee, to receive credit for their work. Again in reference to McKinney (2020, 24), this serves as an example of how information design choices must be made intentionally to avoid trans-exclusion. Adding the individual's gender-affirming name to the record also has the potential to be helpful to future researchers using the project's collection, as knowing who is being discussed could allow them to find further information in another part of the record by using the name as a search term.

Due to the nature of the archive hosting the project, the team also had the privilege of being able to archive materials without making them publicly accessible. Multiple versions of the same interview could be retained in the private archive, with only a selected version made publicly accessible. This could allow the original versions of any edited recording to be retained, both for purposes of future internal research and to leave the possibility open for a different decision about what should be publicly accessible to be made in the future.

Thus, the project team decided that originally assigned names would be removed from recorded oral histories before they were entered into the archives. This would be done by simply splicing the audio or audiovisual file. Technical quality was important to the team, but not more important than preventing harm. The gender-affirming name would *not* be inserted into the audio, due to technical limitations and the ethics of editing oral histories as minimally as possible, but it would be included in the written documentation that accompanies the interview in the archive. In the interest of being as transparent and accountable as possible, the team also decided that the documentation for any impacted oral histories would include a note stating that the recording had been edited to prevent the harm of misnaming or misgendering for trans individuals.² Original, unedited versions of these interviews would be retained privately in the archive, preventing originally assigned names from entering the public metadata or being heard by the public without dismissing the importance of preserving the unedited recordings.

Implications

With this decision comes a promise from the project team to continually reevaluate materials even after they have entered the archive. At any point that it is discovered that an individual was misgendered or misnamed in an oral history uploaded to the archive, whether it is because this information was not known at the time the recording was uploaded or because the individual has transitioned in the time since, the recording will temporarily be pulled from the public archive, the originally assigned name will be removed, and the corresponding documentation will be uploaded. This is a long-term commitment on the part of the project to minimize the amount of harm caused by its archive.

The project team hopes that its decision and the reasoning behind it will serve as guidance for others in the future. A major hurdle the project faced in reaching its decision was the lack of publicly stated precedent from any other oral history projects. While it is important that other projects reach their own ethical decisions, hopefully seeing the considerations, balanced interests, and decisions of this project can be helpful and make the deliberation process less intimidating. The project sincerely hopes that all archives can find ways to reduce harm without sacrificing the integrity of research.

² The note accompanying edited interviews reads: "The [name of project] is committed to preventing the harm done to trans individuals by misnaming or misgendering them. To address concerns regarding birth names, this recording has been edited and documentation related to its content uses gender-affirming names and pronouns."

Conclusion

The project team hopes that this decision and the journey behind it underscores the project's commitment to preventing harm against trans individuals and to creating an ethical queer archive. If a trans individual's originally assigned name is mentioned in an oral history, it will be edited out of the audio or video recording of the interview before the file is uploaded to the publicly accessible archive, with the original, unedited recording being maintained in the private archive. The individual's gender-affirming name will be added to the written documentation that accompanies the interview. While this decision, like all other ethical decisions, was an informed and thoughtful judgment call, the team feels it is the most ethical way to balance the priorities of general oral history best practices with those of not causing harm to trans individuals. As with all matters related to queerness, we recognize that what makes sense right now might not make sense in the future. We encourage further discussion on the matter and hope that differing perspectives will be shared and help to shape the future of both the curation and creation of queer archives.

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