1999

Archival Orientation Interviews as Social Interactions

Michael R. Hill

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub

Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Social Psychology and Interaction Commons

Hill, Michael R., "Archival Orientation Interviews as Social Interactions" (1999). Sociology Department, Faculty Publications. 423.

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/423

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
ARCHIVAL ORIENTATION INTERVIEWS
AS SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Michael R. Hill, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0324

For social scientists, every orientation interview is inherently an opportunity for systematic observation, analysis, and critique. Consider, by way of contrast, a hypothetical committee of mathematicians who visit archival repositories searching for documentary materials to display during the upcoming centennial celebration of the Mathematics Department at their home university. As mathematicians, orientation interviews are simply means to their pragmatic ends. For social scientists, however, especially for qualitative sociologists such as myself (Hill 1993), the situation is more complex. For some of us, every social interaction is potentially a source of sociological insight (Deegan and Hill 1987). Thus, every orientation interview has a double character: first, it is a means to some ostensibly archival end, such as that pursued by the aforementioned mathematicians (and I suggest this is, in fact, the primary frame of mind in which most social scientists visit archival repositories). But, second, the orientation interview can become a primary focus of attention in and of itself, as a social interaction worthy of study and observation in its own right. It is this facility for stepping back from the transactions of ordinary day-to-day life to directly observe and study ourselves and others as we engage in myriad social interactions -- interactions, such as orientation interviews, that most folks routinely and unquestioningly take for granted -- that characterizes qualitative sociological inquiry. In short, qualitative sociologists are trained observers of our shared human dramas (Deegan 1989, 1998). Here, as a qualitative sociologist who also pursues archival research, my assigned task is to reflect on my direct, participatory observations of orientation interviews in archival repositories.

My observations are based on hundreds of bona fide archival research hours in repositories large and small during the past eleven years. Nearly fifty repositories have welcomed me within their doors, including five facilities in foreign countries (see Appendix). In all cases, my primary reason for visiting these repositories is legitimate archival research; my observations of social interactions in repositories is always a subordinate, collateral interest. The orientation interview, in every case I have observed, takes place in a public area -- typically in or adjacent to the reading room -- such that I am able to observe many interactions beyond those in which I directly participate. It behooves me to note that my participatory

observations are structured by the fact that I am a well-educated, able-bodied, adult white male with valid academic credentials, as the latter are sometimes necessary to gain entry to archival repositories.

As a sociologist, I am professionally attune to "the big three" human factors that structure social interactions in all societies: race, sex, and class -- and I thus address each of these elements, in turn. With the sole exception of my visit to the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, the vast majority of my observations are restricted to white on white interactions. The world of archival research is a predominantly white realm, especially at larger, well-funded, more prestigious facilities. There is a curious and dramatic racial divide, for example, in terms of patrons and staff in the great reading room of the Library of Congress, and those one finds across the street in the reading room of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. The former is clearly integrated racially, the latter is virtually a white preserve. Same city, same institution, same civil service rules, same ostensible concern for public access, but very different racial patterns in terms of both patrons and staff. Where, as a sociologist, I feel obligated to report on the dynamics of multi-racial orientation interviews, I have observed so few, and directly participated in far fewer, that I have no basis for reliable generalization.

The sexual dimension of orientation interviews, by contrast, provides a vast opportunity for generalization about the world of archival research. Here, my observations are supplemented by the numerous experiences of my life-partner, Mary Jo Deegan, a well-travelled, well-educated, tenured white female professor and author of several archivally-based books and journal articles on the history of American sociology (e.g., Deegan 1988, 1991; Gilman 1997). Sad to say, it is clear that, as a male, I receive preferential treatment during archival orientations. I am much more likely to be warmly welcomed, introduced to collateral staff, and generally shown "the ropes" in greater detail than is my life-partner. Relevant finding aids silently appear at my elbow while I work, whereas Mary Jo must more often interrogate the staff to determine what useful, additional finding aids may be available. Local photocopying protocols are more likely to be explained to me without my prompting. The overall allocation of staff resources favors male researchers. Males are more often received as "serious" researchers, and this generally holds true on the part of male as well as female staff members.

Class dynamics comprise the final element of "the big three" concerns in sociological inventories of social settings. Social class reveals itself in many ways in archival repositories, for example, in terms of overall funding, staff salaries and benefits, training and credentials, acquisition budgets, and so on. These patterns and realities reflect and mimic the social hierarchy in academia per se and in the wider society more generally. Working class patrons are far more welcome in public libraries and local historical societies, for example, than they are in the reading rooms of the nation's most prestigious universities and private libraries. Class distinctions during orientation interviews appear in profuse guises. Linguistic faux pas tag class status as surely as the cut of one's clothing. The prestige of the patron's institutional affiliation, or lack thereof, often determine the
significance with which a patron's requests and inquiries are viewed by repository staff. I have, over the years, legitimately presented myself variously as an "unemployed, independent scholar," as a community college teacher, as a doctoral student, as a university professor, and/or as sponsored by the American Sociological Association, the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Suffice it to say, being perceived as a well-connected "insider," as a member of the credentialed, upper-middle-class elite world of intellectuals, results more often than not in tangible perquisites during and following the orientation interview, including "back stage" admission to otherwise closed areas of repositories, free and/or unrestricted photocopying, lightening quick page retrievals, attentive service throughout the archival visit, speedy attention to subsequent permissions requests, ad nauseam. The flip side of this, in terms of orientation interviews, is the snobbery, disdain, posturing, overt rudeness, and short shrift that often characterizes interactions with patrons who do not "measure up" to the implicit class standards enforced by the repository staff.

In sum, sex, class, and, presumably, race, structure the interactions between patrons and staff during orientation interviews, with tangible consequences for otherwise legitimate scholars. Unfortunately, however, race, sex and class are not the whole story. A variety of additional social factors can and sometimes do compound the complexity of orientation interviews, including physical disabilities, learning disabilities, speech impediments, facial disfigurement, age, gender orientation, marital status, and so forth. These various factors can impinge on social interactions in compound ways. My life-partner and I refer to these numerous possibilities as the respective differences and advantages accruing to multiple majority statuses, one the one hand, and multiple minority statuses, on the other (Deegan 1985). The well-dressed, polite, articulate, savvy, athletic, culturally-attractive, adult white male who presents his impeccable institutional and educational credentials is virtually guaranteed a helpful, energetic, engaging, and receptive response on the part of resident archivists. In contrast, the poorly-dressed, unemployed, community college drop-out, somewhat inarticulate, physically disabled, facially-disfigured woman of color, currently lacking any institutional affiliation, is, I propose, in for a rough time if she dare ask for admission and assistance during an orientation interview, especially at the door of an elite, private archival repository.

By way of a postscript, I am compelled to outline three disciplinary aspects of orientation interviews that can still plague someone like myself who is incredibly privileged in terms of multiple majority statuses. Disciplinary background structures orientation interviews, sometimes in ways that are merely irritating, but other times in directions that are disastrous, or nearly so. The first of these is the simple and straightforward matter of disciplinary misidentification, illustrated by the following exchange:

Me: "Hello, my name is Michael Hill, I am a sociologist."
Archivist's Reply: "Welcome, I know you will be very interested in our social work collection."
Or, another version (relevant to my double doctorates in geography and sociology):

Me: "Hello, my name is Michael Hill, I am a geographer."
Archivist’s Reply: "Welcome, I want you to meet my assistant, Mr. Jones, he has a degree in geology and is quite interested in your project."

Needless, to say, sociology and social work can be very different activities, as can geography and geology, such that the practitioners of one discipline have little in common with the other. When such misidentifications become embedded in an archivist’s mind, it spells trouble for the researcher.

Another issue involves pigeon-holing researchers in disciplinary straightjackets. When I admit to being a "sociologist," it can seal my archival fate in unpredictable ways. For example, I once stated my interest in excavating the history of sociology at a large, land-grant university in the midwest. I discovered, much later, that the papers of a man who was central to the story were filed not under the "Department of Sociology" (of which the man had been Chair), but under the "Department of History" (wherein he held an earlier appointment). Once an historian, always an historian, apparently. The archivist in this tale could neither comprehend nor respond to my interest, as an announced "sociologist", in a figure who was, and would always be, in the archivist’s mind, an "historian."

Finally, it should be noted that "sociology," as a disciplinary project, is not an undifferentiated field of study. The same holds true for "geography" and many sciences. There are, for example, almost as many definitions of "sociology" as there are sociologists. The substantive impetus and methodological framework that each sociologist brings to archival repositories can differ sharply, and almost all diverge radically from those employed by historians, the traditional patrons of archival precints. The range and variety of archival materials that may have potential relevance to any given sociologist’s research project are essentially unlimited, and none should be preempted a priori by archivists during the orientation interview. In conclusion, allow me to suggest that an important task during each orientation interview is to attentively and patiently help each patron fully articulate his/her research goals and analytical strategies, regardless of the complexity of their attendant multiple majority/multiple minority statuses.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: SITE VISITS

Domestic

Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA
Hoover Institute, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
Special Collections, Stanford University, Stanford, CA
Local History Collection, Pikes Peak Regional Library, Colorado Springs, CO
Library and Archives, U.S. National Holocaust Museum, Washington, DC
Manuscript Division, U.S. Library of Congress, Washington, DC
Roscoe Pound Library, Association of Trial Lawyers, Washington, DC
Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC
U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC
Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA
University Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA
Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, IL
Chicago Jewish Archives, Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, Chicago, IL
College Archives, Rockford College, Rockford, IL
Newberry Library, Chicago, IL
Rosenthal Archives, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Center, Chicago, IL
Ryerson Library, Art Institute of Chicago, IL
Special Collections, Harold Washington Public Library, Chicago, IL
Special Collections, University of Chicago, IL
Special Collections, University of Illinois at Chicago, IL
University Archives, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
Special Collections, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA
Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library, Cambridge, MA
University Archives, Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Suitland, MD
Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
College Archives, Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI
House of David Collection, Benton Harbor Public Library, Benton Harbor, MI
University Archives, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI
College Archives, Doane College, Crete, NE
Family History Center, Church of Latter Day Saints, Lincoln, NE
Grace and Edith Abbott Public Library, Grand Island, NE
University Archives, Creighton University, Omaha, NE
University Archives, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NE
University Archives, University of Nebraska at Omaha, NE
Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE
Heritage Room, Bennett Martin Public Library, Lincoln, NE
Library, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Lincoln, NE
University Archives, Miami University, Oxford, OH
Labor History Archives, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
University Archives, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI

Foreign

National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Canada
University Archives, Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, Germany
Manuscripts Room, University College London, England, UK
Students' Reading Room, British Museum, London, England, UK
University Archives, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK