

Dance Around the Camera

Experiences with Recording Video Oral History from the Second Wave Women's Movement

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'Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets.'

Ann Oakley (1981: 31)

The IIAV collects, manages and makes available the cultural heritage of the women's movement. Its collections preserve books and other printed material, posters, photographs, and the archives of diverse women's organizations, including their correspondence and the minutes of meetings. The IIAV has recently initiated a project to supplement this principally written archival record by recording on video the personal histories of key figures in the Second Wave women's movement in the Netherlands. The project was conceived and is being directed by anthropologist and IIAV director Saskia Wieringa.

The IIAV aims to use oral history to record the personal memories that are either not well represented in, or even completely missing from, traditional records. The IIAV aims to create new source material for future researchers with this new collection of video interviews. As part of this process, the authors believe it is important to make the context in which this material has been produced transparent for future researchers. We must evaluate our role as creators of the material and assess how our approach affects what we have created.

This chapter attempts to provide the reader a glimpse behind the 'closed door' that Oakley describes in her article *Interviewing Women: a Contradiction in Terms* (1981). As of this writing, the authors have completed the initial phase of the proj-

Left: Oration of Gloria Wekker, the first black professor in Gender and Ethnicity in the Netherlands, Utrecht University, Faculty of Arts. Utrecht 2002. Photo: Gon Buurman



Women's strike, Amsterdam 1981. Photo: IIAV, Gonuurman

ect. Three pilot interviews have been recorded on video.¹ Recording oral history interviews for academic purposes is relatively uncharted territory, and we looked diligently for material that either dealt with theoretical considerations or provided accounts of practical experience. By describing the personal and theoretical background of the interviewees, we have tried to answer the question: what sort of knowledge is created when you record someone's life story on video?

At the end of the chapter, we will address three dilemmas that we have encountered so far. The first dilemma revolves around the question: how do you create useful source material for current and future research? The second dilemma con-

¹ The interviewees are Yvonne Saro, Gunilla Kleiverda and Nel Willekens.

cerns the transcription process: what is the best way to transcribe the interviews? The third dilemma concerns the role of the camera. How do the camera and interview techniques influence each other and, as a result, the interview? The use of a camera is often seen in the oral history literature as a problematic technique. The interviewee may feel less at ease, and the interviewer may have less flexibility (Leydesdorff 2004: 237). We will show in this chapter that the camera need not be an obstacle to developing an intimate rapport between the interviewer and interviewee.² In fact, we view the camera as an ally.

Inspiration for the project

The preservation of the heritage of women and the women's movement is important. In the Netherlands, the women's movement has played a significant role in shaping the nation's image as a progressive country: men and women enjoy equal rights, and our sexual morality and norms are tolerant. This self-image is also evident in our contemporary political discussions and the assimilation process that new immigrants experience. We think of ourselves as 'liberated', while 'they' are oppressed. Our belief in and commitment to equal rights between men and women is held up to new immigrants as an important aspect of Dutch identity.³

It is important to recognize the political struggles and the diversity of viewpoints that provide the foundation for this cherished aspect of Dutch identity. The IIAV intends to use these video oral history interviews to supplement the traditional written record. Video interviews do more than transmit factual information. This medium also visibly preserves emotion. A video recording shows humor, rage, sadness, loneliness and other emotions that are less evident – or even absent – in written source material.

2 Oakley (1981) emphasizes that an intimate relationship is important. The 'handbooks' that she was critical of emphasized that the researcher must remain neutral, objective and distant.

3 The relationship between women's liberation, sexual equality and Dutch identity that has recently been prominent in Dutch political debate is certainly not uncontested. In this regard, see Ghorashi 'Paradoxen van culturele erkenning. Managen van diversiteit in Nieuw Nederland' (13 October 2006) and Ghorashi, Lubbers and Tahir (27 and 28 January 2007) 'Vier de komst van migranten, haal alles uit hen wat ze in zich hebben en dat is veel', *NRC Handelsblad*.

The creation of a collection of interviews will be unusual and innovative in the Netherlands.⁴ In the United States, there is a long tradition of collecting interviews for archival collections. Oral historians in the US are often also archivists (Leydesdorff 2004). In the Netherlands, there have been only a few large-scale academic oral history projects until now that have been undertaken with the objective of creating a collection.⁵

Assembling this collection will take place in phases. For the first series of interviews, the IIAV is collaborating with the project 'Geschiedenis van de Vrouwenhulpverlening' (History of the Women's Health Movement) – a research project that is currently underway at Utrecht University under the direction of Professors Janneke van Mens-Verhulst and Berteke Waaldijk. The IIAV will record eight video interviews with women who played key roles in the 1970s and 1980s in the women's health movement. Utrecht University is providing guidance in the selection of the interviewees with the goal of ensuring as much diversity as possible among the eight women. Participants in the project will be diverse in a number of ways. The aim is to seek women who were involved with different issues, for example: abortion, domestic abuse, menopause, gynecology, and so forth. We also want to interview women who did different types of work: direct services, management, policy-related and government work, volunteer work, and academic research and study. Finally, the women themselves will be different in terms of their individual backgrounds: age, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and cities or town where they lived and worked.

Subjectivity and oral history

Oral history as a method is also regularly criticized. The critique maintains that oral history does not reflect reliable historical facts or objective truth and will produce knowledge that is unreliable. Critics invoke the fallibility of human memory.

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- 4 The most accepted form of oral history in the Netherlands is research in which the researcher interviews a group of people for his/her study. The original interviews are almost never made public for other researchers. Regarding the limitations of interviews for individual research projects, see: Ronald J. Grele (Oct. 1993) 'Why Call It *Oral history*? Some Ruminations from the Field', *Pennsylvania History*, 60: 506-9.
 - 5 Steijlen (2002) names two oral history projects. Because the notion of oral history for the purpose of creating a collection is unknown in the Netherlands, funders and historians regard these projects with skepticism (Steijlen 2002: 2; Sutherland in Steijlen 2002: 7).

Others charge that interviewees will have their own agendas.⁶ Given a postmodern view, we no longer believe it is relevant to try to ‘measure’ how closely an interview does or does not conform to *the* truth. Selma Leydesdorff, a pioneer and founder of oral history in the Netherlands, responds to this critique as follows: ‘Every source is of course subjective and represents the vision of one individual or a small number of people with regard to part of history. (...) The only thing that a historian must add is to demonstrate what is being represented. That is the normal practice of being critical of your sources’ (Leydesdorff 2004: 48).

The interviews provide insight into ‘collective memory’. Leydesdorff writes about this: ‘In every form of reporting, choices are made from all the possible things that could be said, and the choices are influenced by the prevailing stories that are available. And by what people – collectively – are supposed to think’ (Leydesdorff 2004: 19). There are countless subjects that can be discussed in an interview. The choice of what to discuss is always ‘biased’ and problematic. The ‘stories’ that are told always create the context within which personal experiences develop meaning; in which ‘(...) some experiences are seen and selected as “problems” or political problems, while others are not’ (Withuis 1990: 18). In addition to the personal experiences that they illuminate, interviews also provide insights that help to make other source material easier to understand: what was the atmosphere at a particular time, and what importance was attached to certain events and ideas? Fridus Steijlen (2002) has made the comparison to a puzzle and a jigsaw. Oral history does not provide us with missing puzzle pieces; the importance of oral history interviews is that they add color to a puzzle that was previously comprised only of gray tones.⁷

Practical and substantive issues in conducting the interviews

As documentary filmmakers, we are conscious of the fact that we shape reality. The interview technique, the way we use the camera, and the way we edit and structure a piece, determine the final form and content of a documentary. In addition to making documentaries, we both have Masters’ degrees from the University of Amsterdam in Women’s Studies. Oral history is an important subject within

6 Bourdieu, for example, found the interview to be a weak methodology because the interviewee provides socially acceptable answers (Bourdieu 1977: 37 in: Collins 1998: 1, 4).

7 Based on a telephone interview on June 6, 2007, between Grietje Keller and Fridus Steijlen, project director Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië (SMGI) (Foundation for the Oral History of Indonesia), KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies).

Women's Studies. Leydesdorff writes: '[W]omen's studies and oral history are fundamentally intertwined with each other. There are often no other sources than oral history available for women's history' (2004:27). 'Female voices' offer feminists a source of identification. Women's position in society offers an alternative perspective on the society and history (Leydesdorff 2004: 28; Leydesdorff, Passerini & Thompson 1996: 2). Leydesdorff and other feminists went in search of women's stories. Following Leydesdorff's example, we – a younger generation – are going in search of the stories of Leydesdorff's contemporaries and political allies.⁸ We will sketch the portraits of a generation of women who shaped the women's movement.

Influenced by postmodern feminist theories, we do not see life stories as a fixed set of experiences that are just waiting to be recorded. The knowledge that we record during the video interviews is being expressed in a specific social and historical context. The anthropologist Janet Hoskins describes interviews as 'a complex dialogue, a co-creation of a narrative that is in part structured by the listener's questions and expectations' (1998: 1). Donna Haraway (1988) suggests that all knowledge is produced within certain power structures and argues that researchers must take responsibility for the influence that they exercise over the knowledge and information that they produce. She rejects relativism wherein the opinions of the researcher are invisible. She similarly critiques universal objectivism, wherein the researcher assumes the omnipresent position of an all-knowing god without ever making her/himself visible (Haraway 1988: 575-599). Researchers are obligated to reveal themselves as a part of the knowledge that they have played a role in producing. During the production of the video interviews, we pro-

8 Leydesdorff herself was active in the women's groups *Dolle Mina* (Mad Mina) and *Wij Vrouwen Eisen* (We Women Demand). While this oral history project is about women's voices, we do not mean to suggest there has been no previous attention to them. However, it needs to be seen in a changed feminist climate. Today, the results of the work that feminists have done in society are often seen as clear evidence of progress and are not attributed to the women's movement. For example, someone named Alastair from London wrote the following in response to the BBC documentary *Angry Wimmim* (2006): 'We made things happen? Things have happened – mostly for the better, and things could get better. But it has been more to do with the progress in the mainstream and market forces rather than the efforts of self-obsessed, deluded, white, English, middle class wimmin living out their private fantasies' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/yoursay/lefties.shtml>). The achievements of the women's movement are also now being invoked in political discussions about national identity in the Netherlands with which many feminists do not identify (Ghorashi 2006). It also should be acknowledged that feminism's public image has experienced a turnaround. The activism of the Second Feminist Wave was initially enthusiastically received, but attitudes have shifted and feminism still carries a fairly negative image (Van Zoonen 1991; Van der Loo 2005).

vide insights into the process by which the interviews have come to be. We do this both on a practical level (what is the process during a day of recording?) as well as on a theoretical level (what are the vision and motives that inspire our work?).

You could describe an interview as a dance between the interviewers and the interviewees, both in front of and behind the camera. The dance begins with the first telephone conversation in which we approach the prospective interviewee with an invitation to participate in a video interview. We explain that we would like to interview her because of her participation in the women's movement in general and the women's health movement in particular. All three interviewees in the pilot interviews reacted very positively to the fact that the project had been initiated by the IIAV and they felt that this was an important thing to do. The video recordings will be preserved for future generations. After the initial telephone contact, one of us had a preliminary conversation with the interviewee. This introductory conversation is a technique that we have adopted from our work as documentary filmmakers. During this preliminary talk, the interviewee tells her life story over a period of an hour or two. With this first conversation we try to stimulate the process of remembering long before the video recording is actually made. Experience has taught us that this is a good way to strengthen the interview's 'performance' quality. The camera will capture the release of emotion and energy as the past is retrieved, thereby creating new layers of meaning that are lost when the story is written on paper.

When we have conducted an introductory conversation, we want to avoid having the interviewee tell the same story twice to the same person. Therefore, the camerawoman conducts the initial interview, while the interviewer guides the discussion during the actual video recording session. This arrangement also ensures that the interviewee will not refer to stories she has already told, which the viewer would not know.

During these pilot interviews, we explored different possible approaches that we could take as interviewers. To what degree should the interviewee be informed about our agenda? Daphne Patai discusses this dilemma in *Women's Words* (1991) when she deals with the critical questions that a feminist oral historian can pose. She critiques Oakley for suggesting a dichotomous model – either the interviewer maintains a great distance between herself and the interviewee, or she establishes a close rapport on the basis of a feeling of common cause. 'Instead, I believe we must question the entire system that seems to allow for no other approach than manipulative distance, on the one hand, and spurious identification on the other' (Patai 1991: 145). We chose to take the position of sympathetic outsiders.

In terms of ethnicity and class background, we are members of the same group as most of the women in the Second Wave women's movement. We are white and belong to the well-educated middle class. We are describing and conducting research about a social movement that we are sympathetic to, but in which we did not take part. We are part of a generation of women who are younger than the women of the Second Wave. One consequence of this is that the interviewees tell us about events and ideas that they would omit from conversations with their contemporaries – between members of the same generation, these things would be self-evident.

During the first conversation, the interviewer explains that one of the aims of the video interview is to create historical source material. We emphasize that we attach a great deal of importance to her life story and what she herself considers to be the important aspects of her experiences in the women's health movement and women's movement. An audio recording of this preliminary conversation is made on minidisk and is listened to by the eventual interviewer.⁹ Afterwards we (both interviewers) discuss and evaluate this conversation: Which issues remained unspoken or were not addressed, and were there issues that were difficult to discuss during the interview? Together we consider what issues should be emphasized during the video interview.

As a form of introduction, the interviewer calls the interviewee to discuss the initial conversation. We emphasize that we are not only interested in the interviewee's experiences in the women's movement, but also in the relationship between personal life, public activism, and career or work. We also discuss the possibility that photographs or other visual material can be shown during the video interview. These can often be helpful in recalling memories or in explaining or clarifying memories.

On the day of the video interview itself, we need about an hour to set up the camera, tripod, microphones and sound mixer, and possibly lights. During the first part of the interview, until lunchtime, we do not ask many questions. This part of the interview lasts an hour and a half to two hours. The interviewee reflects on her own life and decides what she thinks is important to include. By telling her own story, she indicates what the most important issues and information are for her. Many of the issues that we have already referred to come up spontaneously for the interviewee. After the first part of the interview, which is allowed to pro-

9 The preliminary conversation is recorded with a Sony ECM-MS 957 microphone (on Minidisk). The microphone is held reasonably close to the mouth of the interviewee (about 30 centimeters), in order to achieve good sound quality.

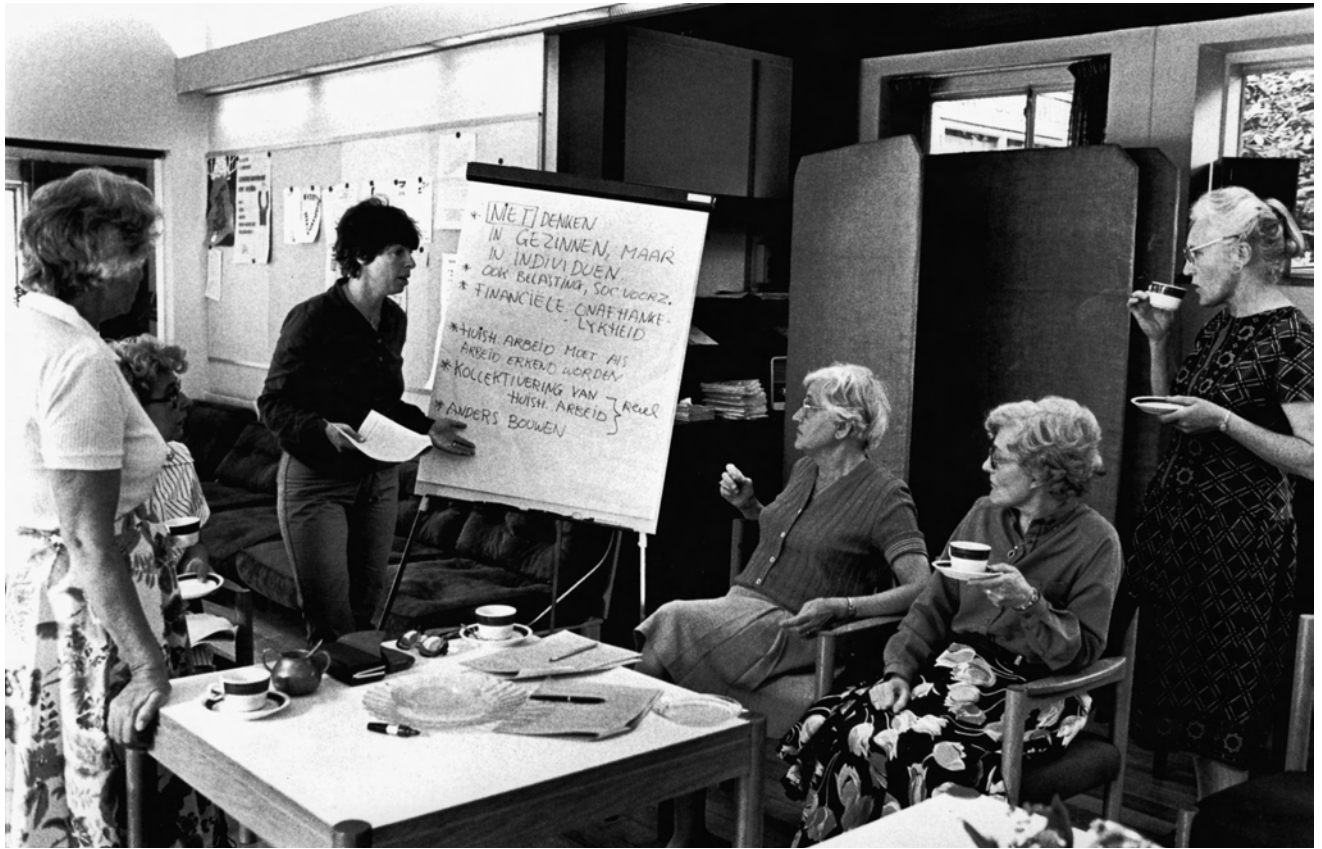
ceed in a stream of consciousness fashion, the interview is resumed after lunch for another one to two hours.

During the second part of the interview, questions are asked to fill in any gaps in the story. This requires a rather broad approach. The interviewee is asked to address and clarify the following issues: her relationship with her mother and father and the social class that she believes her parents belonged to, the specific place (province/state and city or town) and the country where she was born, the cultural context in which she grew up, the values that she learned at home, and her sense of the *Zeitgeist* before the Second Feminist Wave.

Next, we ask about how she encountered feminism: the process of becoming conscious and the ways that that awareness affected and shaped her life. Then we discuss in greater detail the important events and developments in the movement, from the point of view of the interviewee. We also discuss issues such as sexuality, ethnicity, the search for and choice of a partner, the decision to have children or remain childless, illnesses and setbacks in life, and the consequences of all of these aspects of her life for her view of feminism. How are education and career related to feminism and what changes has she experienced in that regard? During the interview, there is an opportunity to show any photographs, film, or literature that the interviewee has chosen.

The IIAV's oral history interviews are being recorded on video, and this suggests a comparison with television interviews. Television interviews, however, are of a completely different nature than the oral history interview. Television interviewers use a journalistic approach and often pose confrontational questions. The interviews are generally fairly brief and have to be brought quickly to a conclusion (Leydesdorff 2004: 92). Initially, it feels unusual to the oral history interviewees that we ask so few questions (see also Plummer 2001: 145). Oral history interview techniques are very different from the methods used in a journalistic interview. We are also interested in the periods before and after the interviewee's involvement in the women's movement – these experiences provide important contextual information that will allow the interviews to be interpreted and analyzed.

After the interview, the interviewee signs a release form in which she gives her consent for the interview to be made public for educational purposes. The interviews are literally transcribed, and the transcript is given to the interviewee for correction. The interviewees also receive a copy of the interview on DVD.



Nel Willekens teaches a group of older socialist women at the women's socio-cultural education center De Born, Bennekom 1980. Photo: IIAV, Catrien Ariëns

Dilemmas

The creation of source material

An important question in the recording of oral history interviews is how to create source material that will be useful for current and future research? We discuss this question with the interviewees and ask them to reflect on which stories they want to leave behind for future generations. In this sense, we agree with Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack: 'In order to learn to listen, we need to attend more to the narrator than to our own agendas' (Anderson & Jack 1991: 12). This idea has prompted us to develop the interview technique whereby we ask very few ques-

tions during the first half of the interview and allow the interviewee to follow her own train of thought.

We also use the ‘life story approach’. That means that we are interested in the individual’s entire life story and not only the period during which the interviewee was active in the women’s movement. This life story approach helped us to understand the life of Yvonne Saro better. She told us that during the period of her life when she was becoming politically and socially conscious, the first thing that caught her attention was her position as a ‘colonized’ person in Suriname. We asked her about her family and the school that she attended. She told us about the critical secondary school teachers who made the Eurocentrism of her school-books so visible. She told us about her father who had worked his way up from being a laborer to become an independent entrepreneur and about her activities as part of the Suriname Work Group during her university days in Groningen. Saro says that it was motherhood that stimulated her to get involved with the (white) women’s movement. If we had only asked her about her activities in the women’s health movement, we would have gotten very little insight into the roles that class, ethnicity and gender have played in her life.

Our conclusion after this pilot project is that it is also important to preserve the audio recording of the preliminary conversation for researchers. This conversation clarifies the background to the formal video interview and shows how the video interview came to be. Saving both the initial conversation and the video interview will allow researchers to see how the two interviews differ. What the interviewee thinks is important to say for the camera, and what she does not say during the video interview, provide insight into what the interviewee thinks is important. This issue is discussed in an article from Helen Lomax and Neil Casey (1998). They used a video camera in their research with midwives. During the research, there were moments when the researchers were not allowed to turn the camera on, because the ‘real’ medical appointment had not yet started. The information that is shared, when it is shared, and the medium that is used – all of these factors reveal something about the meaning and significance that the interviewee attaches to the information.

The influence of the camera

The oral history literature often portrays the camera as a complicated technique that is being added to an already complicated social interview process. The interviewees may be less at ease, and the interviewer will have less flexibility (Leydesdorff 2004: 237). Our objection to this view of the camera is that the interview between two people – without the intervention of the camera – is seen as producing better knowledge. One could draw this conclusion, of course, depending on

the type of research for which the method is being used. Much feminist research has used the life story approach to bring to light buried or repressed experiences and to create a space for marginalized voices (Hesse-Biber 2007: 118). In that case, the camera could indeed be an obstacle to achieving the goal. The IIAV, however, is not interviewing marginalized women, but key figures from the women's movement who have had a public role and political lives.

Instead of viewing the camera as an obstacle to an intimate relationship, we argue for a vision in which the camera does not impose limitations, but rather functions as an ally. The technical quality of the recording equipment can give the interview a higher status. Expensive technical equipment communicates a message: we think the movement that you were part of is important. It means a lot to us to record your life story as well as possible. This helps to focus the interviewee. They prepare themselves well for the interview and think carefully beforehand about what they want to leave behind for posterity. The interviews that we recorded were lengthy, approximately three and a half hours. The interviewees became eager to make the most of this opportunity to record their memories and experiences now that the opportunity presented itself.

Transcribing the interviews

Making the interviews accessible requires that they be transcribed. We had the first three interviews completely transcribed, and then we let a number of people read them critically.¹⁰ Given the length of the interviews, our readers indicated that, given time constraints, they would prefer to read the transcripts than to view the video interviews. This demonstrates a disadvantage of literal transcription: a transcript remains a translation from the spoken word to a written text. But because a word for word transcription reflects the content of the interview so exhaustively, the proofreaders didn't feel the need to view the original video interview.

We have already noted that filming an interview brings into view the emotions and significant memories in the interviewee's 'performance'. A word for word transcription of the interview gives the illusion of a literal reproduction of the interview. The disadvantage is that a transcript increases the chance that the researcher will be satisfied with this transcribed 'translation' and will not view the richer visual material. To avoid this, one could advocate the creation of an extensive summary of the interview, using the interviewee's actual words, in place of a

¹⁰ Readers were: Prof. Dr. Van Mens, Prof. Dr. Waaldijk, Prof. Dr. Wieringa, and doctoral student Keller-Van Epenhuysen.

literal transcription.¹¹ This would make it clear what material is discussed in the interview, but in order to use the information for academic or scientific purposes, the researcher would be forced to consult the original video source material. The drawback to this approach is that it makes the interview less accessible.

We have chosen to transcribe the interviews literally in order to make them as accessible as possible. We also include a caveat with the transcript that a transcription is only an interpretation of the original 'text' and that citations are only permitted when the researcher has viewed the video material.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have provided an account of what happens behind the closed doors of the interview. As IIAV researchers with a background in women's studies and documentary filmmaking, we have recorded three oral history pilot interviews with Second Wave feminists. Our vision has been inspired by postmodern feminist theories; we assume that a life story is not a fixed event or experience, but rather that the story is created during an interaction between the interviewee, the interviewer, and the camera. The interviewer's questions and the expectations of all the participants about how the interview will be viewed and used by future researchers also contribute to determining the outcome of the interview. We saw the camera as an ally that heightened the status of the interviews and, as a result, helped the interviewees to concentrate during the interviews and made them conscious of the fact that they were speaking to future generations.

We do not believe that the true and ultimate life story lies buried in each person. Neither do we believe that the best interview is the interview that comes closest to unearthing this 'real' story. The myth of the 'real' life story is based on a structuralist point of view. In this structuralist vision of the interview, language is seen as a tool that is used to describe reality. This model reduces the interview to a process by which information is transferred from 'one mind to another' (Collins 1998: 1, 6). We believe that an interview is more than a functional method for the exchange of knowledge. It is an interaction between interviewee, interviewer, any others who are present, the research questions, the institution that is sponsoring the research, the equipment being used, and the location. A different set of conditions and ingredients would produce a different outcome.

11 See the interview database of the Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië at www.kitlv.nl.

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