

Oral History

Who uses oral history?

- Before 1960s, used for collecting folklore and folksong.
- 1960s 'History from below' movement. Left-wing historians developed social history – histories of ordinary people.
- Taken up by historians of women, sexuality, race – who were also trying to give groups traditionally 'hidden from history' a place in history.

Methodology

The Interview

- What is the status of personal testimony?
- What is the significance of the historian's presence?
- the impact of intersubjectivity in shaping the narrative.
- Ethical questions – the emotional welfare of the interviewee; confidentiality.
- After the interview – transcripts, storage, permission.

Oral Testimony as a Source

Questions for the historian:

1. Is it true?

- a) Accuracy issues – triangulation (testing for historical accuracy by comparing the personal account with other sources).
- b) Physiological issues – memory and aging; remembering routines; the public and the private.
- c) Psychological issues – repression and trauma.
- d) Cultural responses - Alessandro Portelli's account of the 'Death of Luigi Trastulli'

2. How can oral history be used?

- As information – on previously unrecorded subjects.
- As illustration – enlivening an account of a historical event.
- As testimony – an eye-witness account to a major event.

3. Oral history as narrative

- a) The construction of an oral autobiography is quasi-literary. It uses a variety of narrative conventions:
 - life story narratives
 - narratives of liberation, redemption, coming out

ORAL HISTORY

In the past fifty years or so, oral history can be understood as the practice of interviewing eyewitnesses to past events. The practice most often (though not invariably) entails interviews with representatives of groups who might otherwise have escaped the scrutiny of historians. These have tended to be members of the non-literate labouring classes, or indigenous or minority cultural groups. Of course, such interviews have then to be placed (as with all the evidence related to the past) within what the historian believes to be an appropriate narrative framework. An additional range of inter-disciplinary skills, which the historian has had to borrow (from sociology, psychology, ethnography, social anthropology and often linguistics), usually supports this activity. But oral history also – so it is claimed – places a new emphasis on the mediatory role of the historian. It is, for example, impossible to ignore the heavily constructed character of oral histories, specifically the ideological functioning of the historian who wishes to recuperate certain voices rather than others. Using history as a way to empower certain groups is – surprisingly perhaps – still a controversial aim. Although this is not really that unusual as all historians select their range of evidence, in oral histories silence can often mean forgetting and it is the historian who regularly has to act as ‘stage prompt’. Moreover, the ethnographic practices of the historian can make ‘listen, record and narrate’ a hugely complex and necessarily fictive history-making process (see NARRATIVE).

For such reasons, as a practice for engaging with the past, oral history is still often regarded with suspicion and scepticism, especially by those who are distrustful of the ‘new social history’ (which is modernist historian’s code for postmodern inflected social history) (see DECONSTRUCTIONIST HISTORY). As the reconstructionist historian Arthur Marwick has said, while oral testimony can give us access to information about

the recent past we would otherwise not have, ‘oral accounts are particularly subject to the fallibility of the human memory’ and are, he maintains, severely limited in their utility to historians. Moreover, he regards the argument that oral testimony, memoirs and autobiographies are special and need expert treatment as ‘specious nonsense’ (Marwick 2001: 136). In other words, oral testimony is at once a highly problematic source and certainly does not require an arcane set of skills (see SOURCES). Oral history is often dubious because it all too easily relies on the stories people tell about themselves and pays too little (if any) attention to the many different kinds of primary source, which are (claimed to be) the real basis of ‘proper history’. The riposte to this – the document-driven history of reconstructionists – from oral historians has long come from Jan Vansina, who maintains that where there is no written documentation oral traditions must bear the brunt of the reconstruction of the past. But far more importantly, it is dangerous to undervalue oral testimony because it can correct or support the perspectives historians can obtain from sources of other kinds.

But many historians still remain unconvinced. Essentially, ‘proper history’ must be based on documentary evidence because its artefacts can be compared, contrasted and verified with each other (just as ‘history films’ have to use documentary footage shot of the events to which reference is being made) (see FILM AND HISTORY). Documents also do not get confused over when things happened – the things to which they refer happened chronologically. And, of course, oral testimony cannot account for change over time. Oral testimony is essentially just a matter of ‘this happened, then that happened’, and is delivered infused with inexplicable and unstable emotion. Any challenge to document-driven and ‘artefactual’ inferential history is to be avoided because it loosens up the strict regime of professional modernist history. Once this happens we (will surely?) end up with all kinds of serious problems.

These include the invention of traditions, epistemic relativism, fictive stories, overt authorship, the figuration of the past, the collapse of objectivity, uncertainty over what is truth and untruth and, eventually, mystification over what is 'right' and 'what is wrong'.

This opens up the key issue with oral testimony/history. Do we think that people retell pre-existing stories or are they so unreliable that they simply 'invent' them about their own past? Such invention (if we assume it is invention) can result from false memories, wishful thinking and ideological conviction. We might also encounter the unconscious repetition of a cultural narrative, a desire to obfuscate, self-indulgence and/or simple confusion. So what can historians do when faced with oral testimony? Do they still think they are able to 'discover the actual stories that exist in the past' by supplementing oral testimony with other 'documentary sources' (see EMPLOTMENT; REPRESENTATION; MIMESIS)? However, and this is a major consideration, whatever sources are used, the historian still has to substitute their narrative emplotment for the past regardless of whether they like to call it a 'reconstruction' or a 'retelling'. At this point oral history, given its particularly disputed nature, demands that the historian consider the implications of the relationship between form and content in generating their history. The empirical fragility of oral testimony, including issues of interviewing technique and choice of questions (the face-to-face relationship between source and historian), forces historians to examine the content, purpose and design (including their analytical strategies of explanation) of their history text. The form of oral history is clearly different from that of other forms and genres.

But a very important related point about oral testimony is what seemingly makes it different from other kinds of source. It is that interviews – the content – appear 'already formed' as narratives. Though they are usually generated as a series of responses to individual questions, oral testimonies are typically cast

within a narrative framework that has already been created by the witness as well as – in part – by the historian's choices of question. The witness's narrative is constructed like any other, and is subject to the same formal influences (voice, distance, perspective, timing and focalisation). In oral history the 'reference' comes already as an event under a description, as an interpretation – authored and subjective. It comes to us as a history rather than a document out of which a history is (supposedly) constructed. Of course, oral testimony is actually no different from other documentary forms inasmuch as all sources are narrativised to some greater or lesser extent (as when they are archived, for example, or grouped together by the historian). It is merely that oral testimony so obviously mixes up the historical, narrative and cultural contexts (past and present) in their creation. Because of this, oral sources only appear to possess a different sort of (dubious) quality from other kinds of source. But this is wrong. That argument privileges those other 'documentary' sources as if they were 'proper' and 'factual' (see FACTS) and oral testimony is inferior and suspicious. What is confused (and forgotten) is that sources of all kinds have an ontological dimension that makes them of a kind. All sources are simply sites for meaning-creation. Surely, it is hard to claim objectivity for certain sources over others? The mere existence of a source does not endow it with 'objectivity' or 'truth', whether it is documentary or oral. All history has a purpose, it is constructed for someone and, arguably, it is in the nature of oral history to forcefully remind us of that central feature of the historical undertaking.

Further reading

Chamberlain, M. and Thompson, P., 1998; Dunaway, D.K. and Blum, W.K., 1996; Genette, G., 1990 [1983]; Grele, R.J., 1999, 1991; Marwick, A., 2001; Perks, R. and Thomson, A., 1998; Prins, G., 1991; Samuel, R., 1994; Thompson, P., 1978; Vansina, J., 1985.

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