

APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF HISTORICAL CRITIQUE: AUTHENTIC ORAL HISTORY?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Memory is still recognized as the 'raw material of history' and 'the living source from which historians can draw'. Oral historians are concerned with memory as a potential historical source of information. This is done to provide an explication of the reliability of the recollection of events and circumstances compared to the written history, with both presenting the past.¹ Before the emergence of manuscript literacy, knowledge of the past was largely conveyed orally where the world trusted the authority of the spoken word. Modern print culture has led to a search for the certain and the true, which must include acts of recollection and of repetition.²

Therefore, the past that exists in people's living memory needs to be remembered, especially if it can serve a present need. It is consequently the privilege, as well as the definitive task of the historian to implement historical interpretation in unlocking and reconstructing memories hidden in the recesses of a distant past in which images and ideas are directly connected, resulting in the past coming alive once more. Considering the variables influencing and shaping memory, using oral history methods may pose challenges to the researcher, especially in searching for authenticity. Against this background the paper will focus on general factors and criteria that can be taken into account, as well as implemented for examining oral evidence for reliability and objectivity in order to pursue the aspiration of truthfulness.

II. CHALLENGES CONFRONTING ORAL HISTORY

All memory, short- as well as long-term, is stored through a process of selection and interpretation. Immediately after an event, sifting and shaping occurs to a large degree and continues in the long term in a more slow and subtle way. Ordering, discarding, combining and selecting is a continual process, resulting in memory bringing together the objective and subjective, facts, opinions and interpretations. Therefore,

the researcher can never assume that the information produced from memory to be unadulterated fact.³ Memory is known to be fallible due to such factors as passive decay, interference between traces such that similar memories cannot be distinguished, retrieval forgetting, systematic distortions of memory traces and displacement of existing memories by incoming material.

A key aspect of oral history is the retrieving of memories of the people being interviewed and who are given a chance to convey their story. The past is continually reinvented in our living memories, making them highly unreliable as a guide to what actually transpired and their imagery should be interpreted for hidden agendas. Notwithstanding, given oral history's special benefits and attributes, memory is in and of itself simply subjective.⁴ This is a particular problem area of oral history concerning the retrieval of memories connected with the unreliability of the interviewee's memory with regard to hard and specific facts.

Concerning the problematic nature of oral history with memory as a potential source of evidence, there are numerous factors that may negatively affect and dilute its reliability. However, contrary to what many historians believe, these factors are not insuperable and they may be overcome by utilizing reliable techniques developed by historians over the years, who are involved with oral history.

III. PURSUING TRUTHFULNESS AND FACTUAL CREDIBILITY IN ORAL EVIDENCE

When using oral history with memory as the core, it is crucial to be aware of the unique nature of memory as a source of evidence. Memory should not be treated as a source in the same way as written documents. Both types of sources require different and specific interpretative instruments, as both have common, as well as autonomous characteristics.⁵ Oral historians have highlighted the unique advantages of oral history against the written document, where the latter is

¹ P. Burke, "History as social memory" in T. Butler (ed.), *Memory. History, culture and the mind* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 99-100.

² P.H. Hutton, *History as an art of memory* (London, 1993), pp. xxii, 48.

³ H. Slim et al., (eds), *Listening for a change. Oral testimony and community development* (London, 1995), pp. 140-141.

⁴ Hutton, p. 7; J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social memory* (Oxford, 1992), p. 7.

⁵ A. Portelli, "What makes oral history different" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The oral history reader* (New York, 1998), p. 64.

definitely not 'problem-free'⁶ as a source. Written documents may be as deceptive as memory where "even the most genuine of documents should be regarded as guilty of deceit until proven innocent".⁷

On the other hand, the true distinctiveness of oral history evidence lies in the fact that it presents itself in an oral form. The recording may be a more reliable and accurate account of an interview than a purely written record, with the interview bringing the information much closer to the human condition. The speaker can be challenged immediately and even more importantly, all the precise words used are there, as they were spoken.⁸

Consequently, one may conclude, taking into account the limitations and imperfections of the historian and the objects of investigation, that complete neutrality and total objectivity in history are not possible. The historian should research his/her topic as thoroughly as possible and apply the principles of historical criticism to all sources to pursue truth and objectivity, as far as possible.⁹

As is the case with all historical sources, oral evidence should also be subjected to consistency in the testimony (reliability) and accuracy (validity) in relevant factual information.¹⁰

Thus, it is obvious that any oral historian needs to be aware of the basic processes of human memory and how these processes will determine the information that will be recalled by an interviewee. Human memory will never provide the complete record and it therefore depends on other sources for reconstructing the past.¹¹

It is worthwhile remembering that documents by themselves may be as misleading as human memory.

The characteristics of selectivity and interpretation forms part of all messages, as every person, either with writing or speaking, chooses information to convey, orders it and colours it. Just as recorded documents should be examined for relevance and accuracy, so will oral sources require judgement and discernment.¹²

When using any type of source, the researcher should take into account the issue of underlining bias in all sources, i.e. the tendency to favour a viewpoint in the retelling of an event. In every source, the information is shaped, filtered and selected through a distinctive view.¹³

Oral sources may indeed convey 'reliable' information, but to treat them as 'simply one more document' is to ignore the special value which they have as subjective, spoken testimony.¹⁴ Taking into consideration that the purpose of any piece of evidence is essential in making accurate evaluations, one should realize that no source is either reliable or unreliable for every purpose. In other words, it is necessary to understand precisely what it is the researcher is about to evaluate. Besides, all data of any sort should not be trusted completely, because all sources need to be evaluated and tested against other evidence.¹⁵

By checking the reliability of a source, the researcher can gain greater knowledge and understanding of a source and the role it plays in the recording of the event under study. Certain steps and methods may be implemented.

The first step in pursuing the reliability of a source will be through background research on the life history of the interviewee, as well as on the chosen subject. For oral history, this is absolutely essential before conducting an interview.¹⁶

The second step will be to cross-check the source with other sources and may be done on the corresponding subject and/or a similar period. Especially in cross-checking the researcher should be aware of any bias that may be present in the sources. If documented and oral evidence contradict each other, the researcher should dig even deeper to determine their accuracy.¹⁷

While cross-checking, the researcher can accordingly search for internal consistency in the

⁶ Written records may carry personal and/or social biases and may occur within a social context. It may also be viewed through the screen of contemporary experiences, making it partial and distorted and causing it to suffer from historical inaccuracy.

⁷ L. Gottschalk, *Understanding history. A primer of historical method* (2nd ed., New York, 1969), p. 144.

⁸ P. Thompson, *The voice of the past: Oral history* (3rd ed., Oxford, 2000), pp. 125-127.

⁹ J.P. Brits, "Doing history". *A practical guide to improving your study skills* (Cape Town, 1993), p. 10.

¹⁰ "Validity refers to the degree of conformity between the reports of the event and the event itself as reported by other primary source material, such as documents, diaries, letters or other oral reports. Reliability, on the other hand is the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the same event on a number of different occasions." A.M. Hoffman and H.S. Hoffman, "Reliability and validity in oral history: The case for memory" in J. Jeffrey and G. Edwall (eds), *Memory and History. Essays on recalling and interpreting experience* (Lanham, 1994), p. 109. See in detail this chapter where the wife-husband team, historian A.M. Hoffman and psychologist H.S. Hoffman, discuss their project on the reliability of memory, in which they compare documented fact with individual long-term memory.

¹¹ D.A. Ritchie, *Doing oral history. A practical guide* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2003), p. 119; B. Allen and L. Montell, *From memory to history. Using oral sources in local historical research* (Tennessee, 1982), pp. 15-22; A. Parkin, *Memory. A guide for professionals* (New York, 1999), p. 19; T. Butler, "Memory: A mixed blessing" in Butler (ed.), p. 14; T. Lummis, *Listening to history. The authenticity of oral evidence* (London, 1987), p. 147.

¹² Allen and Montell, p. 71; J. Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (London, 1985), p. 191; Lummis, p. 130.

¹³ J. Worthington and P. Denis, *Working draft. Training manual. Oral history project* (Durban, s.a.), pp. 19-21; D.A. Ritchie, "Foreword" in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds), p. viii. See also W. Moss, "Oral history: An appreciation" in D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum (eds), *Oral history. An interdisciplinary anthology* (2nd ed., London, 1996), pp. 117-118 where the author lists a number of questions that may be applied to an interview or group of interviews when evaluating the content.

¹⁴ Thompson, p. 118.

¹⁵ Worthington and Denis, p. 21; Ritchie, p. 26; S. Caunce, *Oral history and the local historian* (London, 1994), p. 103.

¹⁶ Ritchie, p. 32. See also Lummis, p. 22.

¹⁷ Allen and Montell, p. 85; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Ritchie, p. 119.

sources. If the pattern of evidence is consistent and drawn from more than one viewpoint, the historical account or interpretation becomes credible. The researcher thus has to evaluate carefully the oral accounts and determine if they are based on personal experience or second- or third-hand reports. The evidence therefore, also needs to be weighed against a wider context, where in some cases oral evidence will be the best and in others, will be supplementary or complementary to other sources.¹⁸

The interview itself is also crucial, as it is the response to a particular person and set of questions, as well as to the interviewee's attempt to make sense of past experiences. During the interview, the interviewer should be alert to biases, contradictions and inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers.¹⁹

Before even starting with the interview, the ultimate purpose of the questionnaire or interview guide is to structure the interview and to guide the interviewee carefully through the interview process. The phrasing of the questions and the structure of the questionnaire are of vital importance and may in due course determine the result of an interview.²⁰

The skills and motivation of the interviewer, as well as the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator may affect the quality of the evidence. The interviewer's special interests and the asking of adequate questions will determine the interview's direction and flow. To minimize bias on his/her part, the interviewer should establish a sense of rapport with the interviewee so that he/she does not feel intimidated by the interviewer.²¹

Another tactic for dealing with the above-mentioned problems is by probing (asking follow-up questions). To probe effectively, requires a certain level of skill that is developed only over time and should be done with sensitivity, so that the interviewee will not experience the interview situation as an interrogation.²²

A variety of steps and methods may be used by interviewers to help them evaluate the evidence. These methods include the interviewer steering a narrator

closer to the truth by asking follow-up questions and/or approaching the same topic/issue from several different lines of inquiry at different stages in the interview. The interviewer can examine the interviewee with close attention. By not being too obvious and using eye contact, the interviewer may assess the interviewee's responses. Here the interviewer is focused on the interviewee's non-verbal behaviour, such as gestures and voice quality. In order to read and understand these clues, the researcher should develop sensitivity to the social pressures which have bearing on them.²³

All details surrounding a specific event in the past may very seldom recalled by only one respondent. An oral historian therefore, should interview as many candidates as possible on the same subject, in order to get to the truth.²⁴

Thus, to have relative success with oral history interviews, the researcher should be aware of the peculiarities of memory and at the same time, be acutely conscious of its limitations, be imaginative in his/her methods of dealing with it and open to its multiple riches. With the intensive practice of oral history methodology, combined with a critical and self-reflective approach to this field of history where the oral historian really listens and observes, may eliminate and reduce the dangers of testimonial complexity, unintended suppression, unconscious manipulation and unintentional historical imposition. Oral historians can further 'add' to authentic oral history if they become even more willing to subject their work to serious collaborative evaluation.²⁵

IV. CONCLUSION

Oral narratives may uncover how memory generates historical understanding in an attempt to make sense of the personal experiences of events in history. There is a need to pierce the silences and reconstruct the stories in relation to a historical context, where individual and collective memory may be debated, revisited and re-interpreted. Oral history may accordingly be accepted alongside documentary evidence as part of the available material for research. To make the most of oral sources requires a deep and broad critique of the possibilities and limitations thereof.

Historians must examine in detail the inconsistencies inherent in alternative interpretations of past events. The past is not dead, but lives on in daily life and people, through their memories, are the embodiment of the facts and processes. Therefore, historians must, by recognizing the interchange and complementary relationship between history and memory, use the information gained from oral narratives to confront

¹⁸ Allen and Montell, pp. 77, 81; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Thompson, p. 288; Ritchie, p. 34.

¹⁹ Portelli, "What makes oral history ...", pp. 70-71; Thompson, pp. 272-273; Lummis, p. 158; L. Shopes, "Making sense of oral history", <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral.htm>>, s.a. See Moss, "Oral history: An appreciation" in Dunaway and Baum (eds), pp. 118-119 where the author sets out a number of questions that the historian should ask about the way in which any given interview or group of interviews was conducted.

²⁰ Parkin, p. 136; Ritchie, p. 93.

²¹ T. Sideris, "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for oral history in South Africa" in *Critical Arts* 4(2), 1986, p. 43; Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-28; Ritchie, p. 34; R.J. Grele, "Movement without aim. Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history" in Perks and Thomson (eds), pp. 43-45.

²² Ritchie, pp. 94-95.

²³ Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 127-128; C. Davis *et al.*, *Oral history. From tape to type* (Chicago, 1983), p. 6; Thompson, p. 169.

²⁴ Allen and Montell, p. 77; Lummis, p. 156.

²⁵ Jeffrey and Edwall (eds), p. xi; A. Skotness, "The people's archives and oral history in South Africa: a traveller's account" in *South African Archives Journal* 37, 1995, p. 69.

memory and its selection process using criteria of historical critique to be able to investigate and expand the histories.

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