

Memory and Testimony in Oral History

The Nature of Memory

Memory is not a recording device. It is an active process of reconstruction shaped by:

- Present circumstances and concerns
- Social frameworks and cultural narratives
- Emotional states and psychological needs
- The interview situation itself

Understanding memory's constructed nature is essential for working with oral testimony.

Reliability and Truth

The Positivist Critique

Early critics of oral history questioned its reliability:
- Memories fade and distort over time
- Witnesses contradict each other
- Personal bias shapes recollection
- Events may be invented or borrowed

Beyond Factual Accuracy

Contemporary oral historians argue that "truth" in testimony operates on multiple levels:

1. **Factual truth** - What literally happened
2. **Narrative truth** - How events are structured into meaningful stories
3. **Emotional truth** - What experiences felt like
4. **Historical truth** - What testimony reveals about its era

A factually inaccurate memory may still be historically significant for what it reveals about meaning-making.

Trauma and Memory

Traumatic experiences pose special challenges:

- Fragmentation of memory
- Intrusive recollections
- Difficulty with chronology
- Embodied memory (physical responses)
- Silence and the unspeakable

Working with trauma survivors requires:
- Ethical care for narrator well-being
- Understanding of trauma's effects on memory
- Patience with non-linear narratives
- Respect for silences and omissions

The Interview as Event

Oral history testimony is created in a specific context:

- Relationship between interviewer and narrator
- Location and setting
- Questions asked (and not asked)
- Recording technology used
- Intended audience and purpose

The interview is not a transparent window onto the past but a collaborative production.

Silences and Absences

What narrators don't say can be as significant as what they do say:

- **Chosen silences** - Topics deliberately avoided
- **Structural silences** - Things that "go without saying"
- **Traumatic silences** - Experiences too painful to articulate
- **Political silences** - Dangerous topics in certain contexts

Interpreters must attend to gaps and hesitations.

Intersubjectivity

The oral history encounter is intersubjective—meaning emerges between interviewer and narrator. This involves:

- Shared humanity and difference
- Power dynamics (age, gender, race, class, education)
- Mutual vulnerability
- Co-construction of narrative

Reflexive practice requires examining one's own position and assumptions.

Working with Testimony

Preparation

- Research historical context thoroughly
- Learn about narrator's background
- Prepare open-ended questions
- Consider ethical implications

During Interview

- Listen actively and attentively
- Follow unexpected directions
- Allow silence

- Attend to emotion and embodiment

After Interview

- Transcribe carefully (noting pauses, tone, gesture)
- Share with narrator for review
- Interpret with sensitivity to context
- Preserve for future researchers

Key Readings (Not Copyrighted Excerpts)

Topics to explore further: - Alessandro Portelli on oral history as a genre - Luisa Passerini on subjectivity and memory - Michael Frisch on “shared authority” - Valerie Yow on interview ethics - Paul Thompson on the voice of the past

Conclusion

Oral testimony offers unique access to subjective experience and vernacular memory. Working responsibly with testimony requires understanding memory as constructed, attending to the interview context, and interpreting with care for both accuracy and meaning.