



What is Oral History?

Oral history is the collection and study of historical information about individuals, families, important events, or everyday life using audiotapes, videotapes, or transcriptions of planned interviews.

These interviews are conducted with people who participated in or observed past events and whose memories and perceptions of these are to be preserved as an aural record for future generations. Oral history strives to obtain information from different perspectives, not just those found in documents, accounts or history books, important as those are to the development of a historical record. Oral history also refers to information gathered in this manner and to a written work (published or unpublished) based on such data, often preserved in archives and libraries.

Oral history has become an international movement in historical research. Oral historians in different countries have approached the collection, analysis and dissemination of oral history in different modes. However, it should also be noted that there are many ways of creating oral histories and carrying out the study of oral history even within individual contexts.

The discipline came into its own in the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States (and then elsewhere) when inexpensive tape recorders were available to document such rising social movements as civil rights, feminism, and anti-Vietnam War protests. By the end of the 20th century, oral history had become a respected discipline in many colleges and universities. At that time the Italian historian Alessandro Portelli and his associates began to study the role that memory itself, whether accurate or faulty, plays in the themes and structures of oral history. Their published work has since become standard material in the field, and many oral historians now include in their research the study of the subjective memory of the persons they interview.

Academic Oral History Studies

In 1948, Allan Nevins, a Columbia University historian, established the Columbia Oral History Research Office, with a mission of recording, transcribing, and preserving oral history interviews. The Regional Oral History Office was founded in 1954. In 1967, American oral historians founded the Oral History Association, and British oral historians founded the Oral History Society in 1969. There are now numerous national organizations and an International Oral History Association, which hold workshops and conferences and publish newsletters and journals devoted to oral history theory and practices.

Folklore Roots and Ordinary People

Contemporary oral history involves recording or transcribing eyewitness accounts of historical events. Some anthropologists started collecting recordings (at first especially of Aboriginal legends and folklore) on phonograph cylinders in the late 19th century. In the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project—part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—sent out interviewers to collect accounts from various groups, including surviving witnesses of the Civil War, slavery, and other major historical events. The Library of Congress also began recording traditional American music and folklore onto acetate discs. With the development of audio tape recordings after World War II, the task of oral historians became easier.



In 1946, David P. Boder, a professor of psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, traveled to Europe to record long interviews with "displaced persons"—most of them Holocaust survivors. Using the first device capable of capturing hours of audio—the wire recorder—Boder came back with the first recorded Holocaust testimonials and in all likelihood the first recorded oral histories of significant length.

Historians, folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, journalists, linguists, and many others employ some form of interviewing in their research. Although multi-disciplinary, oral historians have promoted common ethics and standards of practice, most importantly the attaining of the “informed consent” of those being interviewed. Usually this is achieved through a deed of gift, which also establishes copyright ownership that is critical for publication and archival preservation.

Oral historians generally prefer to ask open-ended questions and avoid leading questions that encourage people to say what they think the interviewer wants them to say. Some interviews are “life reviews,” conducted with people at the end of their careers. Other interviews focus on a specific period or a specific event in people's lives, such as in the case of war veterans or survivors of a hurricane.

Oral history is often considered akin to journalism. Both are committed to uncovering truths and compiling narratives about people, places, and events. Whatever the field or focus of a project, oral historians attempt to record the memories of many different people when researching a given event. Interviewing a single person provides a single perspective. Individuals may misremember events or distort their account for personal reasons. By interviewing widely, oral historians seek points of agreement among many different sources, and also record the complexity of the issues. The nature of memory—both individual and community—is as much a part of the practice of oral history as are the stories collected.