Interpreting and Using Oral History

Oral history is a valuable source for historians. Although the major beneficiaries of oral histories usually have been social historians, all historical methodological fields have the potential to learn from this rich primary source. Some historians rely on oral histories to form the core of their research. Others use these individual testimonies merely to illustrate a particular point. Yet however historians choose to use oral histories, it has the potential to greatly enrich their scholarship on a number of levels.

One of the primary benefits of oral history for scholars is its ability to bring to life the voices and experiences of individuals, many of whom might otherwise have been forgotten by history. Although famous men and women have contributed to the oral historical record, most oral histories come from people whose mark on history is not as grand, from the so-called “ordinary people:” a small-town butcher; a World War I private; a one-room schoolhouse teacher from Appalachia, etc. Some of these oral testimonies are quite short or else only focus on a single event. Others are much longer and are often accounts of an individual’s entire life. Yet whatever the length, when these individuals decided to allow their stories to be recorded for posterity, they left behind particular memories and insights that have the potential to fill in the considerable gaps left by broader histories of humanity.

Indeed, when historians first start writing about an event, they usually start with big questions and broad narratives, often at the expense of individual experiences. An excellent example of this is the history of the Holocaust in Europe between 1939 and 1945. When historians first began to devote attention to the topic in the early 1960s, they concerned themselves with the big questions: why did this happen? How did the Nazis go about coordinating and executing the horrific massacre of six million Jews? What policies did the Nazis enact, and what organizational apparatuses did they create in order to aid them in genocide? These questions are, of course, essential to understanding one of humanity’s greatest tragedies. However, the individual voices of the victims often received little attention.

In the last few decades, historians of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust began to turn their attentions to the individual voices of the victims of Nazism. Large archives dedicated solely to recording oral testimony from Holocaust survivors have enriched the field and changed the way that scholars view the event. Today, there are tens of thousands of oral testimonies from Holocaust survivors, and their impact on the field has been immense. In addition to bringing individual experiences to light, oral testimonies from Holocaust survivors illustrate exactly how the Holocaust unfolded in different ways throughout Europe. Earlier histories of the Holocaust often discussed the event as a European-wide phenomenon (which it certainly was), but they neglected to discuss how an array of cultural and social factors specific to each country under Nazi occupation influenced how and when the Nazis pursued their murderous policies. Oral histories of the event forced historians to focus increasingly on the local and regional policies of the Nazis and to realize that they often were generalizing about an event that had far greater nuances and contours than they previously had considered.

In fact, one of the primary benefits of oral history is that it can shed light on larger issues and themes that at first glance appear removed from or unrelated to larger
historical narratives. For example, think back to any stories your parents or grandparents shared with you about when they were growing up. If you know your basic historical facts, I bet you will be able to place their experiences within a larger historical context. For example, my father used to tell me the occasional story of some of his experiences growing up as a teenager in San Francisco back in the 1960s. Once I started really reading about American history during that period and about things like “Flower Power,” the “Human Be-In” of 1967, and the Vietnam War, my father’s stories complemented and enhanced everything that I was reading in the history books. Indeed, oral histories reconnect the individual to the major movements and events that have shaped human history. They act as a valuable bridge between the often impersonal and occasionally dull—but still quite important—narratives of the past and the personal and dynamic experiences of individuals.

This “bridge” has made history much more accessible to people. Many of the questions that historians grapple with might appear at first glance to have little personal relevance. Yet what historians are really doing is examining the past to answer incredibly personal and intricate questions about who we are as individuals and how we fit into society. Incorporating oral testimonies into historical writing allows historians to illustrate their theses and conclusions in a much more relatable way than they could ever achieve with impersonal theory or simply by relying on famous individuals from the past. Consider this point for a moment. As much as Julius Caesar or Eleanor Roosevelt might inspire you, can you relate to them as well as your small-town pharmacist, your elementary school teacher, or that inseparable group of friends who you always see sitting in the park every day after school? Everyday people make history, even if we do not realize it. It is the everyday person that most of us can relate to. Ultimately, the value of oral history is that it allows the reader to grapple with the magnitude of important, life-changing historical events but to do so through the eyes of real people. Oral history provides a level of accessibility to the past that often is missing from other forms of history, and this is one of the primary reasons why it is so popular among historians, students, and the general reading public.

Yet, if oral history has the potential to highlight individual experiences of past events and reassert our inherent agency as people, it is not without its pitfalls. A skilled historian approaches oral testimony with a critical eye.

As I already have discussed, one of the benefits of oral histories is their ability to bring to life individual experiences. Keep in mind that these experiences often happened years ago. In reality, what historians are listening to is the memory of those experiences, and as we all know, memories are not always accurate. Consider your own experiences for a moment. Have you ever had to wrack your memory when retelling something that happened to you? It can be difficult, particularly if the event you are recalling happened years ago. In some cases, you might not be able to remember all of the details. Instead, you might have to rely on approximations, such as “it happened ten or eleven years ago” or “I think I read that book sometime in middle school.” In other cases, you might not be able to remember much of an event at all, except that you know it happened to you. Here is an exercise for you. Try and list your tenth grade class schedule in order, including your teacher for each subject. It’s not as easy as you thought, right? When listening to oral testimonies then, historians need to
remain cognizant of the fact that people forget many of the small details of their daily life and instead rely on presenting a broad sketch of their experiences. Often, only the most profound memories stand out decades later. Therefore, historians need to be careful when relying on oral histories to provide historically reliable details. When possible, a good historian will try to compare the information gathered in oral testimonies against established historical fact. When the two do not correspond, it can be a frustrating affair. After all, nobody wants to hear that they do not remember their own life experiences.

The idea of not being able to remember every detail of one’s past is complicated further when many people experienced a particular event, a phenomenon known as collective memory. Again, consider the Holocaust for a moment. In his recent study Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp, the historian Christopher Browning examines the experiences of a group of Holocaust survivors, most of who grew up in the same few towns, experienced the same ghetto liquidation, and labored in the same small camp. Browning successfully managed to navigate the difficulties inherent in differentiating between collective memory and individual memory. Even he was unable in some cases to assert with absolute certainty what the real version was of certain events. As time goes by and people retell their experiences multiple times, outside memories have a way of creeping into their minds and subtly influencing how they remember. Perhaps the most famous instance of this during the Holocaust is the case of Dr. Josef Mengele, which Browning also discusses in his study. Mengele was an infamous Nazi doctor at the Auschwitz concentration camp, and he performed brutal and often fatal experiments on camp prisoners. He occasionally waited for the trains to arrive at the camp with new prisoners, and he would go around and select people for his experiments. Far more people remember having seen Mengele when they arrived at Auschwitz than would have been possible. Instead, the memory of Mengele’s brutality so influenced the memories of camp survivors that far more individuals think they saw him when they arrived at Auschwitz than was actually the case.

In addition to the challenges discussed above, historians relying on oral history also need to be aware of the reasons people decided to grant interviews. When a person sits down to recount their life, they will necessarily focus on some aspects more than others. If you tell a veteran of the Second World War that you want to hear about their experiences in the Pacific Theater, they will likely discuss the dangerous battles in which they fought and probably not discuss life in the barracks or being on latrine duty, even if those less thrilling stories might provide valuable insights into the daily life of a WWII soldier. In other words, they will try to preempt the interviewer’s questions by telling the interviewer what he thinks the interviewer will want to hear. In other cases, the person being interviewed will skip over painful parts of his or her life. This is a natural human desire for privacy and is completely understandable. Consider for a moment some of the worst and most embarrassing things that have happened to you in your own life. Would you be willing to record those experiences for posterity? Do you even want to recall those moments? Might they not be too painful? You see, even if a life experience has the potential to shed light on the past, not all people will want to share their memories with total strangers. Thus, in listening to oral testimonies, the historian must always ask in the back of their mind, “yes, but what are they not saying?”
The nature of the interview also influences oral history. Some interviews are free form. The interviewer simply turns on the videotape or the recorder and lets the interviewee speak. In these cases, the person speaking does not have to worry about being interrupted or cut off. However, they also might leave out a lot of information that you as the historian are curious about. In other cases, the interview might be much more structured. In these cases, the interviewer asks a set of questions. However, the interviewer might rush the person they are interviewing, cutting them off or interrupting which may lead to not getting certain information. In one particularly egregious case, I witnessed an interviewer contradicting the person they were interviewing about a verifiable fact, and the interviewer was wrong!

Clearly, oral history presents a number of problems to the historian. Does that mean that we should avoid oral history or only use oral history as illustrative filler to grab people’s attention? I say no. Oral history is one of the most exciting forms of history. It certainly has the potential to connect the day-to-day experiences of the average person to the momentous events that occurred in the past, and it allows us to see a little more of our self and our humanity in history. Yes, you must always approach oral history with a critical eye, but a critical eye need not be a skeptical eye. Just because someone does not remember every small detail of their life or just because collective memory and public discourse have the potential to invade our memories, does not mean that our experiences are not real. The feeling behind the memory is still authentic. Even if a memory has been influenced by outside factors, those influences can be just as historically informative as the memory itself. After all, the factors influencing how we remember are also products of historical forces. Once you recognize that oral history has its limits, you can begin to appreciate better its myriad possibilities.