

Handout 3: What is Oral History?

Session: *What is Oral History?*

“ Oral history is a field of study AND a method of gathering, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.¹ ”

What does this mean? Let's break it down:

1 Field of study

Oral History is a specific field of historical inquiry; like other fields, it has particular approaches and foundational literature on which it is built.

2 Method of gathering

Oral History is not only a theory: it is also a *practice*. It is unique as a field of study in that its practical aspect (i.e. its method) is both an example of “learning by doing” AND of interdisciplinarity. Historians are not the only people who do oral history; in fact, sociologists, anthropologists, folklorists, and all kinds of researchers do oral history. Anthropologists are closely associated with ethnography (field work based on participant observation of an ethnic group) which is also related to oral history. Oral History methodologically gathers, collects, and accumulates its sources and classifies them based on their interpretative value.

3 Method of preserving

In Oral History, the source is the recorded interview, either in audio or video format. Interviews are recorded specifically to preserve them and to create historical sources to be stored in archives that are publicly accessible for others to use for their own research in the future.

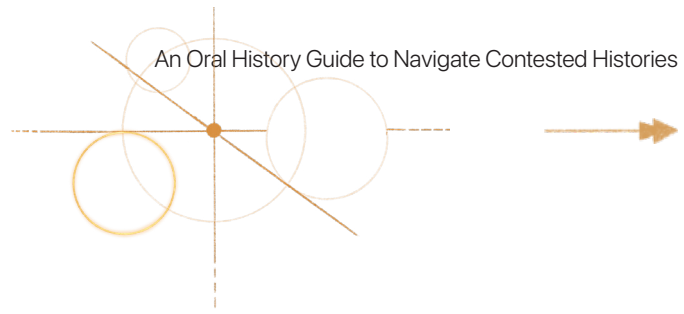
4 Method of interpreting

These recorded interviews, or oral sources, provide us with eye-witness testimonies that we interpret in light of what they tell us about the past. We compare them to other sources (oral, written, visual, etc.) to extract information about the past from them in order to get a closer understanding of what happened and why. We also interpret sources based on what they tell us about *how people remember*, what they remember, taking into consideration that what people remember is based on their own selectivity, their own *positionality* and their view of people, places, and events². By interpreting sources, we strive to make meaningful connections between the past and the present. One way to frame Oral History is to consider it as a *process of meaning-making*.

¹ [Oral History Association, Oral History: Defined](#)

² Positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. It also describes how your identity influences your understanding and outlook of the world and your potential biases. [“Positionality,” Dictionary.com](#), 23 August 2008





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5 Voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events

Oral History means engaging with those around us and recognizing that though we live in the present, history is all around us in the memories and experiences of ordinary people. When Malian historian and ethnologist Amadou Hampâté Bâ wrote, “when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground,” he reminds us that older people carry a lifetime of experiences that have shaped their perspective and their memory of the past. Oral historians are interested in recording voices and memories that recall a specific time or event, based on **eye-witness accounts and personal experiences** (not what other people told them). The interpretation of these accounts (and especially comparing different ones) is very much “alive” in peoples’ voices and word choice. This gives us insights and understandings of the past in a very direct and personal way. But by its very nature, Oral History research is limited to topics that are relatively recent (occurred less than 100 years ago) or, in other words, to the past as measured by the lifespan of a human being.

Oral History is a research-based process:

Oral History is an interactive, inquiry-based form of historical research in the sense that oral historians are constantly in the **process of working with sources**, i.e. together in conversation with narrators, they record these conversations as interviews, they conduct and collect (gather) new ones, and subject them to critical analysis and interpretation through comparison, contextualization, and evaluation. You may interview someone about their role as a leader of a particular militia in a conflict. They may tell you that they believed they were protecting their community from outside aggressors. By the time you interview them, many years will have passed since they’d been a militia leader. They may have changed their views on the role they once played, and they may regret decisions they’d made at the time. This is also a form of revisionism; whereby the benefit of hindsight shifts perspectives or views on understandings of what happened in the past, resulting in a revised history. At the end of the day, through revisions, additions, and interpretations, history is always a work in progress. And Oral History, as defined above, is the creation and gathering of sources (as in, interview recordings) and then interpreting these sources by cross-checking them with others. Indeed, all history, especially Oral History, is a research-based process.

