

Handout 5: Why is Oral History Important?

Session: Significance of Oral History

1 Fills the gaps

Oral history fills in the gaps in the historical record. Oral history provides a fuller, more accurate picture of the past by adding to the information provided by public records, data, photographs, maps, letters, diaries, and other historical materials. Eye-witnesses to events contribute various viewpoints and perspectives that fill in the gaps in documented history, sometimes correcting or even contradicting the written record. Interviewers are able to ask questions left out of other records and to interview people whose stories have been untold or forgotten. At times, an interview may serve as the only source of information available about a certain place, event, or person.

2 Reflects the impact of the forces of history

Oral history also helps us understand how individuals and communities experience the forces of history. Traditional history courses in high schools and colleges usually touch only on the major events of the past, covering the fundamentals of who, what, where, why, when, and so what. Oral history brings depth to our understanding of the past by introducing us to individual experiences. Thoughtful, personal answers to questions like “What did you do during the war?” reveal the ways decisions made by political leaders and governments changed the lives of ordinary people and their families and communities.

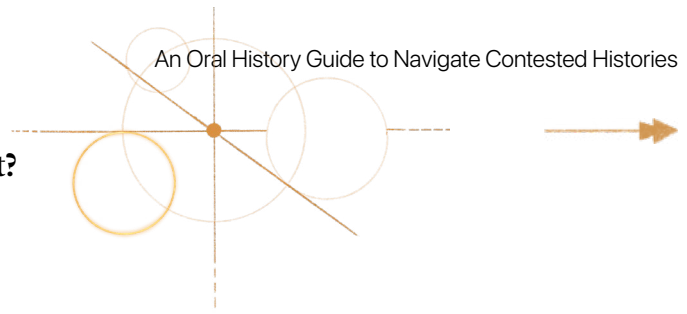
3 Showcases change versus continuity

Oral history also teaches us what has changed and what has stayed the same over time. Change is very obvious, but oral history allows people to express the personal consequences of change affecting everyday life – the radio to the TV, the train to the car, the telephone exchange to the cell phone – to the more complex changes, such as having limited access to local products vs. a globalized marketplace, village living to suburban sprawl, etc. Many interviews may also see narrators reflecting on the ways their lives have remained the same despite the change.

4 Preserves a sound portrait

History enables people to share their stories in their own words, with their own voices, based on their own understanding of what happened and why. As a voice recording, oral history also preserves the actual sound of the narrator’s voice. The recording captures its accent, its intonation, its pitch, its tone, its emotion, its personality, and its individuality. In the same way that a painting or a photograph is a portrait that preserves a visual likeness of a person, an oral history recording is a portrait that preserves how a person sounds. In this sense Oral History preserves a sound portrait of who we are in the present, in the moment of the recording, and what we remember about the past.





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5 Tells history from the bottom up

Oral history gives voice to ordinary people and allows history to be seen and heard from the bottom up. In this way, it is more “democratic” and representative. Oral history recordings help listeners better understand how individuals from various backgrounds, various viewpoints, and different social strata live the full range of life, from everyday routines to catastrophic events. Carefully preserved, the recordings carry the witness of the present into the future, where they can inform, instruct, and inspire future generations.

6 Provides living sources

Interviewers are able to ask their sources questions. Unlike any other form of historical research, oral history research enables the researcher to interact with their sources and to ask them questions. By contrast, written sources can only be read, and in that sense are finite as they contain a specific amount or type of information. But oral history sources are living, breathing, thinking, and hopefully responsive sources that can act as unlimited sources of information on a particular topic or point of view.

Adapted from: [The Institute of Oral History, Baylor University](#)

