

11 The conflict of memories and documents

Dilemmas and pragmatics of oral history

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Oral history interviews can breathe life into the research and writing of recent history. By filling in the nerves and connective tissue (motives, inspirations, fears, obsessions, etc.) that link actions with each other, participant accounts can animate a narrative with details not found in documents, shade it with nuances, and vitalize interpretations with insights into diverse points of view.

Interviews can also help the historian go about studying an institutional or theoretical development.¹ They may provide information that is unrecorded anywhere else or guide the historian through archival collections, adding annotations, and revealing documents, such as letters or notebooks, which had been squirreled away in an attic or cellar, or clippings which were interspersed in personal files. Interviewees sometimes contribute references that the historian could not possibly have found unaided, or help the historian decode agendas that lurk behind documents. It is not uncommon for the interview process to restore lost information by tickling the memories of “living sources,” so they are able to recall events that they had effectively forgotten.

One of the most dramatic uses of oral history—about which I will have much to say here—occurs when memories and documents come into conflict. Such conflict remains at the core of the most devastating criticism that has been leveled against using interviews in historical research. Yet in the hands of a skilled oral historian, this conflict can become a powerful tool in a methodology that leads to deeper histories having subtler overtones than can be achieved without the use of interviews.

Before presenting the methodology, I need to define what is meant by oral history and explain the major objections that historians have raised to it.

Definitions and distinctions

The term oral history is commonly used in three different ways. It can refer to the interviews themselves, to the methodology for conducting them, or to histories that were written *using* the interviews. Most of the literature on oral history deals with the first two uses. This chapter will consider as well the histories that interviews enrich.² These histories divide into two basic types: those that are based almost entirely on interviews (e.g. Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*) and