

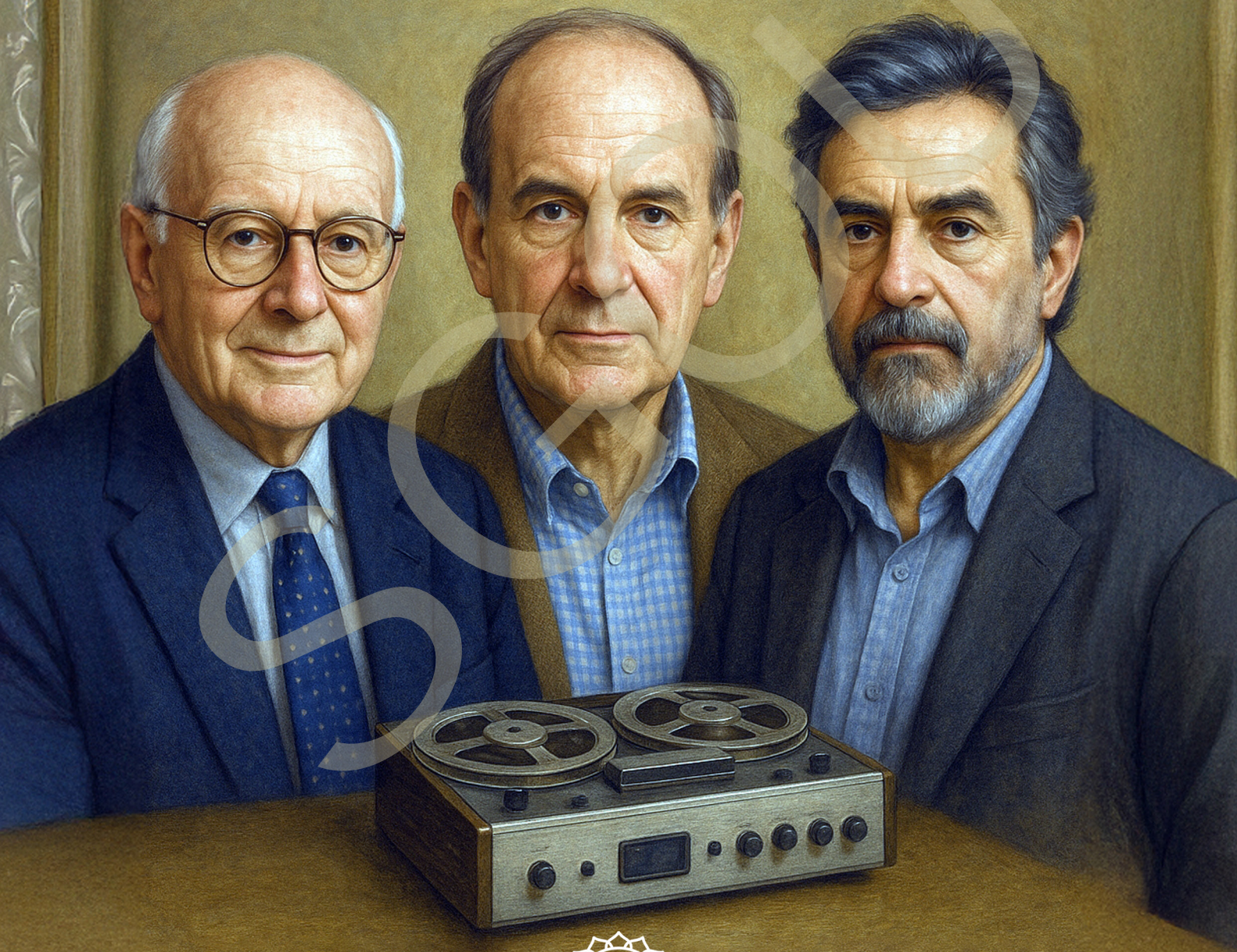
# Doing Oral History

**COURSE CODE: B21HS02SE**

**Skill Enhancement Course**

**Undergraduate Programme in History**

**Self Learning Material**



**SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



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Access and Quality define Equity.

**Doing Oral History**  
Course Code: B21HS02SE  
Semester - V

**Skill Enhancement Course**  
**Undergraduate Programme in History**  
**Self Learning Material**  
(With Model Question Paper Sets)



SREENARAYANAGURU  
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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



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# DOING ORAL HISTORY

Course Code: B21HS02SE

Semester- V

Skill Enhancement Course

Undergraduate Programme in History

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# MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed “blended format,” a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The University aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The Undergraduate Programme in History is carefully designed to incorporate recent trends in historical knowledge. Concepts, methodologies, and interpretations are presented as a coherent narrative tailored to fit the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) format. This programme aims to inspire students to pursue further reading in the discipline. Its primary objective is to cultivate competent history learners who are well-versed in the principles of historical understanding.

Rest assured, the university’s student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.



Warm regards.  
Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.

01-05-2025

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**BLOCK**

# Definition of Oral History



# UNIT

## Experiences of People in the Margin - 'People's History'

### Learning Outcomes

After the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ aware of the concept of people's history and its focus on oral history
- ◆ evaluate the definition of oral history
- ◆ comprehend on the criticism of people's history
- ◆ learn the social-scientific approach to history

### Prerequisites

The different approaches to history, like Marxist and subaltern historiography and their foundational debates, have their specific perceptions on the understanding of people's history. The scholarly positions of Raphael Samuel, Paul Thompson, and Alessandro Portelli are important for understanding the evolution of people's history and oral history traditions. The study of people's history and oral history, therefore, requires an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond conventional historical narratives. Since these fields emphasise the personal experiences and voices of the marginalised sections, a strong methodological foundation and analysis are necessary. This unit, therefore, provides foundational knowledge for the documentation and interpretation of these marginalised narratives.

### Keywords

People's History, Oral history, Personal Narratives, Memory and Subjectivity, International Oral History Association



## Discussion

### 1.1.1 People's History - Meaning

People's history prioritises individual experiences and relies on personal narratives, oral history, and autobiographies. Raphael Samuel, in his work *People's History and Socialist Theory* (1980), argued that the people's history approach aimed to reconstruct everyday life and tended to capture the certainties of the lives of ordinary people. People's history often shifts its focus from large-scale social trends to personal struggles, resistance, and emotions.

According to Samuel, this approach is characteristically political, as it challenges the dominant historical narratives by emphasising the voices of the marginalised sections. To Samuel and other historians of this tradition, like Paul Thompson, history is shaped by ideology, and historical research should acknowledge its political aspects. Certain branches of women's history also align with this people's history because they emphasise personal narratives.

However, people's history has often been critiqued for its neglect of the theoretical framework and broader analysis. People's history prioritises subjective experiences and individual perspectives. According to Louise A. Tilly, rejecting collective biography in favour of individual narratives sometimes limits its ability to account for variation. Alessandro Portelli, who conducted an oral history study of metalworkers in Terni, Italy, argues that subjectivity is not a limitation but a strength of oral sources. Portelli, however, believes that historians should listen to the stories of the people without compelling them into previous frameworks. He argues that history is not something that emerges independently from the voices of ordinary people but instead is shaped by those who study and narrate it.

According to Portelli, oral history brings a more personal and engaged approach to the past. This will challenge the traditional idea of historians as being objective observers.

Portelli argues that historians should accept subjectivity as a challenge rather than a flaw in understanding people's history. This perspective, therefore, is central to the debate between Selbourne, a critic of subjective approaches, and R. Samuel, an advocate for people's history. Selbourne criticises the History Workshop group for their claim of focusing on individual testimony and criticises them for lacking generalisations and deeper explanations. In response to his criticism, Samuel acknowledged that the History Workshop had prioritised description over explicit analysis. He then argues that no historical framework is truly objective. Instead, all narratives are shaped by the choice of the historian.

Samuel also integrates elements of social science into his approach to people's history. In his introduction to *People's History and Socialist Theory*, he highlights the importance of autobiographies as 'unfiltered testimonies'. He argues that these personal narratives can be useful for broader analysis and providing insight into class relations, family, and economic conditions.

#### 1.1.1.1. Social Scientific Approach

An application of a social scientific approach to oral history seeks to move beyond the application of the conceptual and theoretical framework. Sociologists like Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame demonstrate this method, using structured and focused research questions to examine broader social dynamics rather than solely relying on personal narratives. Their study

on Parisian bakers explores why the industry resisted industrialisation. They interviewed the people and discovered that most owner-bakers entered the trade and took over the bakery, gradually repaying long-term debts to former owners. Though this study was conducted mainly on oral testimony, it didn't depend solely on it.

This historical approach can take multiple directions. It can begin with asking theoretical questions and applying individual biographies in a structured and indirect manner. Otherwise, it can analyse collective biographies using fragmented life histories. Irrespective of the method, the focus must remain on social relationships between people.

### 1.1.2 Oral History

Oral history was initially considered to be outside the traditional academic boundaries. Therefore, it is difficult to define this tradition precisely. Experts in the field use the term in different ways. Sometimes, it refers to oral traditions; sometimes, to life histories. However, there is no universal agreement on its terminology. Along with this, there are debates about whether oral history is merely the collection of testimonies or the creation of historical narratives.

The lack of a clear definition allows oral history to cross disciplinary boundaries. Scholars view that oral history research can take many forms, such as detailed case studies and methodological analysis, and folklore and linguistic studies. Oral histories are used worldwide to capture different perspectives, for example, from Latin American testimonials and Holocaust memories to African oral traditions.

Initially, this field was followed to fill

the gaps in written records. Later, it evolved into a tool for exploring experiences, including memory, ideology, discourse, and identity. Despite the ambiguity of the subject, a global community of oral historians has emerged. Since the 1960s, formal oral history associations have been established in English-speaking countries and beyond. International conferences have been conducted periodically, leading to the creation of the International Oral History Association in June 1966 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Oral history has gradually evolved into a dynamic field, which has helped to produce a wealth of literature and scholarship. Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* is considered the foundational text of oral history, and it emphasises the role of oral history in finding the stories of those often unnoticed by traditional historians. Other scholars, such as Ronald Grele and Alessandro Portelli, have explored the theoretical and methodological difficulties of oral history. Ronald Grele's *Envelopes of Sound* (1991) explores the theoretical and methodological challenges of oral history. Meanwhile, Alessandro Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (1991) offers a deep replication of the ability of oral history to reshape our understanding of the past.

Other significant works include Michael Frisch's *A Shared Authority* (1990), which examines how oral histories were created and used in public history projects. Some of the works on oral history have gained international attention as well. Key works include *Oral History* (1984, revised 1996) by David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum and Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994).

## Recap

- ◆ People's history focuses on individual experiences
- ◆ It prioritises personal narratives, oral histories, and autobiographies
- ◆ Raphael Samuel argues that people's history reconstructs everyday life
- ◆ It is inherently political
- ◆ It challenges dominant historical narratives by emphasising marginalised voices
- ◆ Women's history aligns with people's history
- ◆ The lack of a theoretical framework is a criticism of people's history
- ◆ Oral history was initially considered outside the academic boundary
- ◆ Oral history includes elements of folklore, linguistics, and memory
- ◆ Oral history was globally recognised through the International Oral History Association (1966)

## Objective Questions

1. Who wrote People's *History and Socialist Theory* (1980)?
2. What does people's history prioritise?
3. Which historian argued that history is shaped by ideology?
4. Where was the International Oral History Association established?
5. Who wrote *A Shared Authority* (1990)?
6. What do oral historians study apart from testimonies?
7. Which field of study helps document marginalised voices?



## Answers

1. Raphael Samuel
2. Individual experiences
3. Paul Thompson
4. Gothenburg, Sweden
5. Michael Frisch
6. Memory, discourse, and ideology
7. Oral history

## Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of people's history in reconstructing everyday life.
2. Assess the role of oral history in documenting marginalised voices. Use examples from different regions.
3. Evaluate the contributions of Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel to oral history and people's history.

## Reference

1. Ronald J Grele, *Oral History* in Kelly Boyd ed, *Encyclopaedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, Routledge, London, 1999.
2. Louise A. Tilly, "People's History and Social Science History", *Social Science History*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1983.

## Suggested Reading

1. Alessandro Portelli, *What Makes Oral History Different*, 1979.
2. Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, OUP, 2003.
3. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Wisconsin Press, 1985.



## UNIT

# Life History, Personal Narratives, Family History, History of Community

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine on different methodologies of studying oral history
- ◆ learn the significance of personal narratives in understanding individual experiences
- ◆ identify key methods and sources used in oral history research
- ◆ discuss the role of oral history in preserving the history of the community
- ◆ recognise the importance of sharing oral history with the larger community

### Prerequisites

History is more than just a collection and interpretation of facts and events. It is also considered a rich source of narratives comprising the experiences of individuals, families, and communities. We know that traditional sources often focus on major political events, institutions, and stories of influential figures. However, the personal stories of people provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the past. At this point, the life history, personal narratives, family history, and community history come into play as essential methodologies for apprehending the voices and experiences of the people. These sources provide a deeper understanding of the social structures, cultural norms, and historical events. Such stories are preserved in the memories of the members of the family or community.

Personal narratives highlight the voices of the marginalised sections, whose role was overlooked in traditional sources. Family history is intended to preserve generational knowledge, and it is an effort to connect personal identities to a broader historical context. In community history, oral history tends to capture the collective

memories, social formations, and shared experiences. These interconnected themes of oral history, therefore, help to understand the significance, methodologies, and challenges of understanding history.

## Keywords

Life History, Personal Narratives, Community History, Family History, Narrative Analysis

## Discussion

### 1.2.1 Life History

Life history aims to bring a real and personalised account of the individual experiences, expectations, aspirations, and tensions. Life history is considered a qualitative research method that aims to create a comprehensive autobiographical account, allowing the individual to share their stories from childhood to the present. This method involves involvement with various data sources like interviews, observations, diaries, or digital records.

The terms ‘life history’ and ‘biography’ are used to suggest two different things. A life history can be defined as an individual's account of his or her life that is recorded in some way, by recording or writing. The biographer takes up the life history, autobiographical writings, and personal documents like letters and artefacts, and changes them into narratives with a wider historical context.

Biography is sometimes considered to be part of literature and sometimes as history. According to Paul Kendall, “Biography is a genuine province of literature.” Historian B. L Reid defines biography as a branch of history, as “its essence is fact and its shaper is time.” Another perspective of biography

was given by Valerie Raleigh Yow, who considers biography an interdisciplinary endeavour because the biographer must use historical research methods and concepts and employ psychological insights, sociological perspectives, and anthropological and individual aspects. Biography is, therefore, the presentation of an individual's life and its interpretation in a wider history.

An autobiography, at the same time, differs from life history because it is written voluntarily by the individual rather than in response to someone else's inquiry. The process of writing an autobiography and recording a life history shares similarities since both involve interpreting life events and constructing a sense of self through the method of storytelling.

The life history method aims to blend the history and biography of the individual to explore the effects of social structures on people and to portray the ways in which people themselves create culture. Therefore, the life stories of the people are located in the historical context rather than the oral history method. It may explore how the prevailing historical institution affects family life. This method also aims to record the person's oral narrative and contextualise the narrative with references to documentary sources.



Life history research emerged in the early 20th century as anthropologists sought to document the lives of the Native American leaders. One of the earliest examples is the biography of Paul Radin (1926) of *Crashing Thunder*. Between 1917 and 1942, the sociology department of Chicago University became the leading force in life history research. Under the guidance of Robert E Park and Ernest W Burgess, the Chicago school focused on the marginalised individual in the urban environment. They have been credited with works like *The Hobo* (Anderson, 1923), *The Gang* (Thrasher, 1928), *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930), and others. This life story revealed the struggles of the people in the urban centres.

By the 20th century, the influence of the Chicago school slowly waned, and life history research lost its popularity. However, scholars like C. Wright Mills made the effort to show the importance of biography in understanding the relationship between the individual and society. From the 1970s to the 1990s, European sociologists revitalised life history research. Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson conducted extensive life history projects during this period. The contemporary trend in life history continues to focus on marginalised voices.

### 1.2.2 Personal Narratives

Scholars who study personal narratives must recognise that life stories are not just individual experiences. Rather, they are shaped by historical contexts, cultural norms, and narrative structures. Like storytelling, personal narratives also link the life experience of the individual to collective historical events. Examining personal narratives shows that they challenge the conventional division between individual experience and larger social structures. Instead of treating them as separate, the narrative analysis will reveal their interconnections. In the work *Telling Stories*, the authors hold that when a person's

life is examined, the distinction between the individual experience and social experience becomes less rigid.

Although narrative analysis is not widely practised in the social sciences as a research method, it has gained recognition among the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and social work. Personal narratives are the first-person accounts of the life of an individual within a social and historical framework. These include oral histories, autobiographies, interviews, diaries, journals, and letters.

In the analysis of personal narratives, the main concern is how the individual's life intersects with historical events. Researchers analyse personal narratives to understand social dynamics, especially in marginalised communities. Through studies on class, gender, labour history, and sexuality, personal narratives can challenge the dominant assumptions and bring the voice of the ignored into discussions. Personal narratives are thus valuable in exposing the 'hidden stories' or suppressed perspectives of events.

On certain occasions, personal narratives may offer insights into the emotional dimensions of social actions, revealing the inner motivations behind the actions. Scholars analyse personal writings, like letters and diaries, to understand how these personal experiences shape the intellectual and ideological development of people.

Personal narratives, therefore, bridge the gap between individual experiences and social structures, giving a deeper understanding of human agency and historical processes.

### 1.2.3 Family History

The traditional method of tracing one's family history can be done through analysing census reports, city directories, and ship manifests. These documents can enhance the



recorded memories of the living relatives. The older family members are considered repositories of stories about their childhood, stories of their parents and their generations, stories about former residents, and also about the changes in the family. These members need to preserve the family traditions for the following generations.

Families can do their own interviews, or sometimes they can hire professional interviewers. Many family interviewing services have developed over time, such as conducting interviews and producing tapes, CDs, videotapes, and book-length family histories. The interviews, therefore, became family mementoes that have to be passed along from generation to generation.

To get a good interview, family oral histories should follow the same standards and procedures that are applied to other oral histories. This includes preparing a family history questionnaire that includes questions to be asked to the family members as well as specific questions for each interviewee.

Family oral histories are not just anecdotes. They can tell not only the “who” and “what” in a family, but also “why”. They show the motives and attitudes of the research, which the traditional genealogical sources never show. Sometimes, these interviews can show other sources of the family documentation, such as the name of the town where the family once lived, the location of the cemetery where birth and death dates were shown, newspapers that showed obituaries, etc. The traditional sources of family history provide preliminary research for the interviews. In addition to these, school certificates, letters, and local newspaper clippings can also provide information about the family members.

Family history can reflect the times and communities. In such a situation, questions can be directed to the families regarding their economic status, life during calamities, way

of life during the Great Depression, World Wars, or the freedom struggle. According to Donald A. Ritchie, we should not limit our family history to a simple collection of pleasant memories. The past of the family may include stories of feuds and deaths, which are painful to revisit but are relevant to understanding the family relationships. The stories will reflect how the members experience the same events and react to the same individuals in different ways, according to their age, attitudes, and expectations.

### 1.2.4 History of Community

Oral histories have helped to gather and preserve memories from the communities and people. Community history refers to the collective past of a group of individuals who share a common identity. Oral historians have expanded on the traditional ideas of community history by exploring not only the political and institutional aspects of the community but also economic development and their ethnic population. Some oral history projects have focused on preserving the memories of those communities that have vanished, documenting their buildings and institutions.

Oral history is helpful in capturing the historical moment within a community. For example, in Wrightsville, Pennsylvania, residents who lived through World War II were interviewed for the project named Small Town America in World War II. The interviews explored how global events have influenced the town by interviewing the local population. Similar other projects were conducted to analyse the shifts in the community.

The effectiveness of oral history is dependent on the relationship between the interviewer and the community. Some scholars argue that ‘outsiders’ may find it difficult to gain trust among the community. However, Alessandro Portelli, an Italian

historian, found that his foreign background helped him connect with the people of Harlan County, Kentucky.

#### **1.2.4.1 Balancing Community Narrative**

Communities often depict themselves as positive, directing the interviewers towards their success stories. In such a situation, oral historians must seek diverse perspectives, which include those dissatisfied sections, to avoid the issues of nostalgia and oversimplification. Therefore, balancing the community's privacy and maintaining historical accuracy is very crucial, especially when addressing sensitive topics. Some may refuse to provide details of painful events, while others seek to reveal them. To ensure reliability, the interviewers have to include a broad range of people.

Handling uncooperative communities is one of the difficult tasks of oral historians. Such communities see such acts as 'intrusive or suspicious'. According to Joe Doyle, when communities resist participation, interviewers should allow time for developing trust rather than forcing an immediate engagement.

#### **1.2.4.2 Returning the Community Oral History to the Community**

The initial role of oral history projects is to document the memories of the community. However, it is important to return to the

community history through mediums like books, plays, exhibits, documentaries, or websites that highlight important themes and patterns which are relevant to the community.

Websites have transformed oral history projects into ongoing resources that foster both the sharing of information and the showing of community pride. By integrating interviews with maps, photographs, historical documents, and other links, these online platforms provide a space for the community to access and take ownership of their histories. Since communities evolve due to economic and cultural changes, these oral history projects can capture moments in history or restore the voices of the past.

Another way to share oral history is through local media. The excerpts can be published in community newspapers or broadcast on local radio or television. Some of the examples include the excerpts from the U.S. Latinos and Latina WW II Oral History Project, The Philadelphia Inquirer, and the radio series *Goin' North: Tales of the Great Migration* (featuring African Americans who moved from the South to Philadelphia).

The community oral histories were used in promotional brochures, school curricula, as well as in museum exhibits. However, reaching a broad audience often requires displaying exhibits in accessible locations where people naturally gather, such as shopping malls, libraries, schools, and other organisations.



## Recap

- ◆ Life history records individual experiences
- ◆ A biography is written by an external author, while a life history is recorded directly from an individual's account
- ◆ An autobiography is voluntarily written by an individual, while a life history is recorded through interviews
- ◆ Personal narratives provide first-hand information about individuals
- ◆ Narrative analysis reveals a deep connection between personal experiences and societal structures
- ◆ Family history research involves identifying the history through oral traditions, documents, and artefacts
- ◆ Community history preserves collective memories, documents, and changes
- ◆ Balancing community narratives is essential to avoid bias and nostalgia
- ◆ Books, documentaries, online platforms, and exhibits make life history and oral narratives more accessible
- ◆ Life history and personal narratives help highlight overlooked experiences of the marginalised
- ◆ Personal narratives can reveal deep emotions and motivations
- ◆ Life histories and personal narratives are valuable in studying cultural changes and social movements

## Objective Questions

1. What is the main method used in Life History?
2. Who recorded the biography of *Crashing Thunder*?
3. Which university led Life History research in the early 20th century?

4. Which sociologist emphasised biography in understanding society?
5. Which scholar called biography a province of literature?
6. What do personal narratives challenge?
7. Which project recorded Second World War experiences in Pennsylvania?

## Answers

1. Interviews
2. Radin
3. Chicago University
4. C. Wright Mills
5. Paul Kendall
6. Dominant assumptions
7. Small Town America in WWII

## Assignments

1. Discuss the role of personal narratives in challenging mainstream historical perspectives.
2. How does family history research help in understanding intergenerational identity?
3. Discuss the evolution, methodologies, and significance of life history as a historical research method.
4. Evaluate how digital tools have changed the collection, preservation, and sharing of oral histories.

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1. Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, OUP, 2003.
2. Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Second Edition, Altamira Press, 2005.

## Suggested Reading

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2. William G. Tierney & Michael Lanford, *Life History Methods*, SAGE Research Methods Foundations, 2019.





# UNIT

## Views of Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina and Alessandro Portelli

### Learning Outcomes

After the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ discuss the contribution of Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina and Alessandro Portelli
- ◆ analyse the foundation of oral history
- ◆ evaluate the role of memory in history
- ◆ identify different methodologies of oral history
- ◆ analyse the interdisciplinary nature of oral history

### Prerequisites

Oral history is a powerful historical research tool that gives importance to the accounts of personal narratives and lived experiences. It emerged as an alternative methodology to conventional historical sources and methods, which focus on political events, administrative records, and elite perspectives. Scholars such as Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina, and Alessandro Portelli have played crucial roles in shaping oral history as a valuable historical source. Thompson has emphasised the social purpose of oral history, while Vansina contributed significantly to the study of oral traditions, particularly in African history. Portelli has focused on the challenges and criticisms of oral history. The present unit will delve into the contributions of these scholars towards the development of oral history.

### Keywords

Oral history, Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina, Alessandro Portelli



## Discussion

### 1.3.1 Paul Thompson

Paul Thompson is a British sociologist who is regarded as the founder of oral history in Britain. He founded the Oral History Society in Britain in the 1970s. His approach to oral history is created by breaking down the barriers between teachers and students and giving back to the communities that shared their histories. In the work *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, he described oral history as "...a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself, and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders but also from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow workers..."

He argued that, initially, history was focused mainly on politics, power struggles, and administrative matters that reflected the ruling classes. The lives of ordinary people, their economic conditions, and social structures were documented only through mergers. When historical research expanded, economic and social history was included in the study, but still relied on official records. The experience of working-class people, women, and other marginal sections was neglected in the sources.

Therefore, oral history has provided an alternative by giving a voice to the voiceless who were traditionally excluded from the sources. It, therefore, allows for a broader understanding and historical narrative and helps to bridge the gap between past and present.

Oral history has also opened a new arena of study, especially in the field of labour history. Labour historians can now examine the experience of non-unionised workers and women and analyse the everyday impact of work on families and communities. Thus,

one of the significant impacts of studying oral history is the presence of the study of family life. With oral history, researchers can now construct a more complete history of family undercurrents.

#### 1.3.1.1 The Voice of the Past: Oral History: Paul Thompson

The work, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, by Paul Thompson and Joana Bornat, reflects on how oral history has evolved from a disputed methodology to an important tool in historical research. Initially, oral historians had to argue for the legitimacy of their approach. But today, the focus has shifted to refining its usage. The work reflects the origin of the British oral history movement in the 'new' social history.

A key theme of the book is the social purpose of oral history. Thompson has emphasised that history should not only document the past but also inspire social change. This commitment to the subject initially met resistance, especially in the U.S., where oral history projects prioritise interviews with political elites. Over time, American historians combined social history, while European scholars began including interviews with influential figures in their historical writings.

The book has also addressed new challenges, mainly in the field of memory studies. They have acknowledged how personal narratives can shape historical understandings. Both authors, Thompson and Bornat, discussed how individuals reconstruct their past, sometimes blending 'personal truth' with rather than objective facts. They have also discussed how oral history intersects with other disciplines like psychology and trauma studies, emphasising the ethical responsibilities of interviewers.

Another focus of the book was practical guidance for studying oral history. This covers the interview techniques and the equipment used and stresses the importance of building trust between interviewers and interviewees. This also touches on aspects like ethical concerns, such as avoiding harm to interviewees and handling legal issues in archiving.

### 1.3.2 Jan Vansina

Jan Vansina was an Africanist, anthropologist, and historian. His main passion was studying orality and method, and he combined linguistics, history, and ethnography in his studies. He contributed towards defining the oral tradition as a new field and explained its methodological approach. His major contribution to the oral history tradition can be seen in his work *The Oral as History*. It is considered a significant contribution to American historical scholarship.

The book serves as an essential resource for historians who want to reconstruct history. It has played a crucial role in popularising African historical narratives. The book consists of seven chapters, each dealing with different nuances of oral tradition. In the first chapter, the foundation for oral historical study was laid. He defines oral tradition as encompassing both the process and its products. The process consists of transmitting messages verbally until these memories fade. In comparison, the products are oral messages derived from the previous oral narratives.

Vansina explains that messages are generated whenever people communicate. However, only certain messages are repeatedly shared and become valuable to historians. For example, news is often repeated because of its relevance. However, it primarily concerns the present and hints at the future rather than the past. These types

of sources are organised from sources like eyewitness accounts, heresy, and experiences.

Heresy or rumour spreads through verbal transmission, and it often gains acceptance due to its nature. In a society where there is no mass media, where speech is the primary mode of communication, rumours frequently arise. Some rumours have a factual basis, while others are false. Those rumours remain unchallenged and become part of oral history. Vansina asserts that tradition originating from rumours reveals more about the mindset of the people than the actual event.

He emphasises that eyewitness testimony is the foundation for historical knowledge. This can be achieved by individuals who directly experienced or observed an event. However, such accounts are subjective because they are influenced by perception and emotions. He then categorised the oral traditions into four types: memorised speech, accounts, epics and tales, proverbs, and sayings.

Vansina argues that not all oral sources can be considered oral traditions. They must be transmitted verbally over at least one generation, and they should encompass a wide range of information.

In the second chapter, he mentions the application of historical evidence to oral traditions and also analyses the relationship between tradition and text. In oral tradition, historians play an important role as the recorders of the event. The central question is how a recorded text relates to a specific performance and how that performance connects to the broader tradition. The performance serves as the primary expression of tradition, and the text is merely the testimony rather than the tradition itself.

The chapter three focuses on understanding the interpretation of the oral testimonies, concentrating on the meaning of the messages. He insisted that meaning can be measured

through two levels: literal and intended. Here, language, agreements, and genre play a vital role in shaping and interpreting meaning.

Vansina opined that the messages are social products shaped by communities. The significance of the message depends on the societal context, and its significance tends to evolve over time. Oral traditions are, therefore, influenced by the present, requiring historians to assess their impact.

Vansina attempts to apply conventional historical evidence to oral traditions, recognising their unique nature as collective memory. He highlights the challenges in chronology in a society that lacks formal calendars.

In the seventh chapter, he evaluates oral traditions as historical sources. He acknowledges their vulnerability to distortion but also emphasises their value in a society where there is an absence of written records.

He argues that oral traditions should be critically analysed and cross-checked rather than completely ignored. They offer crucial insight into the lives of the marginalised sections, which would aid in historical reconstruction.

### 1.3.3 Alessandro Portelli

The article “What Makes Oral History Different?” by Alessandro Portelli (1979) challenged the critique of oral history by arguing that its unique characteristics, such as orality, narrative structure, subjectivity, and memory, are its strengths rather than weaknesses. He critiques the misunderstandings and biases surrounding oral history, especially within the Italian intellectual community. He argues that oral history has often been misrepresented and terminated without engagement.

He argues that the oral sources disregarded the orality of the oral sources, which has a direct connection to interpretative theory.

The first aspect stresses its origin in that oral sources provide information about illiterate people whose written history is missing or distorted. Another aspect that Portelli discusses is the concern of content. This study examined the daily lives and material culture of these groups. However, he argues that origin and content are not sufficient to distinguish oral sources from other sources. Hence, we need to distinguish oral sources by form rather than by their content.

The use of media, such as analysing spoken language and speech velocity, will help the interviewer reveal the speaker's actual emotions. This will help build a personal connection to the narrative.

Oral history sources are considered narrative sources. Therefore, according to the author, the analysis of oral history must benefit from the narrative theories of literature and folklore. This should be applied to both testimony and structured folklore materials. One of the key aspects of oral narrative that Portelli suggests is the variation in the velocity of storytelling. This is defined as the duration between events and narration. A speaker may elaborate on certain events or sometimes summarise the events according to the severity of the event. Along with the importance of velocity, the narrative distance and perspective help the storyteller's relationship with their account.

An oral tradition, which is developed from non-dominant social groups, has a fluid personal experience. Since oral history blends legend, poetry, and memories, it creates a fluidity that can blur the line between truth and collective imagination. The use of proverbs and songs will indicate a collective perspective, while the shifts in the dialects and language indicate societal influence.

Oral history is different from other sources in that it focuses less on events and more on meaning. While oral history accounts can reveal new perspectives, their primary values



lie in revealing the subjective experience by understanding what people believed they were doing, what they wanted, and how they interpreted their actions.

This subjectivity, according to Portelli, does not undermine the validity of oral history; rather, it complements traditional sources. These sources provide insight into the psychological and emotional cost of the events, which cannot be captured from the written records. Portelli explained this aspect through the distinction between *fabula* (chronological sequence of events) and *plot* (how events are arranged), where it is shown that they reveal how individuals structure and perceive their own history. He maintains that belief, even though it is inaccurate, holds historical facts and is right on its own. Overlooking events does not alter the official timelines but reshapes how historians interpret the memory of the community.

With respect to credibility, Portelli argues that oral sources possess a different kind of credibility than written records. Their importance lies not on the basis of factual accuracy but in their deviation from facts, which reveal imagination, symbolism, etc. Unlike traditional historical sources, oral history sources do not produce “false” statements.

Written sources are often seen as more reliable sources, but they may be omitted

when filtered through institutions like courts and newspapers. On the contrary, oral sources may suffer from memory distortion but will be compensated with cultural memory aids like repeated storytelling.

Oral histories are, therefore, valuable because memory is not a passive recorder of facts but an active creator of meaning. Changes that occur in personal beliefs, political views, or social status will reshape how individuals remember their past; sometimes, this may lead to omissions or reinterpretations. Understanding different ways of storytelling, such as ironic or epic ways, will help us interpret oral histories in their original context.

Portelli then argues that oral sources are inherently subjective, just like other historical sources. However, their non-objectivity derives from their variable characteristics. Unlike written documents, oral documents derive from testimony between the interviewer and the interviewee, making them a shared record.

Oral sources are never complete or identical, even after repeated interviews. This is because, over time, the narrator may shift their perspective, recall new memories, or develop a new understanding of the event. Even in this, ignoring oral sources may result in an incomplete historical account.

## Recap

- ◆ Oral history is the method of recording and preserving accounts of the past
- ◆ Paul Thompson emphasised the role of oral history sources in social history
- ◆ Paul Thompson established the Oral History Society in the 1970s



- ◆ His book 'The Voice of the Past' discusses how oral history challenges traditional historical methods
- ◆ Oral history brings the experience of ordinary people
- ◆ Jan Vansina has focused on oral traditions as historical sources in African history
- ◆ Vansina classified oral traditions into four main types: memorised speech, accounts, epics and tales, and proverbs and sayings
- ◆ Alessandro Portelli argued that subjectivity in oral history added depth to its study
- ◆ Oral history gives voice to the marginalised communities
- ◆ Personal narratives link individual experiences to broader historical and social contexts
- ◆ Memory plays a crucial role in shaping the historical narrative
- ◆ Portelli compared oral history with written sources and argued that written records are filtered through an institutional setup
- ◆ Oral history, according to Portelli, is a cultural memory

## Objective Questions

1. Who is considered the founder of the Oral History Society in Britain?
2. What is the foundation of historical knowledge in oral tradition, according to Vansina?
3. Which historian is known for studying African oral traditions?
4. Which book did Paul Thompson write about oral history?
5. Which historian argued that oral history's subjectivity adds value rather than diminishing its credibility?
6. Who wrote *Oral Tradition as History*?
7. Which historian emphasised subjectivity in oral history?
8. Who wrote *What Makes Oral History Different*?
9. Who categorised oral traditions into four types?

## Answers

1. Paul Thompson
2. Eyewitness testimony
3. Jan Vansina
4. The Voice of the Past: Oral History
5. Alessandro Portelli
6. Jan Vansina
7. Alessandro Portelli
8. Alessandro Portelli
9. Jan Vansina

## Assignments

1. Compare and contrast the contributions of Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina, and Alessandro Portelli to oral history.
2. Explain how memory influences personal narratives and oral history.
3. What are the challenges of oral history?

## Reference

1. Portelli, Alessandro. What Makes Oral History Different. 1979.
2. Vansina, Jan. Oral Tradition as History. Wisconsin Press, 1985.
3. Thompson, Paul. The Voice of the Past: Oral History. Oxford UP, 1988.

## Suggested Reading

1. Donald A. Ritchie, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History by Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat”, *The Public Historian*, February 2018, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2018.
2. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (ed.), *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1998.

SGOU





## UNIT

# Genesis of Contemporary Oral History

### Learning Outcomes

After the completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ discuss the significance of oral history in preserving human experiences
- ◆ recognise the role of oral history projects in documenting personal narratives
- ◆ evaluate the efforts of the government in preserving oral histories

### Prerequisites

Oral history is crucial in preserving human experiences beyond traditional historical records. Governments worldwide have recognised the significance of oral history and have taken measures to document personal narratives through oral history projects. Unlike traditional historical sources, oral history tends to capture the emotions, memories, lived experiences, and perspectives of individuals. This unit deals with will analyse the trends in oral history after World War II, focusing on the importance of different oral history projects.

### Keywords

Memory, Battle of Crete, Historical Documentation, Government Initiative

## Discussion

### 1.4.1 Discussion

The importance of oral history is recognised by governments everywhere nowadays. They understand that oral histories are not just about facts and figures but about capturing the human experience. Globally, they have started measures to preserve these histories through oral history projects. The British Library, for example, has an enormous collection of oral interviews covering all fields.

In the article "After Action: Oral History and War" Megan Hutching discovers the use of oral history in understanding the impact of World War II by interviewing war soldiers and those who are affected by the war. According to Megan, the traditional historical accounts are often criticised for focusing on war strategies and battles, neglecting the experiences of the individual soldiers. The oral history project, therefore, aimed to capture the personal narratives of the soldiers, including their service life, emotional aspects and the long-term effects of the war.

The project was started in 2000, focusing on the Battle of Crete in May 1941. The project has focused on six key themes representing the experiences of New Zealanders in the war, including the prisoners. She emphasises that combat is not the only defining experience of war. She documents military life, including personal details, social interaction, and the psychological and emotional impact of the service. She gave importance to the "ordinary" voices of the battlefield instead of focusing on the experience of the "other ranks".

The interviews revealed the complexities of war, including the emotional detachments and evolving attitudes towards the enemy.

Through this project, Megan has highlighted the use of oral tradition in order to explore the complex aspects of war and experience beyond the battlefield.

The study of oral history after World War II is, therefore, based on the idea of preserving memory. However, one of the biggest challenges of oral history is the unreliability of human memory. According to Nate Silver, the human brain can store around three terabytes of information. This makes humans selective about what they remember. According to Nate, memory is not just shaped by personal significance, but it is also influenced by a person's place within an event. For example, in an experience cited by Donald Ritchie, "After World War II, when Congress investigated the attack on Pearl Harbor, Admiral Harold Stark, the chief of naval operations, could not remember what he had done the night before the attack. However, his flag lieutenant, H.D. Kirk, remembered that they had seen The Student Prince with their wives before returning home" (Ritchie, 2002, 39).

Oral historians recognise that even though memory is flawed, it is still considered an essential tool for preserving history. They can construct rich and nuanced accounts of the past by gathering multiple viewpoints and can understand how memory works.

### 1.4.2 Nature of Memory in Oral History

With time, people tend to reinterpret past events, finding new meaning in their experiences. With changes in time, some memories became more important, while others became less significant. The current perspective of the individual also shapes their memory. Oral history, therefore, is shaped by the voices of those who lived through

an event, which means those who stayed, persisted, or survived. However, memory is not just about what happened but also how it is remembered. For example, historian Robert Gildea learned this difference when interviewing an elderly woman in France. When he asked if she remembered the mayor from 1942, she looked confused. But when he instead asked her to describe life under German occupation, she vividly recalled wartime struggles, bombings, and the loss of neighbours. This illustrates that people do not always connect their personal experiences to wider historical events unless they are invoked correctly.

### 1.4.3 Oral History Projects

The growing importance of preserving oral histories has led to the creation of oral history projects. For example, the National World War II Museum in New Orleans made an effort to collect interviews of 9,139 individual personal accounts and preserved them through written sources, video recordings, audio recordings, and transcripts. The effort to record the oral history began with the efforts of Stephen E. Ambrose. Along with Meuller, he opened the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans on June 6, 2000. Oral histories, therefore, played a key role in the museum exhibits, which detailed the planning, execution, and aftermath of the D-Day invasion of 1944. These oral histories were presented in listening stations or booths within the gallery.

Similar oral history projects were started, such as the United Nations Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Memories of War Oral History Project, and many more.

While most oral history projects focus mainly on the past, some document the events as they unfold. This "history while it's hot" approach, as described by Forrest Pogue, allows for the preservation of immediate reactions and perspectives. For example, military historians have carried recording devices into conflicts from Vietnam to Afghanistan and captured firsthand information from the troops. However, interviewing during the event has its own challenges. The main difficulty is scheduling the interview because the key figures could be too busy and change their plans. Maintaining confidentiality is also another aspect.

The role of oral history in the government is another aspect to consider. The government recognises oral history as a tool for preserving institutional memory and documenting historical events. For example, a survey by the Washington-based Society for History in the Federal Government found oral history projects spanning all branches of the military, intelligence agencies, cabinet departments, Congress, federal courts, and organisations such as NASA and the National Institutes of Health.

Many government efforts were focused on interviewing government staff members, who are both active and retired, and capturing their experiences. These firsthand accounts help illuminate bureaucratic decisions that may be buried in dense official records.

Preserving oral history through government initiatives has helped historians understand how societies recollect the past.

## Recap

- ◆ Oral history was recognised by governments worldwide for understanding human experiences
- ◆ Institutions like the British Library made extensive efforts to preserve oral history
- ◆ Megan Hutching's study focuses on World War II soldiers, emphasising their personal narratives
- ◆ Her study showcased an evolving attitude towards war and enemies
- ◆ Memory is a selective aspect and is influenced by personal significance and social positions
- ◆ Oral historians are aware of the flaws of memory, but they value multiple viewpoints for historical richness
- ◆ Memory evolves over time and is shaped by personal experiences
- ◆ Oral history projects became prominent to preserve memories

## Objective Questions

1. Which institution has a vast collection of oral interviews?
2. What was the focus of Megan Hutching's oral history project?
3. What challenges does oral history face due to memory?
4. Which museum in New Orleans has a major oral history collection on WWII?
5. Which oral history project focuses on Holocaust survivors?
6. What was the key theme of the World War II oral history project led by Megan Hutching?
7. Which organisation conducted a survey on oral history projects within government agencies?



## Answers

1. The British Library
2. Battle of Crete
3. Unreliability of human memory
4. National D-Day Museum
5. United Nations Holocaust Memorial Museum
6. Personal narratives of New Zealand soldiers
7. Society for History in the Federal Government

## Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of oral history in preserving human experiences beyond official records.
2. Explain the challenges of memory in oral history and how historians address them.

## Reference

1. Hutchings, Megan. "After Action: Oral History and War." *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Donald Ritchie, Oxford UP, 2011.
2. Ritchie, Donald. *Doing Oral History*. Oxford UP, 2003.
3. Ritchie, Donald, editor. *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford UP, 2011.

## Suggested Reading

1. Passerini, Luisa. *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experiences of the Turin Working-Class*. Cambridge UP, 1987.
2. Thompson, Paul. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford UP, 1988.
3. Samuel, Raphael, and Paul Thompson. *The Myths We Live By*. Routledge, 1990.





# UNIT

## Oral History of Indian Freedom Movement/ Partition

### Learning Outcomes

After the completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ reflect on the significance of oral history in documenting the freedom movement
- ◆ identify the key contributions to this field of study
- ◆ examine the importance of memory, representation, and narrative
- ◆ evaluate the various institutional initiatives in India, particularly Kerala

### Prerequisites

Oral history plays a significant role in understanding the shades of historical events. Oral history can be a valuable source for understanding the freedom movement as it provides firsthand accounts from the participants of the freedom movement. This archival method can be used along with historical documents like written records to have a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the past.

With government initiatives, oral history projects became popular in India and collected the memories of people. They tried to include diverse voices, making history more dynamic and representative. In Kerala, the role of KCHR in preserving these memories through various projects is also noteworthy. This unit will, therefore, throw light on various initiatives of oral history projects and how scholars collected and narrated the stories of the freedom movement through this collective memory.

## Keywords

Partition, Oral History Projects, Shahid Amin, Urvashi Butalia, Shamshad Hussain, KCHR

## Discussion

### 1.5.1 Oral History of the Freedom Movement

Oral history plays a crucial role in understanding the freedom movement. It provides a firsthand account of the actual participants and witnesses, adding to the traditional archival materials. This offers a complete and nuanced understanding of history. One of the earliest attempts at using oral history was made by novelist Amritlal Nagar, who worked on recording the memories of the Mutiny of 1857. His work was published in non-fictional form in *Gadar ke Phool* in 1957.

The effort to create the archives of oral history was made by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, which focused on creating oral histories of the Indian freedom movement. The evolution of oral history in India was the result of social, political, and academic movements of the 1980s and 1990s. The earliest oral histories to be published were of women in the Telangana people's struggle, named 'We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle' (1989). The work has documented the role of women in the struggle and represented the nature of oral history.

By the twenty-first century, oral history had become an established approach in India. Scholars began to explore diverse topics like the partition, where Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta wrote *The Trauma and Triumph: Gender and Partition in the Eastern Region*. Life stories, Women's involvement in the Tebhaga movement etc., which became some of the themes.

Among the scholars, the works of Shahid Amin and Urvashi Bhutalia need special mention. Shahid Amin, in his *Event Metaphor and Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92*, showed how a collective memory has become the subject of interdisciplinary interest. The work shows a theoretical approach to this subject. He shows how this subject transformed into a cultural metaphor in Indian political memory. It shows the shift from a 'bloody riot' to a 'freedom struggle'.

Initially, the Indian nationalist discourse condemned the event and sought to erase it from the collective memory. However, when this incident was placed within the broader historical narrative, the event reinforced its significance. He studies the history of the Chauri Chaura incident in a broader historical context. He analysed the judicial and national records and interpreted this event as part of the official narrative.

Through an in-depth historical and political analysis, the book examines the ongoing tension between history and memory in shaping the meaning of the past. Amin explores how the process of retelling history continuously reshapes the perception of the Chauri Chaura incident. He also highlights the power of the political oratory that has led to the shift in the discourse from a bloody riot to a freedom struggle.

The *Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia unfolds hidden nuances and voices from the margins, especially the women who were abducted, molested and displaced during the partition of India. Butalia, in her work, brings back memories of the partition through the oral narration of the first-hand



accounts of the people who lived in the country when it was divided into two. She narrates the experiences of the women whose voices were 'silenced' amidst the partition when they experienced different forms of violence. Butalia's close interaction with the women who experienced partition questions the women's sense of belonging and citizenship. She writes that the history of partition is the history of violence against women and children, which was silenced and, therefore, remained contested.

Based on oral testimonies, she writes that women became subjects of sexual violence 'particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, and selling into prostitution', which happened on a massive scale, and the gruesome memories of the violence remained fresh after the partition as well. Revisiting partition stories through oral testimonies is a kind of inward reflection for every woman. The history of the exploitation of women stresses the need for strength and courage to resist violence during any kind of insurgency that women are subjected to. This also explains that women become easy scapegoats and are vulnerable during any kind of insurgency, and their voices are often silenced. Many stories remained unheard and unknown due to displacement and madness during the mass migration. In this book, Butalia not only narrates the consequences of cross-border displacement, deprivation, and destruction but also delves into the internal movement of people within a country, and she opines that any kind of dislocation takes a toll on the minds of the people displaced from their native place.

Butalia, in her work, stresses the violence that women went through. She has, therefore, unearthed the simple stories of people in a time of complex socio-political upheaval. She believes that the birth of the two countries was at the cost of millions of displaced people with trauma and the sexual assault of innumerable women, which still remains

intact in the memories. It is a paradox that in a country where the nation is equated to mother (*Bharat Mata*), in the same country, the women have to go through such brutality and atrocities, and their voices are silenced by the tyranny and domination of administrative decisions.

### 1.5.2 Initiatives in Kerala

In Kerala, the Oral History Project was launched by the Kerala Council for Historical Research in 2004. The main purpose of this project was to document the lives and experiences of marginalised communities, including women, Dalits, and Adivasis. One of the key initiatives of the project was the compilation of Malayalam Proverbs, resulting in the publication of *Keralathile Pazhanjollukkal* in 2012.

A similar initiative was conducted in 2005 to collect and document the lives of the people under the project titled '*A Day in the Life of a Malayali*'. This project aimed at recording everyday experiences. This project aimed to project the everyday life of Malayalees, including their lived experiences, routines, and thoughts. The segments in the project comprise two types of reports. One was the first-person accounts, where the individuals document their own experiences of the day, and the next was the second person report, which captures the lived experience of another person, prepared in discussion with them and uploaded with their approval. One of the key features of this initiative is its inclusivity and representation of diverse sects of Malayalees.

Shamshad Hussain's work "Malabar Kalapatinte Vamozhiparambaryam" demonstrates the importance of oral accounts in revealing new perspectives of history. The work provides valuable insights beyond traditional historical accounts, highlighting the role of memory, representation, and narrative in shaping our understanding of



the past. The work also emphasises that these oral narratives often capture the everyday anxieties, joys, and fears of the people during the period. Therefore, it was an attempt to go beyond the grand narratives of colonialism. The work suggests that these historical records acknowledge the presence of diverse representations of the Malabar Rebellion in historical writing and literature. Therefore, the memories of the rebellion are shaped within this existing discourse.

The work also highlights how contemporary experiences helped the people to recall the Rebellion. Issues like scarcity, labour, health issues and bravery are considered for the narration. She points out that the Malabar Rebellion, portrayed in oral accounts, differs from other representations due to its focus on local, domestic and individual experiences. This shift in focus led to diverse perspectives on the rebellion. However, these narratives do not offer an unbiased or objective past. Instead, they develop into the complexities of memory and experience. The work also highlights the importance of text and language in the narrative context to understand the past. She has also challenged societal standards and revealed the complexities of social life through language and storytelling.

The work then highlights the role of women in narrating the rebellion. It highlights that the accounts of the women focus on their personal experiences within the domestic sphere. Men, on the other hand, tend to present the rebellion as a subject of knowledge. It, therefore, emphasises that these differences should not be interpreted as gendered but rather as a reflection of different social positions and experiences.

Hussain also highlights that religious identity alone cannot explain the perspectives of the narrators on the communal aspects of the rebellion. The narrations reveal a wide range of opinions about the rebellion, including those of Muslims and Hindus, who see the rebellion as a great struggle. These narratives, therefore, challenge the single interpretation of the rebellion. The work, therefore, emphasises the need to consider a diverse range of oral sources to have a nuanced understanding of the past. It also highlights how the mainstream discourses and national institutions shape these memories, reinforcing certain narratives and marginalising other narratives.

## Recap

- ◆ Oral history is an important tool for understanding the freedom movement
- ◆ It provides firsthand accounts from the participants and witnesses of the movement
- ◆ Oral history has evolved over time
- ◆ The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi played a key role in creating oral histories of the Indian freedom movement
- ◆ By the 21st century, oral history became an established method

- ◆ Scholars began to explore the stories of partition themes
- ◆ Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor and Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92* examines how the Chauri Chaura incident transformed from a "bloody riot" into a symbol of the freedom struggle
- ◆ Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* explores the hidden voices of partition survivors, particularly women
- ◆ The Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) launched the Oral History Project in 2004 to document the experiences of marginalised communities
- ◆ One such project is *A Day in the Life of a Malayali*
- ◆ Shamshad Hussain's *Malabar Kalapatinte Vamozhiparambaryam* highlights oral narratives of the Malabar Rebellion

## Objective Questions

1. Who was one of the earliest Indian writers to use oral history in documenting the freedom movement?
2. What was the title of Amritlal Nagar's work on the 1857 Mutiny?
3. Which institution initiated an oral history project focusing on India's freedom movement?
4. Which book documents the role of women in the Telangana People's Struggle?
5. What is the focus of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*?
6. Which institution launched the Kerala Oral History Project?
7. What does Shamshad Hussain's work on the Malabar Rebellion highlight?

## Answers

1. Amritlal Nagar
2. *Gadar Ke Phool*

3. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
4. *We Were Making History*
5. Experiences of Women During Partition
6. Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR)
7. Local oral narratives and personal memories

## Assignments

1. Discuss the significance of oral history in understanding the Indian freedom movement. Provide examples from the works of Shahid Amin and Urvashi Butalia.
2. How did oral history projects in Kerala contribute to documenting the experiences of marginalised communities?

## Reference

1. Chowdhury Indira, *Speaking of the Past: Perspectives on Oral History*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 49, No. 30, 2014.
2. Butalia Urvashi, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1998.

## Suggested Reading

1. Amin Shahid, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*, 1995.
2. Hussain Shamshad, K T, *Oral Traditions of Malabar Rebellion*, Part II, Thesis submitted to the Department of Malayalam, Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit.



## BLOCK

# Sources and Methods



# UNIT

## Oral Testimonies

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine the nature of oral testimonies
- ◆ discuss the role of individual and collective memory
- ◆ evaluate the theories of Halbwachs, Assmann, and Burke to assess how memory is constructed, preserved, or marginalised in societies
- ◆ apply ethical interview techniques to conduct oral history research

### Prerequisites

Oral testimonies serve as a vital bridge between the past and the present, offering a unique lens through which we can understand historical events, cultural practices, and personal experiences. Unlike written records, which often reflect the perspectives of those in power, oral testimonies provide a platform for marginalised voices, offering a more democratic and inclusive narrative of history. Through the study of oral testimonies, we explore the interplay between individual memory and collective memory, shedding light on how societies remember, interpret, and transmit their past. This chapter delves into the intricate relationship between oral testimonies, collective and individual memory, and the methodologies involved in conducting interviews to elicit these memories.

### Keywords

Oral Testimonies, Collective Memory, Symbolic Spaces, Power Dynamics, Interview, Archiving





## Discussion

### 2.1.1 Nature of Oral Testimonies

Oral testimonies are firsthand accounts of experiences, events, or traditions conveyed through spoken words. These testimonies often take the form of interviews, storytelling, or recorded conversations and serve as primary sources for historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. Unlike official documents, oral testimonies often convey emotions, interpretations, and personal insights that enrich historical narratives. These testimonies are invaluable for several reasons:

- **Subjectivity:** Oral testimonies capture the subjective experiences of individuals, providing a personal and emotional dimension to historical events. This authenticity can offer insights that are often absent in official documents.
- **Inclusivity:** They bring to light the voices of those who may have been excluded from written histories, such as women, minorities, and the working class. This diversity enriches our understanding of the past.
- **Dynamic:** Unlike static written records, oral testimonies can evolve over time as individuals reinterpret their memories in light of new experiences or societal changes.

Oral testimonies are crucial in preserving histories that might otherwise be marginalised or forgotten. They are particularly significant in societies with strong oral traditions, where storytelling functions as a primary means of transmitting knowledge across generations. Additionally, they play a vital role in contexts where written documentation is scarce or deliberately erased, such as in the histories of indigenous communities, enslaved peoples, and oppressed groups.

### 2.1.2 Individual Memory

Individual memory forms the foundation of oral testimony, as each account is shaped by personal experiences, emotions, and perspectives. Memory is subjective and influenced by various factors, including time, emotion, and social context. As a result, oral testimonies may reflect selective recollections, emphasising certain aspects of an experience while omitting others.

When individuals recount their experiences, they draw upon their episodic and semantic memories to construct a narrative. However, this process is not a straightforward retrieval of stored information; it involves reconstruction and interpretation. Memory capabilities can change with age. For instance, older adults may experience declines in episodic memory but retain semantic memory and procedural skills. Emotional experiences are often remembered more vividly and accurately than neutral ones. This is due to the involvement of the amygdala, which enhances the encoding and storage of emotionally charged events. The social and cultural environment can shape how individuals remember and interpret their experiences. Cultural narratives and social interactions can influence the encoding, storage, and retrieval of memories. However, it is important to note that every individual interprets their past based on personal beliefs, values, and contemporary influences. Memory is often reconstructed rather than retrieved, making testimonies dynamic rather than collective oral accounts of history.

### 2.1.3 Collective Memory and its Adherents

In general, collective memory refers to the shared pool of knowledge and information

held by a group or society about its past. It is shaped by social interactions, cultural practices, and institutional narratives. While individual memory is personal, collective memory is constructed through the retelling and reinforcement of historical events within a community. The works of Halbwachs, Assmann, and Burke collectively illustrate the complex interplay between individual and collective memory.

### 2.1.3.1 Maurice Halbwachs and Collective Memory

Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and student of Émile Durkheim, is often regarded as the founding figure in the study of collective memory. In his seminal work *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925), Halbwachs argues that memory is inherently social. He posits that individual memory cannot exist in isolation; it is always framed within the context of social groups, such as family, religion, or class. According to Halbwachs, even our most personal memories are shaped by the social frameworks in which we live. For example, an individual's memory of a childhood birthday party is not just a personal recollection but is influenced by family traditions, cultural norms around celebrations, and even broader societal values about childhood and family life.

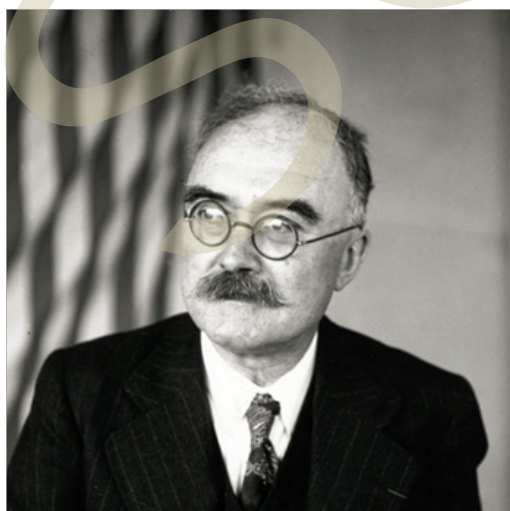


Fig.2.1.1 Maurice Halbwachs

Halbwachs identified several key processes through which collective memory operates. First, memory is always reconstructed to serve present needs. Groups do not passively preserve the past but actively reshape it to maintain identity and cohesion. This explains why historical events are remembered differently by various social groups—each reconstructs the past according to its current perspectives and requirements.

Second, collective memory depends on physical and symbolic spaces. Halbwachs' analysis of urban spaces demonstrated how neighbourhoods, landmarks, and institutions serve as “anchors” for memory. When these spaces change or disappear, the memories associated with them become vulnerable to distortion or erasure. Thus, Halbwachs' work underscores the idea that memory is not just an individual cognitive process but a social phenomenon deeply embedded in the structures and practices of society.

### 2.1.3.2 Jan Assmann and Cultural Memory

Building on Halbwachs' work, Jan Assmann extends the concept of collective memory to include cultural memory. In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992), he differentiates between communicative memory, which is based on oral transmission within a community and lasts for roughly three generations, and cultural memory, which extends over centuries through texts, monuments, and rituals.

Communicative memory refers to the everyday, informal memories shared within a group, typically spanning three to four generations. It is characterised by its orality and fluidity, constantly evolving as it is passed down through stories, anecdotes, and personal experiences. For example, the memory of a family's migration story is preserved through the retelling of personal experiences by grandparents, parents, and

other relatives. Each individual's recollection contributes to the family's collective memory, but the collective memory also shapes how individuals remember and narrate their experiences. Over time, certain details may be emphasised or forgotten, reflecting the evolving needs and values of the group.

In contrast, cultural memory is more stable and enduring, often preserved through texts, rituals, monuments, and other cultural artefacts. Cultural memory serves to anchor a group's identity in a more permanent and formalised past, providing a sense of continuity and legitimacy. Assmann's distinction highlights the different ways in which societies remember and the role of institutions in shaping and preserving memory. While communicative memory is more immediate and personal, cultural memory is more abstract and symbolic, often serving as a repository of a group's foundational myths and values.

Thus, cultural memory provides societies with a means of long-term self-preservation by institutionalising certain narratives about the past. Assmann highlights how memory is not merely an act of recalling but a deliberate process of shaping historical consciousness. By encoding collective experiences in cultural artefacts, societies maintain continuity and reinforce identity across generations. His work is particularly influential in studies of nationalism, religion, and historical trauma.

### 2.1.3.3 Peter Burke and Social Memory

Peter Burke, a British historian, offers a complementary perspective on the relationship between individual and collective memory by exploring the role of history as a form of social memory. In his work *History and Social Theory* (1992), Burke argues that history is not merely an objective recounting of past events but a form of memory that is shaped by social and cultural contexts.

He emphasises that historians, like all individuals, are influenced by the social frameworks in which they operate, and their interpretations of the past are inevitably shaped by the present.

Burke uses social memory to describe how societies remember and forget. He argues that social memory is selective, emphasising certain events while marginalising or forgetting others. For example, national histories often emphasise the achievements of certain groups while marginalising or erasing the experiences of others. This selectivity is often influenced by power dynamics, as dominant groups within a society have the ability to shape the collective memory in ways that serve their interests. However, this selective memory is not merely a top-down process; individuals and marginalised groups can also resist or challenge dominant memories, creating counter-memories that offer alternative perspectives on the past.

Burke's work highlights the political dimensions of memory, showing how it can be used as a tool for both inclusion and exclusion. His work underscores the importance of critically assessing historical sources and recognising the power dynamics involved in remembering and forgetting.

### 2.1.4 The Art of the Interview

Oral history interviews are a powerful method for capturing personal narratives and firsthand accounts of historical events, cultural practices, and social changes. These interviews provide a unique perspective that enriches our understanding of the past, often shedding light on experiences that are not documented in written records. This section provides a detailed guide for the learner on how to conduct an oral history interview, from preparation to execution and post-interview processes.

### 2.1.4.1 Preparation and Planning

#### A. Research and Contextual Understanding:

- **Historical Context:** Familiarise yourself with the historical period, events, and social context relevant to the interviewee's experiences. This background knowledge will help you ask informed and pertinent questions.
- **Interviewee Background:** Gather information about the interviewee's life, including key events, roles, and experiences. This can be done through preliminary conversations, existing records, or secondary sources.

#### B. Setting Objectives:

- **Define Purpose:** Clearly articulate the purpose of the interview. Are you documenting a specific event, exploring a particular theme, or capturing a life story?
- **Identify Key Themes:** Determine the key themes or topics you want to cover. This will guide the structure of your interview and ensure comprehensive coverage.

#### C. Developing a Question Guide:

- **Open-Ended Questions:** Prepare open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses. For example, "Can you describe your daily life during that period?" or "What was your role in that event?"
- **Follow-Up Questions:** Anticipate potential follow-up questions to delve deeper into specific areas. For instance, "How did that experience affect you personally?"
- **Chronological Flow:** Organise questions in a logical, often chronological sequence to help the interviewee recount their story coherently.

#### D. Logistics:

- **Location:** Choose a quiet, comfortable, and neutral location for the interview. Ensure it is free from distractions and interruptions.
- **Equipment:** Test your recording equipment (audio or video) beforehand to ensure it is functioning properly. Have backup equipment and batteries ready.
- **Consent Forms:** Prepare consent forms that explain the purpose, process, and use of the interview. Ensure the interviewee understands their rights and agrees to participate.

### 2.1.4.2 Conducting the Interview: Techniques and Strategies

#### A. Building Rapport:

- **Initial Conversation:** Begin with casual conversation to put the interviewee at ease. Discuss neutral topics to build a connection and establish trust.
- **Active Listening:** Show genuine interest and attentiveness. Use verbal affirmations, nodding, and maintaining eye contact to encourage the interviewee.

#### B. Asking Questions:

- **Clarity and Simplicity:** Ask clear and concise questions. Avoid jargon or complex language that may confuse the interviewee.
- **Pacing:** Allow the interviewee time to think and respond. Avoid rushing or interrupting.
- **Probing and Clarifying:** Use follow-up questions to explore interesting points further. Clarify any ambiguous or unclear responses.





### C. Non-Verbal Communication:

- **Body Language:** Use open and inviting body language. Avoid crossing arms or displaying signs of impatience.
- **Facial Expressions:** Maintain a friendly and encouraging facial expression to convey empathy and understanding.

### D. Managing the Flow:

- **Flexibility:** Be prepared to deviate from the question guide if the interviewee introduces new and relevant topics.
- **Balancing Control:** Gently steer the conversation back on track if it drifts too far from the main objectives, but allow for natural digressions that may yield valuable insights.

## 2.1.4.3 Ethical Considerations

### A. Informed Consent:

- **Transparency:** Clearly explain the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, and any potential risks or benefits.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Ensure that the interviewee understands their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time.

### B. Confidentiality and Anonymity:

- **Privacy:** Respect the interviewee's privacy and confidentiality. Discuss any conditions under which their identity or information may be disclosed.
- **Anonymity:** Offer the option of anonymity if the interviewee prefers it, especially when discussing sensitive topics.

### C. Sensitivity and Respect:

- **Emotional Well-being:** Be mindful of the interviewee's emotional state. Avoid pressing too hard on sensitive or traumatic topics.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Be aware of and respect cultural differences and norms that may affect the interview process.

## 2.1.4.4 Post-Interview: Reflection and Analysis

### A. Reviewing and Transcribing:

- **Immediate Review:** Review the recording or notes soon after the interview to capture any immediate reflections or observations.
- **Transcription:** Transcribe the interview accurately by capturing every word, including pauses and hesitations, to maintain authenticity, noting any significant non-verbal cues or emotional expressions.

### B. Analysing Content:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Identify key themes, patterns, and insights from the interview. Use coding or categorisation techniques to organise the data.
- **Contextualisation:** Place the interviewee's responses within the broader context of the research or project. Compare and contrast with other interviews or sources.

### C. Feedback and Follow-Up:

- **Interviewee Feedback:** Share the transcript or summary with the interviewee for verification and feedback. This ensures accuracy and respects their contribution.
- **Follow-Up Interviews:** Schedule follow-up interviews if additional information or clarification is needed.



### 2.1.4.5 Preservation and Archiving

#### A. Digital Storage and Accessibility

- Audio and video files should be stored in multiple formats to prevent technological obsolescence.
- Digital copies should be backed up in secure locations (e.g., cloud storage, external drives).
- Archives should follow metadata standards to ensure accessibility for future researchers.

#### B. Integration into Educational and Research Materials

- Oral histories can be used in history books, documentaries, podcasts, and museum exhibits.
- Schools and universities should incorporate them into academic curriculums for a more personal understanding of history.

### 2.1.4.6 Challenges and Solutions

#### A. Reluctance or Hesitation:

- **Building Trust:** Spend time building rapport and trust. Reassure the interviewee of the confidentiality and importance of their contribution.

- **Patience:** Be patient and give the interviewee time to open up. Avoid pushing too hard or too quickly.

#### B. Memory Lapses or Inaccuracies:

- **Gentle Probing:** Use gentle probing to help the interviewee recall details. Avoid leading questions that may influence their responses.
- **Cross-Verification:** Where possible, cross-verify information with other sources or interviewees to ensure accuracy.

#### C. Dominance or Verbosity:

- **Politely Redirecting:** Politely redirect the conversation if the interviewee becomes overly dominant or verbose. Use follow-up questions to refocus on key topics.
- **Balancing Time:** Manage the interview time effectively to cover all important areas without rushing or cutting short valuable insights.

#### D. Technical and Financial Constraints

- Oral history projects require recording equipment, transcription services, and secure storage, which can be costly.
- **Solution:** Securing grants and institutional support from historical societies, universities, and cultural organisations.

## Recap

- ◆ Oral testimonies are firsthand spoken accounts of experiences, events, or traditions
- ◆ These testimonies often take the form of interviews, storytelling, and recorded conversations and serve as primary sources for scholars
- ◆ Individual memory is subjective and shaped by personal experiences, emotions and social context



- ◆ Maurice Halbwachs' foundational insight is that individual memory is never truly isolated even personal recollections are shaped by the social groups to which we belong, like families, communities, nations, or religious groups
- ◆ Jan Assmann's works state that societies use cultural memory to create a shared past, often through myths, institutions and symbols
- ◆ Peter Burke's work on social memory introduces a critical dimension to the interplay between individual and collective memory that is, in the role of power. Dominant groups in political, cultural, or economic spheres have the ability to influence what is remembered, how it is remembered, and what is forgotten
- ◆ Memory is not a fixed or static entity but a dynamic process that is continually reconstructed and reinterpreted
- ◆ Oral history interviews are a powerful method for capturing personal narratives and firsthand accounts of historical events, cultural practices, and social changes
- ◆ The interview is a meticulous process consisting of five important phases: planning, conduct, ethics, reflection and archiving

## Objective Questions

1. What is the primary form in which oral testimonies are conveyed?
2. Which part of the brain enhances the encoding of emotionally charged memories?
3. Why are oral testimonies considered dynamic?
4. Who is considered the founding figure in the study of collective memory?
5. What does Maurice Halbwachs emphasise about memory?
6. What is the process of converting spoken words into a written text format called?
7. Which type of memory lasts roughly three generations and is transmitted orally?
8. Which type of question is most effective in an oral history interview?
9. In which format are oral histories preserved today?

## Answers

1. Spoken words
2. Amygdala
3. They change over time due to reinterpretation
4. Maurice Halbwachs
5. Social construct
6. Transcription
7. Communicative memory
8. Open-ended questions
9. Digital

## Assignments

1. Analyse how Peter Burke's theory of social memory explains the way a national holiday is celebrated in your country. Whose narratives are emphasised, and whose are marginalised? How does this reflect power dynamics in collective memory?
2. Design an oral history project including choosing a historical event and theme. Outline your interview process including preparation, questions, and ethical considerations. Explain how you would address challenges like bias or memory gaps.

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# UNIT

## Digital Sources

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine the evolution of oral history technology
- ◆ evaluate the advantages of digital oral history
- ◆ assess the conduct of virtual interviews
- ◆ discuss the impact of digital platforms in improving organisation, accessibility, and longevity of oral histories
- ◆ examine the challenges in maintaining digital archives

### Prerequisites

Oral history has long been a valuable tool for historians, anthropologists, and researchers seeking to document personal narratives, lived experiences, and cultural traditions. Traditionally conducted through in-person interviews and physical documentation, the field has evolved significantly with the advent of digital sources and virtual interviews. These advancements have expanded the reach and accessibility of oral history while introducing new methodological considerations, ethical concerns, and best practices. The practice of oral history has evolved significantly with advancements in digital technology. Traditional methods of conducting face-to-face interviews and recording on analog devices have been supplemented and, in some cases, replaced by digital tools, virtual interviews, and online archives. This chapter explores the transformative impact of digital sources and virtual interviews on oral history, examining their benefits, challenges, and best practices for implementation.



## Keywords

Digitisation, Metadata, Transcription, Audio-Visual, Digital Divide

## Discussion

### 2.2.1 Digital Sources in Oral History

The practice of oral history has evolved significantly over the decades. Initially, historians relied on written records and audio tapes to capture narratives. Cassette tapes and reel-to-reel recordings were widely used until the late 20th century when digital recording devices began to replace analog methods. The introduction of portable digital audio recorders and camcorders allowed for higher-quality recordings with enhanced accessibility and storage capabilities.

The rise of digital technology in the 21st century has revolutionised oral history by offering better recording, editing, and preservation methods. Modern advancements such as high-definition cameras, cloud storage, and AI-driven transcription services have made oral histories more interactive and widely accessible. Digital platforms enable researchers to store, organise, and share content efficiently, ensuring the longevity of recorded testimonies.

Digital sources encompass a wide range of materials that support oral history research. These include digitised archives, multimedia repositories, online databases, social media platforms, and cloud storage systems. The integration of digital sources into oral history has transformed data collection, preservation, and dissemination.

Oral history has always relied on recording technologies, from early wax cylinders and reel-to-reel tapes to cassette recorders and digital audio files. The digital revolution has introduced new possibilities:

- High-quality recordings: Digital devices offer superior sound clarity and longevity compared to analog formats.
- Ease of storage and access: Digital files can be stored on hard drives, cloud services, and institutional repositories.
- Enhanced editing and transcription: Software like Audacity, Otter.ai, and Trint allows for easy editing, transcription, and indexing.

However, this shift also raises concerns about digital preservation, data security, and ethical considerations.

### 2.2.2 Virtual Interviews in Oral History

Virtual interviews have become an essential tool in the oral history process, particularly when in-person interviews are impractical due to geographic, economic, or logistical constraints. The widespread availability of internet-based communication platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Google Meet has revolutionised oral history, making it more accessible and flexible.

While in-person interviews remain valuable for establishing rapport and capturing non-verbal cues, virtual interviews provide an effective alternative that enables historians to engage with narrators regardless of location. However, these digital methods introduce new considerations related to ethics, technology, security, and data management.

Smartphones and tablets now serve as viable recording tools, making oral history more accessible to amateur researchers.

## 1. Preparation and Planning

The success of a virtual oral history interview depends on thorough preparation. Both the interviewer and the interviewee must be comfortable with the technology and the interview environment.

- **Choosing the Right Platform :** Select a video conferencing tool based on the interviewee's accessibility and digital literacy. Platforms like Zoom offer recording capabilities, while encrypted options like Signal or Jitsi Meet may be preferred for sensitive interviews.
- **Technical Requirements :** Ensure both parties have a stable internet connection, a high-quality microphone, and adequate lighting for video-based interviews.

## 2. Ethical Considerations

Digital interviews introduce ethical challenges, particularly regarding informed consent, privacy, and data ownership.

- **Informed Consent :** Clearly explain the purpose of the interview, how the data will be used, where it will be stored, and who will have access. Obtain written or recorded consent before proceeding.
- **Data Security :** Use encrypted storage solutions and password-protected files to protect interview recordings. Ensure compliance with data protection laws such as GDPR or institutional ethical guidelines.
- **Confidentiality:** Discuss potential risks of recording a conversation online, especially for interviews involving sensitive or politically charged topics.

## 3. Technical Considerations

- **Recording Formats and Backup :** Save recordings in multiple formats

(MP4, WAV, MP3) to prevent data loss. Store backups in multiple locations (external hard drives, cloud storage).

- **Automated Transcription Tools:** Use transcription software or AI-assisted tools to facilitate documentation. Some of these AI-based tools include Otter.ai, Trint, or Descript to generate transcripts, but verify accuracy manually.

### 2.2.2.1 Audio-Visual Digital Recordings

The transition from analog to digital recording technologies has not only improved audio documentation in oral history but also revolutionised the use of audio-visual (AV) recordings. While traditional oral history primarily relied on audio cassettes, modern digital tools now enable high-quality video interviews, synchronised transcripts, and multimedia archives. Historically, oral history was audio-centric due to technological limitations. However, digital advancements have made video recording an integral part of contemporary oral history for several reasons:

- **Non-verbal communication :** Video recordings capture facial expressions, gestures, and emotions, making the narratives more compelling and authentic.
- **Emotional resonance :** Seeing a narrator's emotions adds richness to their testimony.
- **Multisensory engagement :** Video formats engage younger audiences more effectively than audio-only.
- **Contextual richness :** The visual component allows historians to see the interviewee's surroundings, clothing, and mannerisms, adding depth to their storytelling.



### 2.2.3 Advantages of Digital Sources

#### 1. Accessibility and Preservation:

Digital archives offer unprecedented access to vast repositories of oral history materials, including recorded interviews, transcripts, photographs, and historical documents. Unlike traditional paper-based archives that are vulnerable to physical degradation, digital sources ensure long-term preservation. With proper metadata tagging and cloud storage solutions, digital sources can be backed up and duplicated, reducing the risk of loss due to natural disasters, wear and tear, or accidental damage. Furthermore, open-access platforms allow researchers, educators, and the general public to access historical materials from anywhere in the world, democratizing knowledge and expanding engagement with oral history.

#### 2. Wider Reach :

Historically, oral history research was constrained by geographical boundaries and the logistical challenges of travel. Digital sources eliminate these constraints, allowing researchers to engage with a wide range of perspectives across different regions, cultures, and time periods. This is particularly beneficial for preserving the histories of marginalised, displaced, or diasporic communities, whose voices might otherwise be difficult to capture through traditional means.

#### 3. Enhanced Searchability :

Traditional archives require time-consuming manual searches through physical records, whereas digital archives enhance efficiency through keyword searches, categorisation, and metadata tagging. This allows historians to instantly locate relevant materials

based on themes, time periods, interviewees, or specific phrases. Additionally, indexing digital sources enables automated cross-referencing, helping researchers discover connections between different oral history narratives that might not have been apparent through manual analysis.

#### 4. Multimedia Integration :

Oral history is no longer confined to audio recordings; digital sources allow for the incorporation of video, text, and interactive elements that enhance storytelling. For instance, video interviews can capture facial expressions, gestures, and emotions, providing deeper insights into the narrator's experience. Interactive timelines, geotagging, and hyperlinked annotations further enrich historical narratives and enhance user engagement.

#### 5. Collaborative Research :

Digital platforms facilitate collaboration between scholars, archivists, institutions, and local communities. Projects such as crowd-sourced transcription initiatives and community-driven oral history platforms empower individuals to contribute their own narratives, enriching historical archives with diverse perspectives. This participatory model makes oral history more inclusive, ensuring that community voices are represented and preserved alongside academic research.

#### 6. Cost-Effectiveness and Environmental Sustainability :

Conducting research via digital sources minimizes the financial burden of travel, printing, and physical storage. Digitalisation reduces the need for paper records, film reels, and cassette

tapes, making oral history research more cost-effective. Furthermore, by reducing the demand for physical resources, digital sources contribute to sustainability efforts and reduce the environmental footprint of archival work.

## 2.2.4 Notable Oral History Archives

### 1. Society of American Archivists (SAA)

Founded in 1936, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is the oldest and largest professional organisation dedicated to the preservation and accessibility of historical records in the United States. SAA supports archivists, records managers, and information professionals by promoting best practices, professional development, and advocacy for archival institutions. Through its initiatives, SAA plays a crucial role in preserving historical records, ensuring access to information, and shaping the future of archival work.

SAA's mission is to serve as a leader in archival education, policy, and standards, ensuring that historical materials are preserved and accessible for research and public use. The organisation provides resources for archivists working in libraries, museums, government agencies, universities, and corporations, helping them navigate the challenges of digital preservation, ethical stewardship, and information management.

SAA also plays an active role in advocacy and public policy, defending the importance of archives in democracy. It works to protect funding for archival institutions, promote open access to public records, and support laws that ensure government transparency and historical preservation.

A key function of SAA is providing training and certification programmes that help archivists develop specialised skills

in areas like digital preservation, metadata management, and oral history archiving. Their Digital Preservation Initiatives support the transition from analog (cassettes, reel-to-reel) to digital formats. The annual SAA Conference brings together professionals to exchange ideas, discuss emerging trends, and explore innovative technologies in archival science.

SAA also publishes journals, books, and guidelines, including *The American Archivist*, one of the most respected peer-reviewed publications in the field. These resources contribute to ongoing scholarship and research in archival studies.

### 2. Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW)

The Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) is a pioneering archival institution in India dedicated to documenting, preserving, and amplifying the voices and experiences of women. Established in 1988 by a group of feminist scholars, including Dr. C.S. Lakshmi, SPARROW focuses on collecting oral histories, photographs, films, and other multimedia materials that highlight the contributions of women in various spheres of life. By creating a rich archive of women's narratives, SPARROW challenges historical biases and ensures that women's stories are not lost or overlooked.

SPARROW was founded with the belief that history has traditionally been recorded from a male perspective, often ignoring the voices and experiences of women. To address this gap, the archive collects firsthand testimonies, visual records, and literary works that showcase women's roles in political movements, social struggles, literature, and everyday life.

One of its core missions is to document oral histories, particularly of women from marginalised backgrounds, including





Dalit women, tribal women, and women involved in grassroots activism. By doing so, SPARROW ensures that these voices are preserved for academic research, education, and public awareness. SPARROW's Mission and Objectives include:

- **Documenting Women's Voices:** SPARROW collects oral histories of women from diverse backgrounds, highlighting their experiences in social movements, labour, politics, and everyday life. Highlights issues like gender discrimination, labour rights, and feminist movements.
- **Preserving Feminist History :** The archive safeguards materials related to feminist activism, literature, and cultural contributions.

- **Promoting Research and Education:** SPARROW serves as a research hub for scholars studying gender, history, and social change.
- **Encouraging Public Engagement:** The institution organises exhibitions, screenings, and publications to bring women's histories into the public domain.

SPARROW conducts oral history workshops to train researchers, students, and community members in recording and preserving narratives. It collaborates with scholars and activists to study gender dynamics in history. Subsequently, the archive produces books and documentaries that present women's voices in historical and cultural contexts.

## Recap

- ◆ Evolution of Oral History Technology saw the shift from analogue (cassettes, reel-to-reel) to digital tools (HD cameras, cloud storage, AI transcription)
- ◆ Digital Technology enhances recording, editing, and preservation
- ◆ Digital sources include archives, multimedia repositories, social media, and online databases
- ◆ Video interviews add non-verbal communication, emotional resonance, and contextual richness.
- ◆ Digital archives provide accessibility and searchability through cloud storage and metadata technologies streamlining research
- ◆ Digital archives prevent physical degradation and reduce travel, printing, and storage costs
- ◆ Ethical concerns include informed consent, data security, and confidentiality



## Objective Questions

1. What was a major advantage of digital audio recorders over analogue methods?
2. What does AV stand for in oral history recordings?
3. What is a key ethical consideration when storing interview data online?
4. Why are video recordings beneficial in oral history?
5. Which law ensures data protection in digital oral history archives in the EU?
6. Which platform is specifically designed to support public access to oral history collections?
7. What is online digital storage accessible remotely referred to as?
8. Which metadata standard is used for cataloguing oral history interviews?

## Answers

1. Higher quality and storage efficiency
2. Audio-Visual
3. Data security
4. Non-verbal communication
5. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
6. Omeka
7. Cloud storage
8. Dublin Core

## Assignments

1. Examine the impact of digital platforms on public engagement with oral history. Consider how websites, podcasts, and interactive exhibits help in democratising access to historical narratives.

2. Explore how digital tools (e.g., AI transcription, VR holograms) are transforming oral history archives. Discuss both the opportunities (e.g., accessibility) and risks (e.g., data loss, ethical concerns). Use examples like the Shoah Foundation's holograms or the challenges of digitising analogue tapes.
3. Analyse the challenges posed by the digital divide on oral history documentation.

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## UNIT

# Multidisciplinary

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ examine the multidisciplinary applications of Oral History
- ◆ understand the importance of Oral History Archives
- ◆ identify important oral history archives around the world
- ◆ assess challenges in Oral History preservation

### Prerequisites

Oral history is not confined to one academic domain; rather, it thrives at the intersection of several disciplines. As a method of historical inquiry based on recorded interviews with individuals who have personal knowledge of past events, oral history draws from fields such as history, anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, linguistics and education. This multidisciplinary character enhances its methodological richness and interpretive depth, allowing oral history to address questions that lie beyond the reach of traditional archival research.

This multidisciplinary notion is the basis for formation of Oral history archives that serve as vital repositories of human experiences, capturing voices, memories, and firsthand accounts of historical events. Unlike traditional textual archives, oral history collections provide an auditory and often visual insight into past narratives, preserving personal and communal histories that might otherwise be lost. These archives play an essential role in broadening the scope of historical documentation, ensuring that diverse perspectives, particularly those of marginalised communities, are included in the historical record. They bridge gaps in historical knowledge, empower marginalised groups to reclaim their narratives, and provide scholars with multidimensional insights into social, political, and cultural phenomena.



## Keywords

Multidisciplinary, Marginalised Voices, Oral History Archive, Cultural Preservation, Pubic Memory, Digitization

## Discussion

### 2.3.1 Oral History as Multidisciplinary Practice

Oral history archives inherently bridge multiple disciplines, offering rich, qualitative data that can be analysed from various perspectives. By examining the theoretical foundations, methodological tools, and practical applications within each discipline, we can analyse the unique versatility and expansive scope of oral history in contemporary research.

#### 1. History and Memory Studies

Historians rely on oral history archives to complement written records, providing insights into personal experiences and cultural memories. Oral histories help challenge dominant narratives and uncover marginalised voices, making them invaluable in reconstructing historical events from multiple viewpoints. The rise of subaltern studies that recovers the lived experiences of ordinary people – workers, women, minorities, and others excluded from mainstream narratives – is an important part of this. It analyses how individuals and communities remember and interpret historical events differently allowing historians to examine the emotional and subjective dimensions of history, offering a more nuanced understanding of the past.

Historians use oral testimonies to reinterpret major historical events such as wars, revolutions, migrations, and independence movements. Oral narratives provide texture, emotion, and nuance, challenging monolithic or state-centric

accounts. They also help fill chronological and factual gaps, offering alternative versions of events based on personal memory.

For example, Civil Rights History Project (CRHP) documents the Civil Rights Movement through firsthand accounts, offering insights that written records alone cannot provide.

#### 2. Anthropology and Ethnography

Anthropologists and ethnographers utilise oral histories to understand cultural practices, traditions, and community identities. Through storytelling, oral history archives capture folklore, rituals, and social norms that shape human behaviour and societal evolution. These records enable researchers to track cultural continuity and change, as well as the ways in which communities adapt to external influences over time.

Oral history plays a key role in preserving indigenous languages, rituals, cosmologies, and environmental knowledge. Through recorded interviews, anthropologists and oral historians work together to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and explore how memory shapes identity and social continuity.

For example, the Māori Oral History Archive records elders' stories to sustain cultural heritage and traditional ecological knowledge.

#### 3. Sociology and Political Science

Sociologists use oral histories to examine social structures, migration patterns, and collective memory. These narratives

provide insights into class, race, gender, and generational shifts within societies. Personal narratives provide insight into social mobility, occupational change, urbanization, and migration. The method reveals how individuals internalise or resist social norms.

Political scientists analyse oral histories for insights into governance, policy impacts, and grassroots movements, helping to document public sentiment and civic engagement. The voices captured in these archives can be instrumental in understanding how political ideologies and policies influence individuals and communities over time. Human Rights organisations record testimonies of political prisoners, refugees, and dissidents highlighting acts of resistance invisible to official records.

For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (e.g., South Africa) use oral testimonies to address historical injustices.

#### 4. Linguistics and Dialect Studies

Linguists benefit from oral history archives by studying language variation, dialects, and linguistic evolution. These archives provide authentic spoken data, helping scholars analyse regional accents, endangered languages, and speech patterns. Through audio recordings, they preserve pronunciation, syntax, idioms, and storytelling styles unique to particular communities. They analyse how people structure their narratives, negotiate meanings, and position themselves within stories. This aligns with oral history's focus on how language shapes memory and how narrators use rhetorical strategies to convey personal truths

Oral histories also play a key role in documenting language shifts due to globalization, migration, and cultural assimilation, offering crucial information for language preservation and revitalisation efforts.

For example, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) collects, preserves and researches on the various languages of the aboriginals of Australia.

#### 5. Psychology and Trauma Studies

Psychologists explore oral histories to study memory, identity formation, and trauma. Survivor testimonies, for example, provide crucial insights into the long-term effects of war, displacement, and social upheaval. Oral history archives serve as therapeutic tools in trauma studies, allowing individuals to process their experiences and share their narratives in meaningful ways. The study of personal storytelling can also reveal cognitive patterns related to memory retention and emotional resilience. The interview process often reveals emotional truths, trauma, nostalgia, and the malleability of recollection.

Apart from the individual, oral accounts illuminate how groups remember, forget, and reinterpret their past in relation to changing social realities. For instance, The Rwanda Genocide Oral History Project has gathered testimonies from survivors, shedding light on the psychological impact of mass violence and the coping mechanisms individuals develop over time.

#### 6. Digital Humanities and Technology

The digital humanities have transformed oral history archiving through advanced technologies such as AI-powered transcription, metadata tagging, and interactive web interfaces. Scholars use these tools to improve accessibility, preservation, and interdisciplinary research methodologies. Innovations such as speech recognition software, machine learning for pattern detection, and multimedia integration help expand the analytical capabilities of oral history archives, making them more dynamic and widely available to researchers



and the public. It connects oral history with podcasting, documentary filmmaking, and theatre.

For instance, the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA) uses AI and virtual reality (VR) tools to engage the audience directly with the archive through holograms.

## 7. Education and Empathy

Educators use oral history projects to engage students in active learning, research, and civic participation. Students learn to conduct interviews, analyse narratives, and connect personal experiences to broader historical contexts.

Oral history fosters intergenerational learning, especially in community-based education. It allows elders to transmit wisdom and life lessons, promoting respect, empathy, and continuity across generations.

For instance, 'The Voices of the Manhattan Project' educates students on nuclear history through witness accounts.

### 2.3.2 Multidisciplinarity through Oral History Archives

We will now look at how oral history archives around the world incorporate multidisciplinary approaches to bring out the various facets of oral history in a form and manner that resonates with the people of the community and nation, at the same time engaging the audience directly with the source.

#### 1. The Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive

The Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA) is one of the world's most extensive collections of oral testimonies from survivors and witnesses of genocide. Founded in 1994 by filmmaker Steven Spielberg after directing *Schindler's List*, the foundation

initially focused on preserving the voices of Holocaust survivors. Over time, it expanded its mission to include testimonies from survivors of other genocides, including the Armenian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide, the Cambodian Genocide, and the Nanjing Massacre. With over 55,000 testimonies from 65 countries in 43 languages, the archive serves as a vital resource for education, research, and historical preservation.

The University of Southern California (USC) now houses the Shoah Foundation, ensuring long-term preservation and access to the archive. With advancements in AI and virtual reality (VR), the foundation has developed interactive survivor holograms, allowing future generations to "converse" with survivors even after they have passed. This innovative approach ensures that survivor testimonies remain engaging and relevant.

Beyond the Holocaust, the Shoah Foundation's inclusion of testimonies from other genocides emphasises that genocide is a recurring human tragedy. By collecting and sharing these stories, the archive fosters global awareness, urging societies to learn from the past to prevent future atrocities.

#### 2. Society of American Archivists (SAA)

Founded in 1936, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is the oldest and largest professional organisation dedicated to the preservation and accessibility of historical records in the United States. SAA supports archivists, records managers, and information professionals by promoting best practices, professional development, and advocacy for archival institutions. Through its initiatives, SAA plays a crucial role in preserving historical records, ensuring access to information, and shaping the future of archival work.

SAA's mission is to serve as a leader in archival education, policy, and standards,

ensuring that historical materials are preserved and accessible for research and public use. The organisation provides resources for archivists working in libraries, museums, government agencies, universities, and corporations, helping them navigate the challenges of digital preservation, ethical stewardship, and information management.

SAA also plays an active role in advocacy and public policy, defending the importance of archives in democracy. It works to protect funding for archival institutions, promote open access to public records, and support laws that ensure government transparency and historical preservation.

A key function of SAA is providing training and certification programs that help archivists develop specialized skills in areas like digital preservation, metadata management, and oral history archiving. Their Digital Preservation Initiative supports the transition from analog (cassettes, reel-to-reel) to digital formats. The annual SAA Conference brings together professionals to exchange ideas, discuss emerging trends, and explore innovative technologies in archival science.

SAA also publishes journals, books, and guidelines, including *The American Archivist*, one of the most respected peer-reviewed publications in the field. These resources contribute to ongoing scholarship and research in archival studies.

### 3. Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW)

The Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) is a pioneering archival institution in India dedicated to documenting, preserving, and amplifying the voices and experiences of women. Established in 1988 by a group of feminist scholars, including Dr. C.S. Lakshmi, SPARROW focuses on collecting oral histories, photographs, films, and other

multimedia materials that highlight the contributions of women in various spheres of life. By creating a rich archive of women's narratives, SPARROW challenges historical biases and ensures that women's stories are not lost or overlooked.

SPARROW was founded with the belief that history has traditionally been recorded from a male perspective, often ignoring the voices and experiences of women. To address this gap, the archive collects firsthand testimonies, visual records, and literary works that showcase women's roles in political movements, social struggles, literature, and everyday life.

One of its core missions is to document oral histories, particularly of women from marginalised backgrounds, including Dalit women, tribal women, and women involved in grassroots activism. By doing so, SPARROW ensures that these voices are preserved for academic research, education, and public awareness. SPARROW's Mission and Objectives include:

- **Documenting Women's Voices:** SPARROW collects oral histories of women from diverse backgrounds, highlighting their experiences in social movements, labor, politics, and everyday life. Highlights issues like gender discrimination, labor rights, and feminist movements.
- **Preserving Feminist History :** The archive safeguards materials related to feminist activism, literature, and cultural contributions.
- **Promoting Research and Education:** SPARROW serves as a research hub for scholars studying gender, history, and social change.
- **Encouraging Public Engagement:** The institution organises exhibitions, screenings, and publications to bring women's histories into the public domain.



SPARROW conducts oral history workshops to train researchers, students, and community members in recording and preserving narratives. It Collaborates with scholars and activists to study gender dynamics in history. Subsequently, the archive produces books and documentaries that present women's voices in historical and cultural contexts.

#### 4. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) is a leading institution dedicated to the collection, preservation, and research of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories, and languages. Established in 1964, AIATSIS plays a crucial role in safeguarding the rich traditions, knowledge, and stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through its vast archives, academic research, and community engagement, AIATSIS works to ensure that Indigenous voices are at the center of historical and contemporary narratives.

AIATSIS is committed to documenting and protecting Indigenous heritage, with a focus on language, oral history, sacred sites, and traditional knowledge. It houses one of the largest collections of Indigenous cultural materials, including photographs, films, audio recordings, manuscripts, and artworks. This includes Over 40,000 hours of audio recordings of Aboriginal languages and stories. These archives not only preserve the past but also support language revitalisation efforts and cultural education programs.

By collaborating with Indigenous communities, AIATSIS ensures that cultural materials are managed ethically and respectfully, with Indigenous peoples maintaining control over their histories and narratives.

Beyond archiving, AIATSIS conducts and supports research on Indigenous land rights, cultural heritage, and social justice

issues. It played a key role in Native Title research, which helped Indigenous groups reclaim their ancestral lands. The institute also works to influence policy by advocating for reconciliation, self-determination, and Indigenous rights in Australia.

#### 5. The Māori Oral History Archive

The Māori Oral History Archive is a vital institution in New Zealand (Aotearoa) dedicated to preserving the stories, traditions, and knowledge of the Māori people, the country's Indigenous population. Rooted in whakapapa (genealogy), tikanga (customs), and kōrero tukuiho (oral traditions), this archive safeguards the voices of elders, leaders, and community members, ensuring that Māori history is recorded and passed down for future generations.

For centuries, Māori history has been primarily transmitted through oral storytelling, *waiata* (songs), and *whaikōrero* (formal speeches). The Māori Oral History Archive works to record, transcribe, and preserve these traditions, recognising that Māori perspectives have often been excluded from mainstream historical narratives. These oral histories provide firsthand accounts of colonisation, land dispossession, resistance movements, and cultural revival, offering a more complete understanding of New Zealand's history. The archive collaborates with Māori communities, historians, and linguists to ensure that these stories are preserved with cultural sensitivity and made accessible to future generations.



Fig.2.3.1. Modern waiata performance by Māori artists

## 6. South African History Archive (SAHA)

Established in 1988 during the darkest years of apartheid, the South African History Archive (SAHA) was born from the urgent need to rescue truth from repression. Operating first as a clandestine project to document state violence, SAHA has evolved into a formidable public archive that challenges historical amnesia, supports accountability, and empowers marginalised voices in South Africa's ongoing journey toward justice.

During apartheid, the regime controlled narratives through censorship, propaganda, and the destruction of evidence. SAHA countered this by:

- Smuggling and preserving banned documents, including anti-apartheid pamphlets, trial records, and underground photography.
- Recording oral testimonies of activists, detainees, and ordinary citizens exposed to forced removals and police brutality.
- Collaborating with liberation movements like the ANC and Black Sash to safeguard their records.

These materials later became critical for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), exposing apartheid-era crimes that officials had denied for decades.

Currently housed at University of Witwatersrand, the archive contains important materials from key organisations of the period such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), trade unions, women's movements, and student organisations that played crucial roles in dismantling apartheid.

SAHA treats archives as living tools for justice, not relics of the past. As part of this motto, it launched the landmark initiative, "Freedom of Information Programme", that trains communities to use the Promotion of

Access to Information Act (PAIA) to uncover corruption and human rights violations.

## 7. The Civil Rights History Project

The Civil Rights History Project (CRHP) is a landmark initiative in the United States, dedicated to documenting and preserving the firsthand accounts of individuals who participated in the Civil Rights Movement (1950s–1960s). Established through the Civil Rights History Project Act of 2009, this project is a collaboration between the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). By collecting oral histories from activists, community leaders, and ordinary citizens, the project ensures that the struggles and triumphs of the movement are recorded for future generations.

The Civil Rights Movement was one of the most transformative periods in American history, marked by nonviolent protests, legal battles, and grassroots organising aimed at ending racial segregation and securing equal rights for African Americans. While historical records document major events, the CRHP focuses on personal testimonies, capturing the voices of those who fought for change.

The CRHP's collection includes more than 1200 video and audio interviews with over 150 civil rights pioneers, many of whom were in their 70s, 80s, and 90s at the time of recording. These testimonies preserve critical perspectives on landmark events, such as:

- The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56), featuring stories from those who walked rather than submit to segregation.
- The Selma to Montgomery Marches (1965), with visceral accounts of Bloody Sunday and the fight for voting rights.





- The Freedom Rides (1961), where activists recall facing violent mobs to challenge segregated interstate travel.

Interviewees range from iconic leaders like Congressman John Lewis and Diane Nash to lesser-known foot soldiers, local teachers, students, and sharecroppers whose contributions were equally vital.

This project fills critical gaps in historical narratives by preserving the perspectives of activists, educators, clergy members, and everyday citizens who risked their lives for justice. These interviews provide unique insights into the challenges, strategies, and emotional impact of the movement, making history more personal and relatable.

### 2.3.3 Challenges in Oral History Archives

#### 1. Access & Ownership

One of the most pressing ethical dilemmas in oral history is navigating consent and intellectual property rights. Unlike traditional archives, oral histories often involve deeply personal, sometimes traumatic, narratives. Key concerns include:

- Who owns the story? the interviewee, the institution, or the community?
- Re-consent for new uses: A recording made for academic research might later be repurposed in a documentary or AI-driven project, raising questions about ongoing permissions.
- Posthumous rights: If a narrator passes away, do their descendants retain control over their voice and image?
- The South African History Archive (SAHA) grapples with these issues when documenting apartheid-era testimonies, where some survivors later regretted public exposure of their trauma.

Another problem is in how western archival practices often conflict with Indigenous oral traditions (e.g., public access vs. tribal protocols). The Māori Oral History Archive requires permission from elders before sharing certain recordings. The Zuni Tribe from New Mexico reclaimed oral histories from universities, arguing that sacred knowledge should not be publicly accessible.

#### 2. Funding & Sustainability

Many oral history projects rely on grants or institutional support, making long-term preservation a challenge. Conducting, transcribing, and cataloguing oral histories requires specialised skills and time. Digitizing analog tapes are expensive and long-term digital storage requires ongoing funding. Coupled with this many organisations lack archivists who specialise in oral history management.

Many oral history projects are grant-funded (e.g., NEH, UNESCO) but lack sustained financial support after initial collection. It may result in “Orphaned archives” with no staff or budget for upkeep.

Similarly, grassroots projects often rely on unpaid labor, leading to burnout. There can also be inconsistent standards when untrained volunteers conduct interviews. We see SPARROW face these challenges including limited funding for digitization and preservation; and Ethical concerns in interviewing sensitive topics (e.g., domestic violence).

#### 3. Digitization and Preservation

One of the most pressing challenges in oral history archiving is preservation. Historically, interviews were recorded on cassette tapes, reel-to-reel tapes, and VHS tapes, all of which degrade over time. Even with modern digital recording methods, files are at risk due to:



- **Format obsolescence:** A recording saved in a 1990s digital format may be unreadable today.
- **Storage costs:** High-quality audio/video files require massive server space, straining budgets.
- **Metadata loss:** Poorly labelled files become “orphaned,” rendering them useless for research.
- **Data Corruption:** Hard drives fail, and cloud storage is not infallible.

## Recap

- ◆ Oral history’s multidisciplinary nature, not only preserves voices that might otherwise be excluded from historical records but also bridges gaps between history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and more.
- ◆ Oral history archives are not just supplementary to written records, they are essential to a fuller, more equitable understanding of history.
- ◆ Archives save endangered languages, rituals, and oral traditions.
- ◆ Recording native speakers helps preserve pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary for future learners.
- ◆ Institutions such as the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and organisations like the Sound & Picture Archives for Research on Women (SPARROW) play crucial roles in standardizing practices and preserving marginalised voices.
- ◆ All oral history archives are multidisciplinary in their approach ensuring holistic understanding of society.
- ◆ Grassroots projects document local social movements that let communities reclaim their narratives.
- ◆ Preservation is a vital aspect of archiving. Older recordings on cassette or reel-to-reel tapes risk deterioration. Digitization is essential but resource-intensive.

## Objective Questions

1. What method does Oral history primarily use to collect data from multiple sources?
2. Which discipline benefits from oral history in understanding social mobility, identity, and class dynamics?
3. What is the primary goal of oral history archives?
4. Which is the oldest oral history archive in the world?
5. Which archive primarily focuses on preserving the voices and contributions of women in India?
6. How do Oral history archives help linguists?
7. What are archives that become non-operational due to lack of funding for preservation called?
8. What is a major risk in oral history preservation?

## Answers

1. Recorded interviews
2. Sociology
3. Preserving marginalised voices
4. Society of American Archivists
5. SPARROW
6. Study language evolution and dialects
7. Orphaned archives
8. Format obsolescence and data loss

## Assignments

1. Evaluate the multidisciplinary applications of oral history. How do different fields such as sociology, anthropology, and linguistics benefit from oral history archives?
2. Examine how oral history archives challenge dominant historical narratives. Discuss examples where oral testimonies have contradicted or expanded official histories.
3. Compare and contrast the goals, methodologies, and challenges of two oral history archives discussed in the chapter (e.g., SAA and SPARROW). How do their approaches reflect their specific cultural or historical contexts?

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## UNIT

# Question of Subjectivity

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ◆ discuss the role of subjectivity in oral history
- ◆ examine feminist approaches to oral history
- ◆ assess the concept of reflexivity
- ◆ evaluate the ethical challenges of oral history

### Prerequisites

Oral history has long been recognised as a vital methodological approach for capturing marginalised voices and experiences that are often excluded from traditional historical narratives. However, the question of subjectivity – how personal perspectives, biases, and emotions shape historical accounts – has been a central concern in oral history research. Feminist scholars have played a pivotal role in redefining subjectivity, not as a flaw to be corrected but as a crucial element that enriches historical understanding. Ethics and reflexivity are at the heart of feminist oral history, shaping how interviews are conducted, narratives are interpreted, and histories are preserved. By prioritising ongoing consent, trauma-sensitive methodologies, and shared authority, feminist scholars ensure that oral history remains an empowering, collaborative, and justice-oriented practice. This chapter explores the feminist interventions in oral history, examining how they have reshaped debates around memory, narrative authority, and the politics of representation.

### Keywords

Reflexivity, Positionality, Shared Authority, Multiplicity, Situated Knowledge





## Discussion

### 2.4.1 The Role of Subjectivity in Oral Histories

Subjectivity in oral histories refers to the ways in which personal experiences, emotions, and social positioning shape how individuals remember and recount their past. Oral histories are deeply intertwined with the lived realities of narrators, whose identities – shaped by gender, race, class, and other social factors – inform both what they remember and how they choose to express those memories. Unlike traditional historiographical methods that often seek to extract “objective” facts from sources, oral history embraces the fluidity of memory and the ways in which individuals construct meaning around past events. Subjectivity manifests in several ways:

1. **Memory and Retrospection:** Memory is fallible and selective. Individuals often reconstruct their past based on present emotions, personal biases, and external influences. This means that oral histories are not static accounts but rather evolving interpretations of events.
2. **Personal Perspective:** Every individual experiences history differently. Two people who lived through the same event may recount it in drastically different ways, highlighting the deeply personal nature of historical memory.
3. **Emotional Influence:** Personal feelings – trauma, nostalgia, pride, or resentment – colour how events are remembered and recounted.
4. **Influence of the Interviewer:** The dynamic between the interviewer and

the narrator can shape the way stories are told. The framing of questions, the relationship between the two parties, and even the cultural or political context of the interview can influence the narrative.

Subjectivity is both a strength and a challenge in oral history. On one hand, personal testimonies provide insights into lived experiences that are often absent from archival records. Emotions, perceptions, and individual interpretations add depth to historical understanding, revealing how people felt about events, not just how they occurred. On the other hand, memory is fallible, shaped by time, trauma, and personal bias. The emotional state of the interviewee can alter the way events are recalled and recounted, raising questions about historical accuracy.

### 2.4.2 Subjectivity in Traditional vs. Feminist Oral Histories

Traditional historiography often privileges objectivity, seeking to eliminate personal bias in favour of verifiable facts. Early oral historians, influenced by positivist approaches, sometimes treated interviews as raw data to be mined for empirical truths. However, feminist scholars challenged this perspective, arguing that subjectivity is inherent in all historical accounts and that personal narratives offer unique insights into lived experiences. Feminist oral historians, such as Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991), emphasised that:

- **Subjectivity reveals power dynamics:** Women’s stories are shaped by their social positions, and their narratives often reflect resistance to dominant historical discourses.

- **Emotion and memory are valuable:** Rather than dismissing emotional accounts as unreliable, feminist scholars argue that affect and memory are key to understanding historical trauma and resilience.
- **The interviewer's role is interactive:** Feminist methodologies reject the idea of a neutral interviewer, instead advocating for reflexive practices that acknowledge the researcher's influence on the narrative.

Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of recognising that subjectivity is not a weakness of oral history but rather one of its most valuable contributions to historical knowledge. As historian Luisa Passerini (1989) argues, oral histories should not be dismissed due to their emotional and interpretative nature; rather, they should be valued for offering insights into the ways individuals construct meaning in their lives. Subjectivity allows historians to understand not just what happened, but how individuals experienced, internalised, and interpreted historical events – insights that are often lost in official archives or traditional historical narratives.

While feminist approaches have expanded the possibilities of oral history, they also raise ethical questions:

- **Power imbalances :** How does the researcher's positionality affect the narrative?
- **Representation :** Who has the right to interpret and publish marginalised voices?
- **Trauma and exploitation :** How can oral historians avoid retraumatising participants while still documenting painful histories?

#### 2.4.2.1 The Feminist Critique of "Objectivity"

Feminist scholars have long critiqued

the notion of objectivity in historical and social scientific research. Joan Scott (1991) and Donna Haraway (1988) challenge the traditional epistemological frameworks that privilege detached, so-called neutral perspectives, arguing instead for the acknowledgment of situated knowledges. Haraway's concept of "situated knowledge" suggests that all knowledge is produced from specific social locations and perspectives, making it impossible to claim a universal, objective truth.

Oral histories, through their embrace of subjectivity, offer a means of recovering marginalised voices and experiences. For example, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) emphasise how oral history has been crucial for documenting the lived experiences of women, particularly those whose histories have been excluded from official archives. By centring the voices of women, especially those from working-class, indigenous, or racialised backgrounds, feminist oral historians challenge the biases of conventional historical narratives and broaden our understanding of the past.

Scholars like Luisa Passerini (1987) argued that subjectivity is not just inevitable but necessary for a more inclusive historiography. Alessandro Portelli (1991) reinforces this argument, stating that inconsistencies and contradictions in oral testimony should not be dismissed as inaccuracies but understood as revealing deeper truths about how people construct meaning. Oral histories expose the gaps in official records and demonstrate how memory, emotion, and social identity shape historical consciousness. Feminist scholars build upon this idea by arguing that women's oral histories, in particular, challenge the patriarchal assumptions embedded in traditional historical accounts, offering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past.

Key contributions include:



1. **The Personal as Political:** Feminist oral histories highlight how personal experiences (e.g., domestic labour, reproductive rights) are deeply political, challenging the public/private divide in historical analysis.
2. **Intersectionality:** Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality influenced oral historians to consider how race, class, gender, and sexuality shape subjective narratives.
3. **Narrative Authority:** Feminist scholars advocate for shared authority between interviewer and interviewee, allowing narrators to shape their own stories rather than conforming to the historian's agenda.

### 2.4.3 The Role of Reflexivity in Feminist Oral Histories

Given their rejection of objectivity, feminist scholars advocate for reflexivity in historical research. So, what is this reflexivity? Reflexivity involves critically examining the researcher's own positionality, biases, and relationship to their subjects. Unlike traditional historical approaches that assume a detached, objective researcher, feminist oral historians acknowledge that their own identities – shaped by gender, race, class, and other social factors – affect their interactions with participants and their interpretations of narratives.

Positionality refers to the researcher's social location and how it shapes their relationship with the narrator. Linda Shopes (2003) and Katherine Borland (1991) emphasise that oral historians must recognise how their positionality, which includes their own social identities – such as gender, race, and class – shapes the way they conduct interviews, interpret narratives, and construct historical accounts. For example, a

white feminist historian interviewing Black women about their experiences of racial and gendered oppression must acknowledge how her positionality influences the interview dynamics. The historian's assumptions, the questions she asks, and the way she interprets responses are all shaped by her background and perspective. Feminist scholars argue that being transparent about these influences is essential for producing ethical and responsible historical work.

Rather than seeking a single, authoritative historical truth, feminist scholars advocate for multiplicity in historical interpretation. This means recognising that multiple perspectives and conflicting narratives can coexist, each offering valuable insights into historical events. Oral history, with its emphasis on individual voices and diverse experiences, is a key methodological tool for capturing this multiplicity.

### 2.4.4 Using Reflexivity in the Interview Process

Given the inherent subjectivity in oral history, feminist scholars advocate for ethical and reflexive approaches to conducting interviews and interpreting narratives. Linda Shopes (2003) and Katherine Borland (1991) emphasise the importance of acknowledging the relationship between interviewer and narrator, recognising how power dynamics influence the production of oral history. Reflexivity, where researchers critically examine their positionality and role in shaping narratives, is a core feminist methodological principle.

For instance, in conducting oral histories with survivors of gender-based violence, feminist scholars emphasise the need for ethical sensitivity, ensuring that narrators maintain control over their stories and are not retraumatised by the research process. This ethical commitment extends to how oral histories are archived, analysed, and

presented, with feminist scholars advocating for collaborative and community-based methodologies that respect narrators' agency.

Traditional research ethics require informed consent, but feminist oral historians emphasise that consent must be an ongoing, iterative process rather than a one-time agreement. Given that oral histories often involve deeply personal, and sometimes painful, recollections, participants should have the ability to revise, withdraw, or reconsider their contributions at any stage of the research process. Linda Shopes (2003) argues that ethical oral history practices should prioritise narrators' agency, ensuring they maintain control over how their stories are told and interpreted.

Moreover, feminist scholars stress the importance of shared authority in oral history. Alessandro Portelli (1991) suggests that narrators should not be treated as passive sources of information but as co-creators of historical knowledge. This means allowing participants to review transcripts, provide feedback, and have a say in how their narratives are presented in publications or public archives. Sherna Berger Gluck (2011) highlights that, particularly in feminist oral history, the goal is not just to document experiences but to engage in a collaborative process where narrators retain ownership of their stories.

Katherine Borland (1991) highlights how interviewers can unintentionally impose their own interpretations onto narratives, sometimes distorting or misrepresenting the experiences of narrators. She argues that reflexivity involves recognising these biases and actively working to mitigate them by:

- Encouraging narrators to frame their own stories without imposing leading questions.
- Providing space for narrators to challenge the interviewer's assumptions.

- Being transparent about one's social position and potential biases in research publications.

Feminist oral historians advocate for shared authority, a term coined by Michael Frisch (1990), which challenges the traditional researcher-subject divide. Rather than positioning the historian as the sole interpreter of narratives, shared authority emphasises collaboration between the interviewer and narrator in shaping the final historical account.

This approach aligns with feminist methodologies that prioritise community engagement and reciprocal relationships. For example, in oral history projects with indigenous women or grassroots feminist activists, researchers often work closely with communities to ensure that narratives are represented in ways that reflect collective priorities rather than just academic interests. This might include co-authored publications, community-led archival projects, or oral history workshops where participants take an active role in shaping how their stories are recorded and shared.

#### **2.4.4.1 Trauma, Sensitivity, and Care Ethics**

Many feminist oral histories involve survivors of gender-based violence, political oppression, or other traumatic experiences. Conducting interviews on such sensitive topics requires an ethical approach that prioritises the well-being of participants. Feminist oral historians draw upon the principles of care ethics, emphasising empathy, emotional support, and attentiveness to the needs of the narrator.

For instance, in interviews with survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault, researchers must be prepared for emotional distress and ensure that narrators feel safe and supported. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) discusses the importance of recognising



trauma as a valid historical archive, one that should not be dismissed as overly emotional or unreliable but instead valued for its ability to convey lived experiences. Feminist oral historians, therefore, must develop interviewing techniques that allow for emotional expression without forcing narrators to relive painful memories in harmful ways.

Practical strategies include:

- Allowing narrators to set the pace and decide which aspects of their experiences they feel comfortable sharing.
- Offering breaks or stopping interviews if a participant becomes distressed
- Providing access to mental health resources or community support organisations.
- Ensuring that narrators can review and revise transcripts to remove content they later feel uncomfortable sharing.

Oral history also highlights the ways in which memory is not only cognitive but embodied – felt through gestures, pauses, tone of voice, and silences. For example, when survivors of gender-based violence recount their experiences, their testimonies are often punctuated by physical manifestations of trauma. Feminist oral historians argue that these non-verbal elements of storytelling should be treated as historical evidence rather than dismissed as subjective excess.

Furthermore, feminist scholars such as Marianne Hirsch (2008) have examined how post-memory – the way later generations inherit and reconstruct traumatic histories – affects the transmission of oral histories. This concept is particularly relevant when documenting the experiences of women who have survived violence, forced displacement, or war, as their narratives may be mediated through cultural silence, family storytelling, or political struggles.

#### 2.4.4.2 Ethical Archiving and Representation

Another crucial ethical consideration in feminist oral history is the archiving and representation of narratives. Historically, oral histories have been stored in institutional archives that may not be accessible to the very communities they document. Feminist scholars argue that ethical archiving requires ensuring that oral histories remain accessible, meaningful, and beneficial to the people whose stories they contain. This means:

- Depositing oral histories in community-centred archives rather than exclusively in university collections.
- Using participatory methods, such as digital storytelling projects, that allow narrators to frame their own histories.
- Being transparent about how narratives will be used, ensuring that participants retain agency over how their stories are represented.

For instance, the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina has collaborated with community groups to develop public-facing digital exhibits that amplify the voices of working-class women and Black activists, ensuring that oral histories remain part of active social movements rather than being confined to academic spaces.

#### 2.4.5 Subjectivity as a Political and Epistemological Intervention

Feminist oral historians argue that acknowledging subjectivity is not just a methodological necessity but also a political intervention. Traditional historical narratives often dismiss subjective accounts, especially those of marginalised groups, as unreliable or anecdotal. Feminist scholars challenge



this erasure by asserting that subjective experiences hold epistemological weight and can reshape historical knowledge.

Joan Scott (1991) critiques traditional historical inquiry for its claims to neutrality and objectivity, arguing that all knowledge is produced from particular perspectives. This critique aligns with Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge, which contends that all knowledge is shaped by the social location of the knower. By centring subjective narratives in oral histories, feminist scholars reject the notion that historical truth is something fixed or detached from personal experience; instead, they emphasise that truth is always mediated through individual and collective memory. In fact, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) highlight that women's oral histories often emphasise relational experiences – such as caregiving, activism, or community-building – rather than

solely individual achievements, countering dominant historical narratives that prioritise singular “great men.” This relational aspect of memory demonstrates how subjectivity shapes historical understanding, revealing the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories.

This feminist perspective has been particularly transformative in recovering histories that would otherwise remain invisible. For example, oral histories of domestic workers, sex workers, and indigenous women have revealed labour conditions, survival strategies, and resistance efforts that official records fail to document. In these cases, subjectivity is not a distortion of history but a necessary lens for understanding the lived realities of those on the margins of historical narratives.

## Recap

- ◆ Subjectivity in oral histories refers to how personal experiences, emotions, and social positions shape historical narratives
- ◆ Subjectivity highlights that no two people experience the same event identically
- ◆ feelings like trauma, pride, or nostalgia shape how stories are told
- ◆ Feminist oral historians argue that subjectivity is valuable and inherent in all historical narratives
- ◆ Feminist scholars emphasise that women's narratives, provide unique and necessary perspectives on social and political life
- ◆ The feminist revaluation of subjectivity in oral history has transformed the field, shifting the focus from a search for objective truth to an appreciation of multiple, contested narratives
- ◆ Reflexivity involves recognising the researcher's own biases in relation to their subjects and how it influences interviews

- ◆ Positionality refers to the researcher's social background (e.g., race, gender, class) and how it shapes their relationship with the narrator
- ◆ Oral history highlights the ways in which memory is not only cognitive but felt through gestures, pauses, tone of voice, and silences
- ◆ By centring women's voices, embracing intersectionality, and critically engaging with memory and emotion, feminist scholars have demonstrated that subjectivity is not a weakness but a strength – one that allows for richer, more democratic histories

## Objective Questions

1. What does subjectivity in oral history emphasise?
2. Which scholar argued that inconsistencies in oral testimonies reveal deeper truths?
3. What term describes the researcher's social background?
4. What does reflexivity mean in feminist oral history?
5. Who introduced the concept of 'situated knowledge' ?
6. Who coined the term 'shared authority'?
7. What do feminist oral historians emphasise in interviews?
8. Which concept refers to how later generations inherit traumatic memories?

## Answers

1. Personal experiences and emotions
2. Alessandro Portelli
3. Positionality
4. Recognising the researcher's biases in relation to the narrator

5. Donna Haraway
6. Michael Frisch
7. Shared authority and reflexivity
8. Post-memory

## Assignments

1. Examine the concept of “shared authority” in oral history. How does the relationship between the interviewer and narrator shape the historical narrative?
2. “The interviewer is never neutral.” Discuss this statement in the context of feminist oral history methodologies.

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## UNIT

# Claims to Alternative History

### Learning Outcomes

After the successful completion of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ◆ discuss the concept of orality and its role in cultural transmission and social structures
- ◆ identify the characteristics of oral cultures
- ◆ differentiate between various types of oral traditions
- ◆ define oral history and explain its methodological process
- ◆ examine the interplay between orality, oral traditions, and oral history

### Prerequisites

The transmission of knowledge, culture, and history has traditionally occurred through oral means in societies across the world. They represent the ways in which societies have transmitted knowledge, values, and experiences across generations long before the advent of written language. This chapter explores the concepts of orality, oral traditions, and oral history, their significance, and their roles in shaping human cultures and histories.

### Keywords

Orality, Oral Cultures, Oral Traditions, Oral Histories, Myth, Transcription, Representation





## Discussion

### 2.5.1 Understanding Orality

Orality refers to the use of speech as the primary means of communication and cultural transmission, as opposed to written or printed texts. Orality is not merely the absence of writing but a rich and complex mode of communication that has its own structures, aesthetics, and cognitive processes.

It encompasses a wide range of communicative practices, from everyday conversations to elaborate rituals and ceremonies. It is through orality that individuals learn their language, absorb cultural norms, and participate in the collective memory of their community. Orality shapes thought processes, social structures, and the ways in which individuals engage with the past and present.

Orality is the bedrock upon which societies have built their cultural and social structures. Societies that rely predominantly on orality are known as oral cultures. In these cultures, knowledge is preserved through speech, storytelling, and communal discourse rather than written records. In oral cultures, the spoken word is not merely a tool for conveying information; it is a dynamic and performative act that embodies the community's values, beliefs, and identity.

#### 2.5.1.1 Characteristics of Oral Cultures

1. **Memory-Based Transmission:** Oral cultures rely on memory to retain and pass down knowledge, often using mnemonic devices, repetition, and poetic structures. Repeated phrases and formulaic expressions serve as memory aids. These are often used in storytelling and ritualistic speech to ensure consistency and accuracy. Information is broken down into manageable chunks or segments, making it easier to remember. This is evident in the structure of proverbs, sayings, and traditional narratives.
2. **Performance - Oriented :** Oral transmission is often performed rather than simply spoken. Storytellers, poets, and orators use gestures, voice modulation, and expressions to convey meaning effectively. This performative aspect makes oral communication a dynamic and engaging experience.
3. **Fluidity and Adaptability:** Unlike written texts, oral messages are subject to variations, interpretations, and modifications over time. Oral narratives are often adapted to suit the context and audience. A storyteller may modify a tale to emphasise certain aspects or to address the specific concerns of the listeners. This adaptability ensures the relevance and immediacy of the narrative.
4. **Emotional and Sensory:** Oral communication is often more emotionally powerful than written communication because it directly engages the listener through voice, sound, and physical presence. Oral traditions use vivid descriptions to engage listeners' imaginations. Many oral narratives use symbolic language that carries deeper meanings within the cultural context.
5. **Interactivity:** Orality encourages engagement between speakers and listeners, allowing for immediate feedback, clarification, and improvisation. In oral cultures, the

audience plays an active role in the communication process. Listeners may respond verbally or non-verbally, influencing the flow and content of the narrative. This interaction creates a communal experience, reinforcing social bonds and collective identity.

- 6. Communal and Participatory:** Knowledge in oral societies is often shared in communal settings, reinforcing social bonds and collective identity. In oral cultures, stories and knowledge are often considered collective property. Different community members specialise in different types of oral knowledge, some as storytellers, others as healers, and others as musicians or religious leaders.

## 2.5.2 Understanding Oral Traditions

Oral traditions refer to the broader cultural practices and expressions through which societies transmit their beliefs, values, histories, and social norms from one generation to the next. These traditions exist in multiple forms and serve various functions within communities. These include myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, songs, and rituals. Oral traditions serve as repositories of a community's collective memory, values, and identity.

These traditions are not static; they evolve and adapt over time, reflecting the changing circumstances and values of the community. Oral traditions play a crucial role in maintaining cultural continuity, providing a sense of belonging and cohesion, and imparting moral and ethical lessons. They are the living archives of a community's history, preserving the experiences and wisdom of past generations in a form that is accessible and meaningful to the present.

In fact, for marginalised communities, oral narratives in the form of folk songs, ballads, and other means were ways by which they could record their lives and happenings. From their point of view, the written works of the educated elite were perishable compared to the everlasting canvas of memory.

### 2.5.2.1 Types of Oral Traditions

- 1. Myths and Legends :** Myths explain the origins of the world, natural phenomena, human existence, and cultural practices. They often involve gods, spirits, and supernatural beings. Legends narrate heroic deeds and historical events, sometimes blending fact and fiction.
- 2. Folktales:** Stories that entertain and impart moral lessons. They typically feature common people, animals, and everyday situations often set in a timeless, generic past. The Panchatantra fables from India use animals to impart wisdom and ethical teachings.
- 3. Proverbs and Sayings:** Concise expressions of wisdom and cultural norms, often used to guide behaviour and decision-making. One such famous proverb is “The early bird catches the worm.”
- 4. Songs and Poetry:** Musical and rhythmic forms of expression that convey emotions, stories, and cultural values. They often use repetition, rhyme, and meter to enhance memorability and aesthetic appeal.
- 5. Rituals and Ceremonies:** These are performative practices that mark significant life events and communal activities, often accompanied by oral recitations. Oral traditions are often embedded in religious and cultural rituals, with songs and chants playing



a key role in ceremonies, rites of passage, and celebrations.

### 2.5.2.2 Functions of Oral Traditions

1. **Cultural Continuity:** Oral traditions are the primary means by which cultural knowledge is preserved in societies without written records. They encapsulate the collective wisdom, beliefs, and practices of a community, ensuring that this knowledge is passed down through generations. Oral traditions maintain the historical consciousness of a society and reinforce collective memory.
2. **Social Cohesion:** Oral traditions foster a sense of belonging and unity within a community. Shared stories, songs, and rituals create common experiences and reference points that strengthen social bonds and collective identity. Many oral traditions involve communal participation, whether through storytelling sessions, group singing, or collective rituals. These activities bring people together, promoting social interaction and cooperation.
- **Moral Education :** Oral traditions impart ethical values and social norms through narratives and proverbs. Through stories, songs, and rituals, oral traditions convey the core values and principles that define a community. These values are embedded in narratives and practices, making them accessible and relatable to individuals within the culture. For instance, many Native American stories teach respect for nature and community values.
- **Historical Record :** Oral traditions serve as living archives, preserving the history and experiences of a community. Genealogies, legends, and oral histories recount significant events, figures, and migrations,

ensuring that they are remembered and honoured. Oral histories provide alternative perspectives to written records, often highlighting the experiences of marginalised and underrepresented groups. They offer a more inclusive and diverse understanding of historical events.

### 2.5.3 Oral History

Oral history is a method of historical documentation that involves the collection and preservation of personal memories and experiences through recorded interviews. It emerged as a distinct discipline in the mid-20th century, driven by the recognition that traditional written records often overlook the perspectives of marginalised and underrepresented groups. Oral history provides a means of capturing these voices, offering a more inclusive and diverse understanding of history. It is a powerful tool for uncovering the lived experiences of individuals, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of historical events, and challenging dominant narratives. Oral history plays a crucial role in documenting and preserving cultural practices, traditions, languages, and knowledge that may not be recorded in written form and lost over time.

Most importantly, oral history empowers marginalised communities by validating their experiences and giving them a voice in the historical narrative. It can be a tool for advocacy and social change, highlighting injustices and promoting equity. The major thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. This does not imply that oral history has no factual validity. Interviews often reveal unknown events or unknown aspects of known events; they always cast new light on unexplored areas of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes.

#### 2.5.3.1 Process of Oral History

Oral history involves a structured process

of gathering, recording, preserving, and analysing firsthand accounts of historical events. The methodology requires careful planning, ethical considerations, and systematic documentation to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the information collected. The process involves four key stages:

1. **Preparation:** Oral history is based on interviews with people who have experienced or witnessed historical events. This includes identifying interviewees, researching background information, and developing interview questions.
2. **Interviewing:** The interview itself is the core of the oral history process. It is conducted, often using audio or video recording equipment to capture the narrative.
3. **Transcription and Archiving:** Transcription involves converting the recorded interview into a written document. Transcribed interviews are stored in archives for future research and reference. Archiving ensures the long-term preservation and accessibility of the oral history.
- **Analysis and Interpretation :** Analysis involves examining the interview content to identify themes, patterns, and insights. Interpretation involves making sense of the analysed data and drawing conclusions. This depends on reflecting on the biases, limitations, and ethical considerations of the oral history process.

### 2.5.4 The Interplay Between Orality, Oral Traditions, and Oral History

Orality, oral traditions, and oral history are deeply interconnected and often overlap. Orality is the medium through which oral traditions and oral histories are expressed

and transmitted. Oral traditions provide the cultural context and content for oral histories, while oral history methods offer a way to document and preserve these traditions. Together, they form a holistic approach to understanding and preserving human culture and history. They remind us that history is not just a collection of written records but a living, breathing tapestry of voices and experiences.

In many cultures, efforts are being made to preserve and revitalise oral traditions and oral histories. This includes documenting oral narratives, teaching traditional practices, and integrating oral history methods into academic research. Such efforts help to safeguard cultural heritage and ensure that diverse voices are heard and valued.

Let us take some case studies. In many indigenous cultures, orality, oral traditions, and oral history are integral to cultural preservation. For example, the oral traditions of the Māori in New Zealand include genealogies (*whakapapa*) and chants (*waiata*) that are passed down orally. Oral history projects have documented these traditions, preserving them for future generations. In West Africa, Griots are traditional storytellers and oral historians who preserve the history and culture of their communities through oral narratives, songs, and poetry. The interplay between orality, oral traditions, and oral history is evident in the griots' role as custodians of cultural heritage. Both the Māori and the African Griots memorise extensive family trees and historical events to ensure that lineage and ancestry are preserved across generations. Modern oral history projects, such as those documenting the experiences of Holocaust survivors or civil rights activists, rely on orality to capture personal narratives. These projects often draw on oral traditions to contextualise individual stories within broader cultural and historical frameworks.





The digital age has introduced new possibilities for the preservation and dissemination of oral traditions and oral histories. Digital archives, online platforms, and multimedia tools enable the recording, sharing, and analysis of oral narratives on a global scale. However, they also raise questions about authenticity, access, and the impact of technology on traditional oral practices.

### 2.5.5 Challenges and Ethical Considerations

While orality, oral traditions, and oral history play crucial roles in human knowledge transmission, they face several challenges:

- **Accuracy and Reliability:** Oral histories are subjective and may be influenced by memory lapses, biases, and the passage of time. To address issues of accuracy, oral historians often cross-verify information with other sources, such as written records, photographs, and other oral accounts. This triangulation helps to corroborate and contextualise the interviewee's narrative.
- **Ethical Concerns:** Ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the respectful treatment of interviewees. Interviewees must be fully aware of the purpose of the interview, how it will be used, and their rights regarding the information they provide.
- **Representation:** Oral historians must be cautious of selective representation, where certain voices or perspectives are overrepresented or underrepresented. This can skew the historical narrative and marginalise important viewpoints. Interviewees may have their own biases, shaped by personal experiences, social positions, and cultural backgrounds. Recognising and addressing these biases is crucial for a balanced and accurate historical account.

## Recap

- ◆ Orality, oral traditions, and oral history are fundamental aspects of human communication and cultural preservation and encompass the ways in which knowledge, stories, and cultural practices are conveyed through spoken language
- ◆ Orality refers to the use of speech as the primary means of communication and before the advent of writing, orality served as the primary medium for preserving and passing down information across generations
- ◆ Oral traditions refer to broader cultural practices through which society transmits values, history, and identity through myths, folktales, proverbs, songs, and rituals
- ◆ Oral traditions play an important role in social cohesion and they evolve over time while preserving cultural continuity
- ◆ Oral history refers to the structured method of recording, preserving, and interpreting historical information through firsthand accounts and personal narratives through interviews



- ◆ Oral history as a discipline provides a means of capturing the perspectives of individuals and groups who may not be represented in written records, offering a more inclusive and diverse understanding of history
- ◆ Relatedly, oral traditions shape the content of oral histories, while oral history helps document and preserve them. Orality enables oral traditions and oral histories to exist and evolve
- ◆ Oral history provides a platform for marginalised voices, left out of traditional historiography, ensuring that their stories are heard and preserved
- ◆ Even among marginalised groups, oral historians must be cautious of selective representation, where certain voices or perspectives are overrepresented or underrepresented

## Objective Questions

1. What is the primary mode of communication in oral cultures?
2. What technique do oral traditions use to make narratives easier to remember?
3. Which form of oral tradition uses animals to convey moral lessons, as seen in the Panchatantra?
4. Which oral traditions explain the origins of the world and involve supernatural beings?
5. In oral history, the stage that involves converting interviews into written documents is called?
6. What is the process of preserving oral history interviews in libraries called?
7. What is the Māori oral tradition of genealogies called?
8. What term is used for traditional storytellers in West African oral cultures?

## Answers

1. Speech
2. Repetition
3. Folktales
4. Myth
5. Transcription
6. Archiving
7. Whakapapa
8. Griots

## Assignments

1. Select one type of oral tradition (myths/folktales/proverbs/songs/rituals) from your own cultural background or a culture you're familiar with. Analyse its form, function, and how it preserves cultural values.
2. "Oral history democratises historical narratives but sacrifices accuracy." Discuss this statement by examining both the strengths and limitations of oral history as a research method. Support your answer with examples.
3. Explain the significance of orality in cultural transmission. How does orality shape thought processes, social structures, and the way individuals engage with the past and present? Provide examples from oral cultures.

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## **MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS**



# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

## Model Question Paper (SET- A)

QP CODE: .....

Reg. No : .....

Name: .....

### FIFTH SEMESTER B.A HISTORY EXAMINATION

#### SKILL ENHANCEMENT COURSE

#### B21HS02SE - DOING ORAL HISTORY

(CBCS - UG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

### SECTION A

*Answer any ten questions of the following. Each question carries one mark.*

**(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)**

1. Who wrote People's History and Socialist Theory?
2. What does people's history prioritise?
3. Which historian argued that history is shaped by ideology?
4. Where was the International Oral History Association established?
5. Who founded the Oral History Society in Britain?
6. Which book by Paul Thompson is foundational to oral history?
7. What was the focus of Megan Hutchings' oral history project?
8. Who authored The Other Side of Silence?
9. Which university led early 20th-century life history research?
10. What is the main method used in life history?
11. Who wrote Oral Tradition as History?
12. Which institution launched the Kerala Oral History Project?
13. What is meant by "fabula" in oral narrative theory?
14. What do personal narratives challenge according to narrative theory?
15. What was the title of Amritlal Nagar's work on the 1857 Revolt?





## SECTION B

*Answer any **ten** questions of the following. Each question carries **two** marks.*

**(10×2 =20 Marks)**

16. Mention two criticisms of people's history.
17. How does oral history challenge dominant historical narratives?
18. What is the difference between oral tradition and oral history?
19. Describe Paul Thompson's vision for oral history.
20. What was the contribution of the Chicago School to life history research?
21. Mention two contributions of Jan Vansina.
22. Why is subjectivity considered a strength in oral history?
23. What are the two levels of meaning in oral testimony, according to Vansina?
24. Describe the key theme in *The Voice of the Past*.
25. What are the challenges of memory in oral history?
26. What did Megan Hutching reveal through her World War II interviews?
27. How does oral history relate to social history?
28. How do community oral histories contribute to local identity?
29. What ethical considerations are involved in conducting oral history interviews?
30. Define cultural memory with an example.

## SECTION C

*Write a short note on any **five** questions of the following. Each question carries **four** marks.*

**(5×4 = 20 Marks)**

31. People's History
32. Oral Testimonies
33. Collective Memory (Halbwachs)
34. Cultural Memory (Jan Assmann)
35. Community History Projects
36. Life History Method
37. Personal Narratives and their relevance

- 38. A Day in the Life of a Malayali Project
- 39. Alessandro Portelli's perspective on oral sources
- 40. Event Metaphor and Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92

#### SECTION D

*Answer any **two** questions of the following. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

**(2×10 =20 Marks)**

- 41. Trace the development of oral history as a method using examples from Thompson, Vansina, and Portelli.
- 42. Evaluate the use of oral history in understanding Partition with reference to The Other Side of Silence.
- 43. How do memory and subjectivity shape the construction of oral history?
- 44. Discuss the significance of Kerala-based oral history initiatives in reconstructing marginal narratives.



# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

## Model Question Paper (SET- B)

QP CODE: .....

Reg. No : .....

Name: .....

### FIFTH SEMESTER B.A HISTORY EXAMINATION

#### SKILL ENHANCEMENT COURSE

#### B21HS02SE - DOING ORAL HISTORY

(CBCS - UG)

2022-23 - Admission Onwards

Time: 3 Hours

Max Marks: 70

### SECTION A

*Answer any **ten** questions of the following. Each question carries **one** mark.*

**(10 × 1 = 10 Marks)**

1. Who wrote People's History and Socialist Theory?
2. Where was the International Oral History Association established?
3. Who wrote The Voice of the Past?
4. Define oral history in one sentence.
5. What is the primary method used in life history?
6. Which archive in India focuses on women's oral narratives?
7. Who wrote What Makes Oral History Different?
8. Name one oral history project on World War II.
9. Which sociologist linked biography with social understanding?
10. Name a key challenge of preserving oral history archives.
11. What is "narrative velocity"?
12. What is the difference between autobiography and life history?
13. Which oral history archive preserves Maori cultural memory?
14. Name one key oral history project initiated by the UN or its agencies.
15. Who argued that memory is shaped by present perspectives?



## SECTION B

*Answer any **ten** questions of the following. Each question carries **two** marks.*

**(10×2 =20 Marks)**

16. What is the role of autobiography in oral history research?
17. Differentiate between biography and life history.
18. Mention any two criticisms of people's history.
19. How do personal narratives challenge dominant history?
20. What is the significance of Alessandro Portelli's study of metalworkers in Terni?
21. Mention the contributions of Paul Thompson.
22. How do family oral histories preserve generational memory?
23. How do community oral histories contribute to local identity?
24. What ethical considerations are involved in conducting oral history interviews?
25. Define cultural memory with an example.
26. Describe the concept of "memory as evidence" in oral history.
27. Mention two contributions of the Shoah Foundation Archive.
28. How do linguists benefit from oral history archives?
29. What ethical concerns exist in sharing oral histories of trauma?
30. How does narrative analysis enrich the interpretation of oral testimony?

## SECTION C

*Write a short note on any **five** questions of the following. Each question carries **four** marks.*

**(5×4 = 20 Marks)**

31. Cultural Memory (Jan Assmann)
32. Life History Method
33. Oral Testimony
34. SPARROW
35. Narrative Analysis
36. Community History Projects
37. People's History



- 38. Memory and Subjectivity
- 39. A Day in the Life of a Malayali Project
- 40. Alessandro Portelli's Perspective on Oral Sources

#### SECTION D

*Answer any **two** questions of the following. Each question carries **ten** marks.*

**(2×10 =20 Marks)**

- 41. Evaluate the role of oral history in preserving community memory with examples from archives like SPARROW and SAHA.
- 42. Examine the challenges in preserving oral history archives in the digital era.
- 43. How does oral history intersect with multiple disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, and psychology? Illustrate with examples.
- 44. Discuss the contributions of Paul Thompson, Jan Vansina, and Alessandro Portelli to the development of oral history.



## സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യാൽ സ്വതന്ത്രരാകണം  
വിശ്വപൗരരായി മാറണം  
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കണേ

കുതിരുട്ടിൽ നിന്നു ഞങ്ങളെ  
സൂര്യവീഥിയിൽ തെളിക്കണം  
സ്നേഹദീപ്തിയായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
നീതിവൈജയന്തി പാറണം

ശാസ്ത്രവ്യാപ്തിയെന്നുമേകണം  
ജാതിഭേദമാകെ മാറണം  
ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ  
ജ്ഞാനകേന്ദ്രമേ ജ്വലിക്കണേ

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# Doing Oral History

COURSE CODE: B21HS02SE



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