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ORAL HISTORY AS A TOOL FOR SHAPING AND INVESTIGATING COLLECTIVE MEMORY NARRATIVES

Abstract

This article examines the methodological foundations of collecting, documenting, and preserving oral history testimonies as an important tool for studying collective memory narratives. The relevance of the research is determined by the growing interest in the individual experiences of participants in historical events, the expanding use of oral history methods in the humanities, and the need to preserve testimonies that complement traditional written sources. Oral history makes it possible to record subjective interpretations of the past, reconstruct local historical narratives, and investigate the mechanisms through which collective memory is formed and transmitted within various social groups.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the principal approaches to organizing oral history research, identify the specific features of respondent selection, interview conduct, documentation of collected materials, and the provision of their long-term preservation. The study employs methods of scholarly literature analysis, synthesis of methodological recommendations in the field of oral history, and systematization of practical experience in conducting oral history research.

The article examines the main stages of collecting oral history materials, including researcher preparation, the search for and selection of respondents, the choice of interview type, and the organization of recording and documentation processes. Particular attention is given to the characteristics of biographical, thematic, genealogical, and group interviews, as well as to the significance of the

narrative approach for studying individual and collective experiences. The study also analyzes the requirements for supporting documentation, the principles of transcribing oral speech, and the specific features of archiving oral history materials in accordance with standards of confidentiality and scholarly use.

The findings demonstrate that the quality of oral history sources directly depends on adherence to methodological principles governing the preparation, conduct, and documentation of interviews. It is argued that oral history serves not only as a source of factual information but also as an important mechanism for the formation, preservation, and transmission of collective memory. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying the proposed recommendations to scientific, educational, and archival projects related to the study of the historical experiences of individuals and communities.

Keywords: oral history, collective memory, narrative, oral history interview, historical source, testimony documentation, transcription, data archiving, historiography, historical memory.

Problem statement. In the context of growing public interest in the individual experiences of participants in historical events and processes, oral history sources have acquired particular significance. They make it possible to investigate not only the factual course of events but also the mechanisms of collective memory formation, the processes of constructing historical narratives, and the ways in which these narratives are transmitted across generations. Oral testimonies complement traditional written sources by capturing the subjective dimension of historical experience, emotional responses, and individual interpretations of the past. [2, 4]

In contemporary humanities scholarship, oral history is increasingly employed as a tool for studying the historical memory of local communities, professional groups, and ethnic and social milieus. At the same time, the

methodology of collecting, documenting, and preserving oral history testimonies remains a relevant issue that requires further theoretical reflection and practical generalization.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The theoretical foundations of oral history were established during the second half of the twentieth century.[5] Significant contributions to the development of oral history methodology were made by Paul Thompson, Alessandro Portelli, Jan Assmann, and Maurice Halbwachs.[5, 6] Their works explored the specific nature of oral testimony as a historical source, examined the relationship between individual and collective memory, and defined the role of narrative in shaping society's historical perceptions. [7, 8]

In Ukrainian historiography, oral history has been actively developed within studies of historical memory, local history, everyday life, and social transformations. Nevertheless, the issue of the comprehensive organization of collecting, documenting, and ensuring the long-term preservation of oral history materials still requires further synthesis and methodological refinement.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the principal methodological approaches to the collection, documentation, and preservation of oral history testimonies as a tool for studying collective memory narratives.

Presentation of the Main Material. The collection of oral history materials constitutes a key stage of research aimed at recording and analyzing individual experiences, memories, and subjective interpretations of the past. Oral history makes it possible to document aspects of historical events and social processes that often remain beyond the scope of written sources, giving voice to direct participants and witnesses.

The tradition of transmitting historical experience orally emerged long before the advent of technical means of recording information. In various societies, oral narratives, stories, and testimonies served as mechanisms for preserving and

transmitting collective memory across generations. In contemporary research practice, the collection of oral history materials encompasses several interconnected stages: preparation, the conduct of interviews, and the preservation of the collected data.

The preparatory stage includes a number of important components, among which the selection of respondents is of primary significance. The choice of informants should correspond to the overall research design and the specific issues that the researcher seeks to illuminate, explain, or analyze through oral testimony. When the objective is to reconstruct particular events or situations and to explore the experiences associated with them, preference is given to direct participants or eyewitnesses.

In general, three principal methods of identifying respondents may be distinguished: private, institutional, and archival-documentary. The most common private method is the “snowball sampling” technique, whereby initial informants or the researcher facilitate contact with other potential participants through their personal networks. The institutional approach involves cooperation with organizations, institutions, and associations, including civic and trade union organizations, professional societies, foundations, and media outlets. The archival-documentary method is particularly useful when documentary sources contain information about specific individuals who participated in the events under investigation. [3]

Researchers should distinguish between “professional witnesses,” whose narratives have been repeatedly presented in public, and “ordinary witnesses,” who often provide more spontaneous and less mediated accounts. [4]

One indicator of the sufficiency of collected empirical material is the achievement of data saturation, that is, a situation in which additional interviews no longer yield fundamentally new information. This threshold may be reached

after several dozen or several hundred interviews, depending on the objectives, scale, and research tasks of the project. [9]

Selection of Interview Type. The choice of interview type, or a combination of interview types, depends on the aims and objectives of the study as well as on the range of issues that may be addressed through oral history sources. According to the number of participants involved, interviews may be classified as individual or group interviews. Group interviewing may take the form of focus-group discussions or community interviews (public interviews).

Based on their thematic orientation, oral history interviews may be classified as biographical, thematic, genealogical, and diary interviews. Among these, biographical and thematic interviews are the most frequently used because they provide rich material for exploring individual experiences and interpretations of historical events. Interviews may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured depending on the objectives of the research. [4–6]

Diary interviews are primarily used to study social processes and everyday practices. Participants make regular written or audio-recorded entries over a specified period, following topics or questions proposed by the researcher. These records may be produced daily or at other predetermined intervals and are subsequently submitted to the researcher for analysis and interpretation. [10]

The principal difference between a focus group and a community interview lies in the nature of communication. In a focus-group discussion, interaction occurs primarily among the participants themselves. The researcher acts as a moderator, facilitating the conversation, encouraging the exchange of views, and maintaining the role of an attentive and engaged listener.

An important advantage of group methods is their ability to reveal the processes through which collective perceptions and memories are formed. They also provide an opportunity to present research findings to the community itself for discussion and reflection. [5,6]

Preparation of the Interviewer. Prior to conducting an interview, the researcher should undertake both substantive and organizational preparation. First and foremost, it is advisable to familiarize oneself with the prospective respondent's biography, the characteristics of the region in which they reside, and, where possible, documents from local archives and other materials related to the topic of the interview. Such preliminary work enables the researcher to formulate questions more precisely and to develop a deeper understanding of the historical and social context.

Before the interview takes place, contact should be established with the respondent by mail, e-mail, or telephone. The purpose of the project and the intended use of the collected information should be explained clearly and concisely. It is also important to discuss the anticipated duration of the meeting, legal and ethical considerations, conditions of data storage, and the main topics to be addressed. Respondents may be provided with an indicative list of questions or thematic areas in advance, allowing them time to reflect on their experiences. [1, 2]

Researchers are also advised to collect basic biographical information in advance and to confirm the date, time, and location of the interview. Whenever possible, interviews should be conducted in a quiet environment conducive to communication.

Contemporary oral history projects primarily rely on digital recording technologies, including voice recorders, mobile devices, and software for recording remote communication. Regardless of the technology employed, the primary requirement is the production of a clear and uninterrupted audio signal and the secure preservation of recorded materials for future analysis and archiving. [1,2]

The practice of taking notes during interviews remains a matter of scholarly debate. On the one hand, extensive note-taking may distract the respondent and

create an atmosphere of formality that interferes with the natural flow of narration. On the other hand, brief notes can help record important names, dates, and other details that may require subsequent clarification.

Therefore, provided that note-taking does not disrupt communication or distract the interviewee, interviewers are encouraged to keep concise supplementary notes.

Collection of Materials (Interview Process). At the beginning of an interview, it is advisable to devote several minutes to informal conversation. Such an introduction helps reduce tension, establish rapport, and prepare the respondent for the recording process. Only after this initial interaction should the researcher proceed to the formal collection of oral history materials through a biographical or problem-oriented interview.

The interviewing process generally consists of two mandatory phases. The first phase is the respondent's primary biographical (free) narrative. This stage is essentially non-dialogical: the informant speaks while the researcher refrains from interrupting the narrative, even with clarifying or encouraging questions. Support for the narration is provided primarily through non-verbal communication, including facial expressions, gestures, attentive posture, and brief neutral responses such as "yes," "I understand," or "please continue." [6, 10]

Restrained friendliness and deliberate non-interference constitute the fundamental principles guiding the interviewer's conduct during this phase.

While listening to the free narrative, the interviewer should make brief notes of points that may require further clarification. These observations subsequently form the basis for narrative questions. Such notes also facilitate the preparation of the interview protocol and related documentation.

The second phase involves the formulation of narrative questions. These questions are intended to clarify, elaborate upon, and contextualize events, circumstances, individuals, and characteristics mentioned during the respondent's

initial narrative. In oral history research, narrative questions are understood as open-ended questions directly linked to topics already introduced by the informant. [6]

The ability to listen attentively while simultaneously identifying issues requiring clarification develops through experience. Nevertheless, it is important that the interval between the free narrative and the questioning phase not be excessively long. Ideally, the transition to the second phase should occur immediately. Questions should be formulated in a manner that guides the respondent back to themes and episodes already discussed in the narrative.

Narrative questions are generally used to clarify, elaborate, contextualize, and personalize themes previously introduced by the respondent. Their purpose is to encourage further reflection while remaining closely connected to the informant's original narrative. [6,10]

The typology of questions may vary depending on the objectives of the research. Questions may focus on a particular period of life, a specific theme, a concrete situation, an argument, or an idea expressed by the respondent.

Following the narrative questioning phase, the interview should be concluded in a respectful and friendly manner. First and foremost, the respondent should be thanked for their time and willingness to share their experiences. The researcher should also provide an opportunity for the respondent to ask questions about the project or the interview process.

If issues relating to copyright, consent, or usage rights were not fully addressed at the beginning of the meeting, the conclusion of the interview provides an appropriate opportunity to explain the conditions governing the storage, archiving, and future use of the recording and to complete the necessary documentation.[3,4]

Each interview should be accompanied by supporting documentation, including a registration form, interview protocol, biographical information, and a

consent agreement regulating the preservation and future use of the materials. These documents provide essential contextual information and establish conditions governing confidentiality, access, and archival storage. [1–4]

It should be emphasized that both audio and video recordings, as well as transcripts derived from them, are confidential materials. They may not be disclosed or used without the narrator's consent. To prevent potential misunderstandings, particularly in cases involving publication or citation, it is advisable to provide the respondent with access to the transcript and obtain separate written permission for the full or partial use of the material.

Preservation of Collected Data. The principal oral history document intended for subsequent analysis and long-term preservation is the interview transcript—that is, a written record of spoken communication that reproduces the respondent's statements verbatim and may also capture intonational features and emotional reactions expressed during the conversation.[4]

At the same time, an autobiographical or other narrative presented as a live oral account, with its pauses, intonation, facial expressions, and gestures, is semantically much richer than a written text. This characteristic constitutes one of the defining features of oral history testimony and represents a significant challenge for both its interpretation and documentation.

The process of converting speech into written form through transcription inevitably raises a number of methodological issues: how to represent intonational variation, changes in speech tempo and rhythm, vocal modulation, accents, and other markers of meaning. The graphic symbols and notation systems employed by researchers may be adopted from established transcription conventions or developed according to the methodological framework of a particular project. [11]

For this reason, before beginning the transcription process, it is essential to determine which characteristics of oral speech should be documented in accordance with the aims and objectives of the research. For example, a researcher

may seek to preserve the distinctive features of the informant's spoken language as fully as possible, retaining unfinished words and phrases in their original form and recording pauses, laughter, changes in mood, and non-verbal reactions (e.g., "laughs," "smiles," "after a pause," etc.).

Upon completion of the transcription, it is advisable, for purposes of documentation and future retrieval, to identify the principal themes addressed by the respondent and record them in the interview registration form, indicating the relevant pages of the transcript and the corresponding timestamps in the audio or video recording.

Once the transcript has been finalized and the complete set of accompanying documentation prepared, the stage of collecting oral history materials may be considered complete. The testimonies should then be systematically organized, supplemented with appropriate metadata, and prepared for long-term preservation in accordance with requirements of confidentiality, security, and future scholarly use.

Oral History and the Formation of Collective Memory Narratives. The particular significance of oral history lies not only in the recording of individual experiences but also in the opportunity to study the processes by which collective memory is formed. Oral history testimonies reflect not only the personal memories of respondents but also the social mechanisms for making sense of the past that operate within a specific community. In the process of storytelling, an individual reconstructs their own life experience through a system of beliefs, values, and interpretations shaped by their family, social environment, education, the media, and public discourse. [7,8]

Collective memory is not a mechanical aggregate of individual memories. It is shaped by the constant interaction between personal experience and dominant social narratives. This is precisely why oral history interviews reveal not only factual information about the past but also the ways in which different generations

and social groups interpret it. [7] An analysis of oral testimonies makes it possible to trace which events acquire significance, which are displaced from collective memory, and how historical experience is reinterpreted in new sociocultural contexts. [6]

It is important to bear in mind that memory is selective. Respondents' recollections may undergo transformations under the influence of time, sociopolitical changes, personal experiences, or new knowledge about past events. In this regard, oral history testimonies should be viewed not only as a source of factual information but also as a source for studying the processes of constructing historical narratives and shaping collective perceptions of the past. [8]

Oral history is particularly valuable when studying traumatic experiences, wars, forced population displacements, political repression, and other events that leave a deep mark on collective memory. In such cases, oral testimonies allow us to explore not only the course of events but also the mechanisms by which they are interpreted, experienced, and passed on to future generations.

Thus, oral history serves not only as a method for collecting historical sources but also as an important tool for studying the processes of the formation, functioning, and transmission of collective memory. It is precisely this combination of individual experience with the analysis of social narratives that gives it its special value for contemporary historical research. [13]

Conclusions. Oral history represents an important instrument for investigating narratives of collective memory and individual historical experience. Oral history testimonies make it possible to identify the mechanisms through which historical perceptions are formed, reconstruct local interpretations of the past, and examine the processes involved in preserving collective memory within society.

The effective use of oral history materials largely depends on adherence to methodological principles governing respondent selection, interview organization,

documentation, transcription, and the archiving of collected data. The application of standardized procedures ensures the scholarly reliability of oral history sources and expands their potential for use in historiographical research.

A promising direction for future research lies in the further development of digital practices for the preservation of oral history archives, as well as in the application of oral history methods to the study of memory related to contemporary social transformations and armed conflicts.

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