



ORAL HISTORY MADE EASY

**WEEK 2: Researching definitions of oral history
& memory as a process**

Sunday 24th March 2024 14.00 hrs GMT

**WITH DR ANGELA MAYE-BANBURY BA MSC PHD SFHEA
ORAL HISTORIAN & EMERITUS FELLOW IN ORAL HISTORY**

Recording



in Progress

What we will have achieved at the end of today's session

Your reflections on hopes and fears; experiences, beliefs and values and Linda Shopes' paper: your 'motivation hubs.'



The emergence of oral history and exploring definitions of oral history.



The emergence of modern day oral history practice: a note on narratives and defining oral history.



Memory as a process: the 'unreliable' witness; evoking our memories; the subjectivity of oral history; individual/collective memory.



Your oral history challenges (i) Identify one resource which you think will be of valuable to everyone; (ii) Begin to think about who you would like to interview (iii) Explore the professional organisations which support oral historians in their everyday practices.



YOUR REFLECTIONS ON LAST WEEK'S TASKS



Your reflections from last week's tasks



Hopes and fears
(keep your notes
handy)

Experiences,
beliefs and values
(again, keep your
notes handy)

Linda Shopes'
paper – discussion
in pairs.

Linda Shopes' paper – your reflections



Zoom room discussion in pairs:
Linda Shopes (2011) paper
entitled 'Making sense of oral
history.'

Your task: What is the value of
oral history, according to the
author?

In your opinion, does oral history
have any other benefits not
mentioned in the paper?

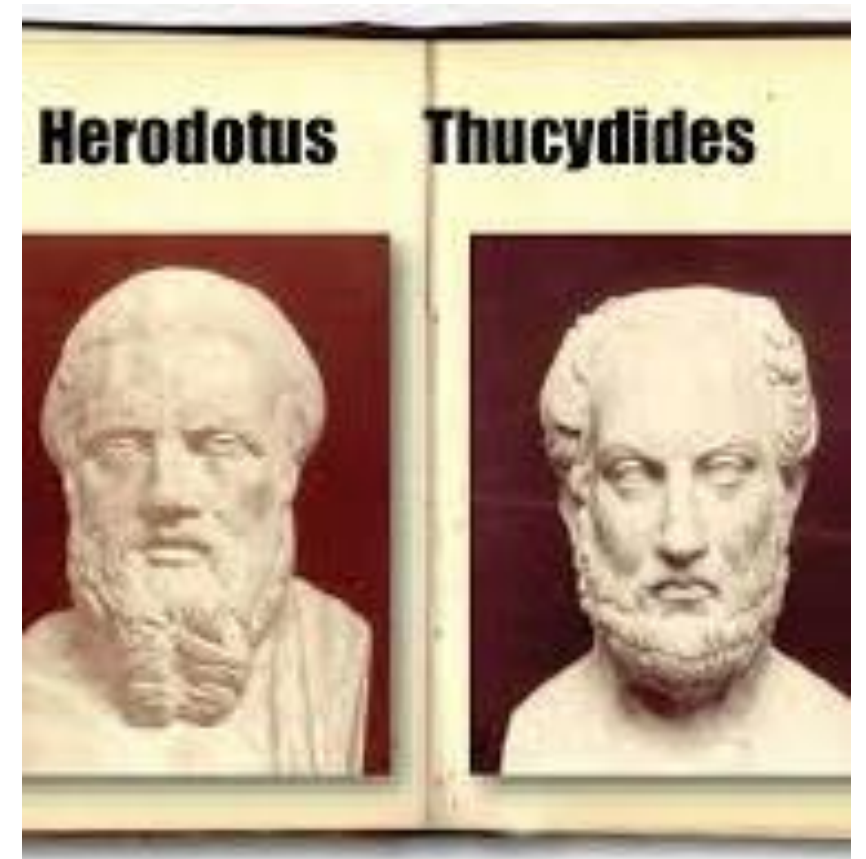
THE EMERGENCE OF ORAL HISTORY & EXPLORING DEFINITIONS



The emergence of oral history

The first ever oral historian is generally regarded to have been Thucydides (c.460 BC c 400 BC) chronicled nearly 30 years of war and tension between Athens and Sparta using eyewitness accounts.

Mention must also be given to Herodotus 425 BC whose accounts of history were infused with myth, legend and narratives of triumph.





A note on narratives

We need to be always vigilant when considering how narratives are formed, by whom and why.

Meta narratives: a plot or backstory widely accepted in society presented top down in such a way as to minimise critique; associated with modernism. Even the emergence of oral history itself is often presented as a metanarrative.

Micro narratives: individual accounts such as oral histories which are generated from the bottom up recounted by those who have born witness to past events; associated with postmodernism.

And everything in between...

Exploring the emergence of modern day oral history practice



Allan Nevins 1948 from Columbia University began to record spoken memories of white male elites (Yow, p 3) including politicians, business and civic leaders.



Studs Terkel 1912 – 2008: saw oral history as a tool for social justice
[Listen to Studs Terkel's oral history interviews](#)



Improvements of technology meant that oral history began more popular with the advent of the cassette recorder and much more besides.

Defining oral history (1)



Oral history is a people's history; concerns events of the past recounted in an individual's own words. Silent voices, hidden stories and personal narratives.

"The interviewing of eyewitness participants about in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction" (Grele, 1996: 63 in Thomson, 1999).

"Memory is the core of oral history. Put simply, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews" (Richie, 2014: 1).



Defining oral history (2)



“Oral history is the recording of personal testimony derived in oral form for purposes beyond the recording itself” (Yow, 2014 p 4).

“Oral history draws on memory and testimony to gain a more complete or different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively” (Bornat, 2004).

The method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices of people, communities and participants in past events...the sharing and maintenance of stories (OHA, 2024) Watch this [short film by Oklahoma Oral History project.](#)



Defining oral history (3)



- Oral history is: (i)the recording itself (ii)the transcript and (iii)the practice.
- Interdisciplinary practice which yields rich primary data which can be applied to a diverse range of contexts.
- Recordings are intended to be accessible and often kept in public repositories.
- British Library Sound Archive; East Midlands Sound Archive; Columbia Centre For Oral History; Achill Oral Histories.
- Professional communities of practice: Oral History Society; Oral History Network Of Ireland; Oral History Association.

What makes oral history different



Gives us access to undocumented rich life experience to generate 'thick descriptions' of past events.



Hidden histories of people whose voices have been neglected or misrepresented to create a 'shared authority' (Frisch, x)



Allows us to focus on aspects of life rarely documented



Enables us to understand how experiences felt and their consequences



Allows us to have a dialogue with interviewees enabling them to assign meaning to past events.

Capturing
real life
experiences

THIS

IS

ME

Exercise 1



IN YOUR OWN WORDS,
WRITE A DEFINITION OF
ORAL HISTORY



THINK OF ONE GROUP WHOSE VOICES HAVE
BEEN MARGINALISED FROM ACCOUNTS OF
THE PAST.

HOW MIGHT ORAL HISTORY MAKE THIS
GROUP'S STORY MORE ACCESSIBLE?

MEMORY AS A PROCESS
THE 'UNRELIABLE' WITNESS &
EMBRACING SUBJECTIVITY



Key issues – oral history and memory

With verbatim records of our experiences, we are unable to report on those experiences faithfully. Without recording, each iteration of the story will shift.

In an oral history interview, people seldom recount their experiences chronologically – and in a moment, we shall see why. What is the relevance of the tangents?

Our inability to remember our lives aged between – 3 (approx) and our limited recollections of past experiences until we are around 10 years old is called ‘infantile amnesia’ and is attributed to evolving neurological development in the early years of our lives (Callaghan et al, 2014).

The mechanics of memory



Prefrontal cortex: short term memory.

Takes around 7 repetitions for something to go from short to long term memory.

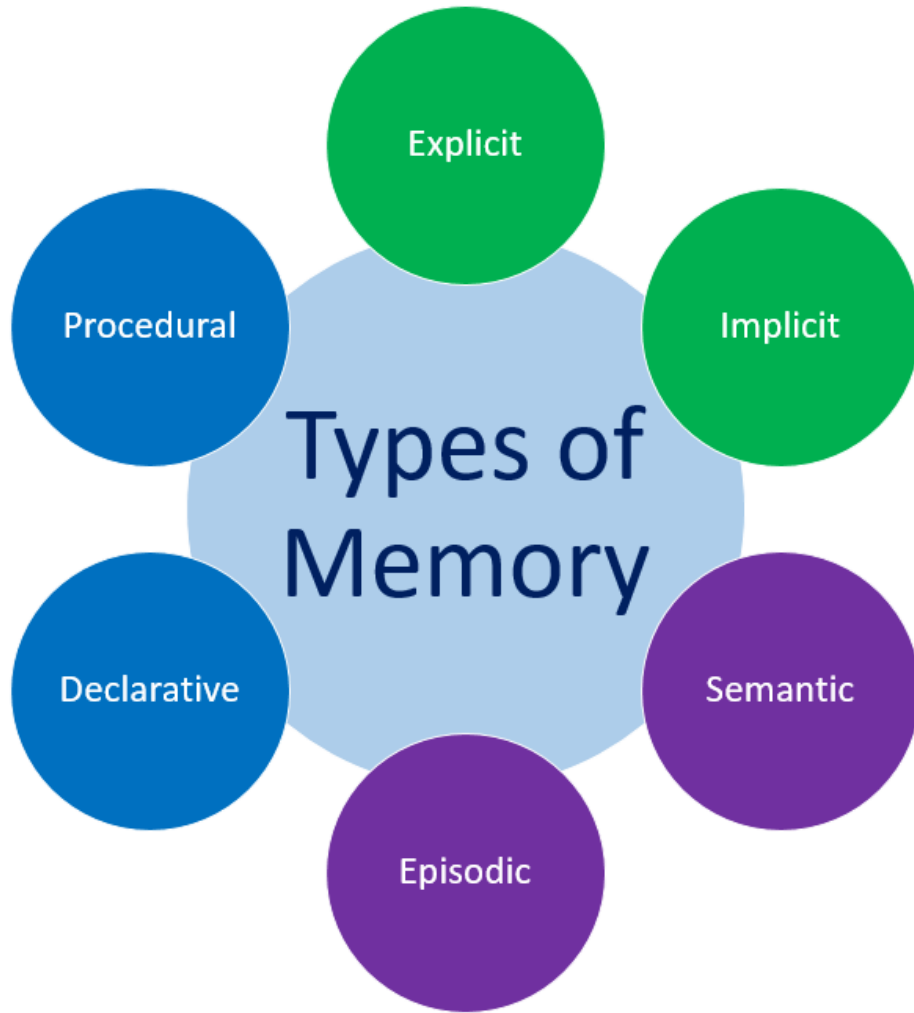


Hippocampus: long term memory; strong; emotional.

Visual stimuli: pictures more 'memorable' than words.

Sensory stimuli.

Marilee Sprenger's work on memory: "The brain is programmed to forget, it filters out about 99 percent of incoming information. This usually allows us to focus and keep our sanity."



Implicit - remembering things subconsciously by rote e.g. knowing the route to home or work

Explicit - consciously remembering things e.g. appointments.

Procedural - remembering how to perform a task or skill e.g. riding a bike; using software.

Declarative - remembering facts; faces; phone numbers.

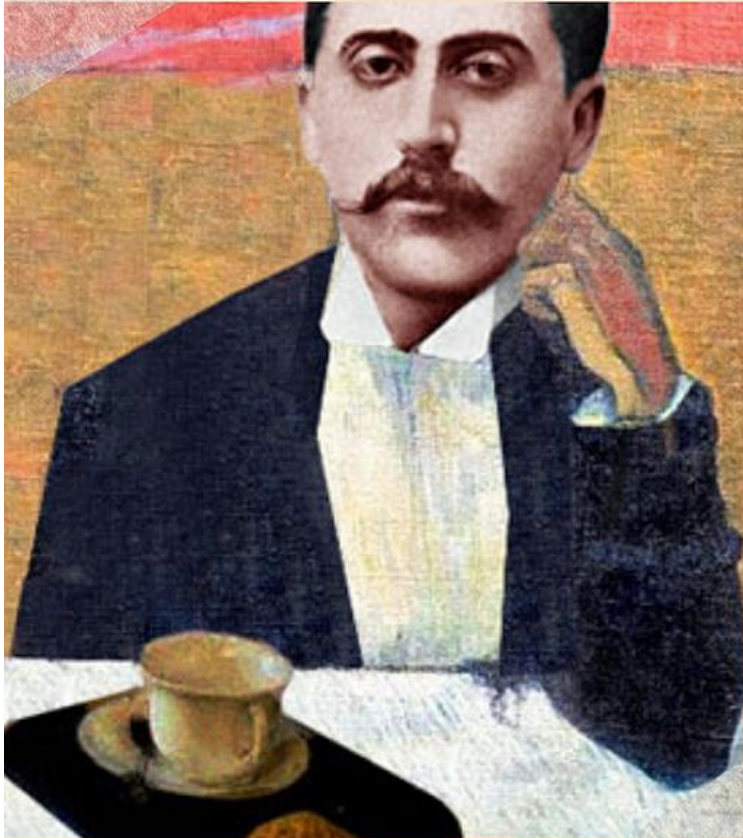
Episodic - remembering recall of personal experiences at specific moment.

Semantic e.g. recalling facts triggered by words/phrases.

SENSORY MEMORY – THE
'PROUSTIAN RUSH'

Exercise 2: What scent/aroma gives you a Proustian rush?

Recipe: The Proust Phenomenon



- Ingredients:**
- 1 tbsn of Scent
 - 1/2 tbsn of Taste
 - 2 tspns of emotion

- Directions:**
- In a small bowl, stir scent and taste until well combined. Resulting mixture: Flavour.
 - Add in emotion, one tspn at a time and mix well.
 - Resulting mixture: Memory

- Storage:**
- For best use, store the memory in a cool, dry place at the back of your mind.
 - Best eaten when remembered

Strategies to improve our memories

Stories	Stories have emotional components that attract the amygdale, the emotional centre of the brain. They also have beginnings, middles, and ends that make sense to the hippocampus, the structure that helps store these episodes.
Humour	Humour, laughter, and joyfulness release important brain chemicals that make us feel good and aid in retention. Some research suggests that we remember at least 30 percent more of what we learn with humour.
Games	Learning through play is one of the most powerful ways to learn. Limiting competition is important.
Analogy	Creating assists brains in connecting new information to what it is being compared to.
Metaphor	Oral History Made Easy is like a delicious buffet of tasty knowledge.
Movement	Active, hands-on learning will bring back memories of prior movement and movement patterns

Exercise 3: Musical memory moments



Soundtracks of our lives.

Choose a song that evokes particular memories for you.

[BBC's Desert Island Discs Series](#)



Eight tracks, a book and a luxury: what would you take to a desert island?

Narrators as 'unreliable' witnesses

Oral histories are **coded, decoded** and **recoded** at multiple points.

Oral histories contains insights framed by context, layers of time and experience of the narrator. It is how people remember from a 'web of meaning'(Abrams, 2014, p 89).

“What is really important to remember is that memory is not a passive depository of facts but an active process in the creation of meanings” (Portelli, 2002).

Pierre Nora & sites of memory.

Fallibility of
human
memory

LES LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE

1 • sous la direction de Pierre Nora



QUARTO
GALLIMARD

The role of memorials:
purpose and prospects.

Sites of memory may be:

- Physical
- Digital
- Imagined.

Embracing (& interrogating) subjectivity

Importance of habitus.

“One precise advantage of oral evidence is that it is interactive and that one is not left alone, as with documentary evidence, to divine its significance. The source can reflect on the content and offer interpretation as well as facts” (Lummis, 1988).

“The importance of oral testimony may often lie in not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them where imagination, symbolism and desire break in.” (Portelli, 2002).

Individual & collective memory

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Collective memory refers to the shared memories and experiences that help define a group or community's identity.

DEFINITION

The concept of collective memory refers to how groups within a culture retain and exchange information amongst themselves. It is something that allows groups of individuals to hold onto familiar experiences across generations. It includes shared memories, values, beliefs, narratives, and cultural heritage collectively held by a group or society.

EXAMPLE

- **National holidays:** National holidays, such as Independence Day or Thanksgiving, reinforce the importance of historical events and help to create shared meanings about the past.
- **Songs and anthems:** National anthems and patriotic songs also contribute to collective memory by serving as a reminder of key moments and values in national history.

YOUR MOTIVATION HUBS



Motivation peer support hubs

Meet at least twice outside like sessions: weeks 3 and 5.

Deciding on who will be in each hub; discuss practicalities.

Three volunteers to co-ordinate the three motivation hubs.

Your one to one mentorship sessions

AMB to be in next week touch to arrange your 30 mins one to ones.

Tasks for week 3

Your oral history challenges for next week!

1. Find one oral history resource you like and think could be useful to the group. This can be in any format! Please email your resource to Angela for sharing with the group on or before 28th March 2024.
2. Begin to think about who you would like to record for your first oral history interviewee.
3. Explore professional communities of practice: Oral History Society; Oral History Network Of Ireland; Oral History Association. What are your three key takeaways following your the review of these web sites?

What we have achieved at the end of today's session

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References

Abrams, L. (2014). Memory as both source and subject of study: The transformations of oral history. *Writing the history of memory*, 89-109.

Bornat, J. (2004) 'Oral history' *Qualitative Research Practice*, 34-47.

Callaghan, B. L., Li, S., & Richardson, R. (2014). The elusive engram: what can infantile amnesia tell us about memory?. *Trends in neurosciences*, 37(1), 47-53.

Grele [1973] 1996, 63) in Thomson A. 'Making the Most of Memories: The Empirical and Subjective Value of Oral History,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. 1999;9:291-301. doi:10.2307/3679406.

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Ritchie, D. A. (2014). *Doing Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turnbull, O., & Solms, M. (2004). Memory, amnesia and intuition: a neuro-psychoanalytic perspective. In *Emotional development in psychoanalysis, attachment theory and neuroscience* (pp. 63-92). Routledge.

Yow, V. R. (2014). *Recording Oral History: A Guide For The Humanities And Social Sciences*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Additional resources

[Introduction To Oral History – Texas Digital Library](#)

[Development And The Use Of Oral History](#)