



Oral History, Memory and the Archive in Postcolonial Societies

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Abstract

Oral history began as a method for recovering testimony from people whose lives had left no written trace, and it has since become a body of theory about how memory works and what it can be made to tell us. This paper traces that development and sets it against a parallel change in archival thinking. The early practice treated the interview as a substitute document, to be checked against the record for accuracy. The interpretive turn treated the interview instead as an account shaped by later experience, by narrative convention and by the relationship between interviewer and narrator, and argued that these features are evidence in their own right rather than contamination to be corrected. Memory studies supplied the conceptual apparatus for that argument, distinguishing individual recollection from the collective and cultural forms through which groups sustain a usable past. The paper then turns to the archive, examining the argument that archives are instruments of power that produce silences as systematically as they preserve records, and considering the community archive movement as a response. Postcolonial and Partition scholarship supplies the sharpest cases, since the events in question were experienced by millions and documented by almost none of them. The paper closes with the practical ethics of the interview and with the problems that digital infrastructure creates for context and consent.

Keywords: Oral History, Collective Memory, Archives, Postcolonial Historiography, Testimony, Research Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The written record is not a neutral sample of the past. It records what institutions had reason to write down, and it records it in the categories those institutions used. For most of recorded history, the people who appear in documents do so because they paid tax, broke a law, owned property or held office, and the great majority of any population appears not at all except as a number in an aggregate.

Oral history began as a response to that absence. Its early practitioners set out to interview people whose lives had generated no documents, on the reasonable view that a recorded account of a working life was better evidence of that life than silence.¹ The method proved productive immediately, and it also proved more complicated than its founders expected, since what an interview produces is not a document but a memory, and memory does not behave like a document.

This paper follows the working through of that complication. It traces the shift from a documentary to an interpretive understanding of testimony, connects that shift to the theoretical literature on collective memory, and then examines the parallel change in archival thinking that has made the archive itself an object of critical study rather than a neutral repository. The postcolonial

context receives particular attention, because it is where the gap between what happened and what was written down is widest.

FROM DOCUMENT TO INTERPRETATION

The first generation of oral historians treated the interview as testimony to be corroborated. The interviewer sought accurate recall, checked it against surviving records, and treated discrepancies as error to be discounted. The interpretive turn began with the observation that the errors were patterned. Working through interviews with Turin factory workers about the fascist period, one influential study found that respondents systematically omitted a whole decade, not from failure of memory but because the period did not fit the narrative of political continuity through which they understood their own lives.² The omission was evidence. It told the historian something about the relationship between political identity and personal memory that no accurate chronology would have revealed.

The argument was developed most fully in work on a factory worker killed by police in an Italian town, where the collective memory of the community consistently misdated the death and misattributed the circumstances. The chronology was demonstrably wrong. The error, however, was uniform across the community and it made the death intelligible within a longer story of labour conflict, so that the wrongness was itself the finding.³ The general principle follows: oral sources tell us less about events than about their meaning, and meaning is what the documentary record is least able to supply.

The methodological consequences have been elaborated since into a full theoretical apparatus, covering the composition of narrative, the intersubjectivity of the interview, the performance of self, and the relationship between individual accounts and the public scripts available for telling them.^{4,5} The practical result is that oral history no longer needs to defend itself as second best evidence for events. It has a distinct evidentiary object.

MEMORY, COLLECTIVE AND CULTURAL

The theoretical grounding for this position comes from the study of memory as a social rather than a purely psychological phenomenon. The foundational claim is that individual recollection depends on social frameworks, and that a memory detached from the group that sustains it becomes unavailable rather than merely private.⁶ This explains a recurrent observation in fieldwork, that memories of a dispersed community are recovered with difficulty and in fragments while those of a community that has remained together are elaborate and shared.

Later work distinguished memory from history in stronger terms, arguing that living memory sustained by a community has been displaced in modern societies by history as an institutional practice, leaving sites of memory such as monuments, archives and commemorations to stand in for a continuity that has been lost.⁷ The framework has been criticised for a nostalgia about pre-modern continuity that the evidence does not support, but its central distinction between memory as lived and memory as curated remains useful.

A further distinction separates communicative memory, which is carried in everyday interaction and reaches back roughly three generations before it fades, from cultural memory, which is fixed in text, ritual and institution and can persist indefinitely.⁸ This distinction is directly relevant to fieldwork planning, since the window for collecting communicative memory of any event closes at a predictable rate, and the transition from one form to the other is exactly what the oral historian observes when interviewing the second and third generations after a catastrophe.

Work on the transmission of traumatic memory across generations has developed this further, describing the relationship that descendants have to events they did not experience but that dominated the households in which they grew up.⁹ The concept has been applied well beyond its original context, and the caution generally raised against it, that it risks assimilating very different histories to a single model, is worth keeping in view.

THE ARCHIVE AND ITS SILENCES

Archival theory has undergone a comparable reorientation. The classical position held the archivist to be a neutral custodian, preserving records created in the ordinary course of business and transmitting them unaltered. That position has been dismantled from several directions. Historiographically, the argument runs that silences enter the historical record at four distinct moments,

in the making of sources, the making of archives, the making of narratives and the making of history as retrospective significance, so that absence is produced continuously rather than at a single point of loss.¹⁰ Philosophically, the archive has been analysed as an institution constituted by the authority to consign and to classify, so that the power to decide what is archivable precedes and determines what can later be recovered.¹¹

Historical work on colonial archives has demonstrated these claims in detail, reading administrative records for their anxieties and their taxonomies rather than for the facts they report, and treating the archive as a site of colonial knowledge production rather than a repository of colonial facts.¹² The related question of whether the colonised subject can be recovered from records written by the coloniser has been posed sharply in postcolonial theory, with the argument that the recovery of a subaltern voice through such records reproduces the representational structure it seeks to escape.¹³

Table 1 sets out the principal forms of silence with the response that oral history and community archiving offer to each.

Table 1. Forms of archival silence and the practices developed in response

Form of silence	How it is produced	Response in practice	Residual limitation
Non-creation	The event generated no record because no institution had reason to make one	Interviewing surviving participants and descendants	Closes with the life of the last witness
Non-retention	Records were made but not selected for permanent preservation	Community collecting and post-custodial deposit	Depends on material having survived at all
Categorical distortion	Records exist but classify people in the administration's terms	Reading against the grain; oral accounts of the same events	Cannot recover what the categories excluded
Access restriction	Records survive but are closed, dispersed or held abroad	Repatriation claims, digitisation, mediated access	Control remains with the holding institution
Language and literacy	Records exist only in the language of administration	Interviewing in vernacular languages, community translation	Translation introduces its own interpretation
Deliberate destruction	Records were destroyed at moments of political transition	Testimony, and the documentation of the destruction itself	The destroyed content is not recoverable

THE ARCHIVAL TURN AND COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Archival practice has responded to these critiques. A widely cited account describes four successive paradigms, moving from evidence through memory and identity to community, with the archivist transformed correspondingly from passive custodian through active appraiser and societal mediator to community facilitator.¹⁴ The reframing carries practical consequences: appraisal decisions become explicit acts of historical judgement requiring justification, and the archive becomes accountable to communities rather than only to its parent institution.

A parallel argument holds that archives are activated in use and that meaning accrues to records through the successive contexts in which they are read, so that the record is never simply the deposit of the moment of its creation.¹⁵ Critical archival studies has since consolidated these positions into a distinct field, defining its purpose as identifying and challenging the power relations that structure archives and the professions that manage them.¹⁶

Community archives are the practical outcome. In these, a community identifies, collects and describes its own material, often retaining custody rather than depositing with a national institution, and describes it in its own terms rather than in professional standards designed for administrative records. The results are uneven in preservation quality and in sustainability, and the movement raises unresolved questions about long term care and about who speaks for a community. It has nevertheless produced holdings that no institutional collecting policy would have generated.

PARTITION AND THE LIMITS OF THE RECORD

The Partition of India in 1947 illustrates the whole argument in a single case. It displaced somewhere between ten and twenty million people and killed several hundred thousand, and the official record consists overwhelmingly of administrative correspondence, boundary commission papers and refugee statistics. Almost nothing in the archive records what the experience was.

Oral history reconstructed a substantial part of it, and in doing so recovered histories that had been unsayable rather than merely unrecorded, particularly concerning the abduction of women, the killing of women by their own families, and the state programme that later recovered and transferred abducted women against their expressed wishes.¹⁷ Two features of this work bear on method generally. The testimony was gathered decades after the events, so it records how the experience had been lived with as much as what happened. And a great deal of it concerned matters that families had agreed not to discuss, which raises the question of what an interviewer owes to a narrator who discloses something the family has spent fifty years containing.

ETHICS AND THE INTERVIEW RELATIONSHIP

Ethical practice in oral history rests on a fuller notion of consent than most research governance recognises. A narrator agrees to an interview without knowing what they will say, since recollection in the interview frequently produces material the narrator did not expect to disclose. Standard practice therefore separates consent to be interviewed from consent to deposit and to use, and returns the transcript for review before deposit, so that the second decision is made with knowledge of the content.¹⁸

Ownership is a related question. Copyright in a recording is not the same as authority over the account it contains, and the conventions that govern this differ by jurisdiction and by institution. The practical resolution generally adopted is joint agreement covering deposit, access and re-use, with the narrator retaining the right to close all or part of the record for a period.

The interview relationship itself has received sustained attention from practitioners writing about what actually happens in the field rather than about protocol, including the difficulties raised by interviews that go wrong, by narrators who want something from the researcher, and by the emotional consequences for the interviewer of extended work on traumatic material.¹⁹ This literature is more useful to a practitioner than most methods textbooks, precisely because it is written about failure.

TESTIMONY, LAW AND THE PUBLIC RECORD

Testimony has a second institutional life outside the academy. Truth commissions, of which several dozen have now reported, collect statements from victims and sometimes from perpetrators, and produce an authorised account intended to establish a shared record where the state had denied that anything happened.²⁰ These bodies are not oral history projects, but they raise the same questions in sharper form, because their proceedings carry legal and political consequences that an academic interview does not.

Three differences from academic practice are instructive.

The purpose of the account differs. A commission seeks a finding, and a finding requires that a version be settled. Oral history is comfortable with contradictory accounts and treats the contradiction as informative. A commission cannot be, since a report that declines to adjudicate serves neither victims nor the public record.

The format shapes what can be said. Statement taking under a commission is structured by categories drawn from human rights law, which recognise particular acts against particular individuals within a defined period. Anthropological work on the South African commission documented the consequence: women giving statements very largely spoke about what had happened to husbands, sons and brothers rather than about their own experience, in part because the categories on offer defined harm in terms of gross violations to the body and did not accommodate the sustained conditions of daily life under which many women had suffered.²¹ The silence that resulted was produced by the instrument, not by the witnesses.

The relationship to the witness differs. A commission offers public acknowledgement and sometimes reparation, and it takes testimony under conditions that may be re-traumatising, with limited capacity for follow up. Oral historians who have worked with survivors have generally concluded that

the duty of care extends past the recording and that projects should budget for it, a conclusion that commissions have reached more slowly.

The relevance of this to the wider argument is direct. These proceedings show, at institutional scale, that the form in which testimony is solicited determines what enters the record, and that a silence in the archive may be an artefact of the collecting instrument rather than of the reticence of those who might have spoken. That is the same claim made about colonial archives in section 4, arrived at from a very different direction and with contemporary documentation of the mechanism at work.^{10,12}

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Digital tools have altered the field in ways that are still being assessed. Recording is now trivially cheap, so the constraint has moved from collection to processing, cataloguing and preservation. Automatic transcription has reduced the cost of making recordings searchable, at the price of errors that fall unevenly across accents, dialects and languages, which means that the most under-documented voices are the ones the technology transcribes worst.

Online publication raises harder questions. Consent given for deposit in a regional archive consulted by a handful of researchers a year is not obviously consent for global publication with full text search, and the ability to locate a single sentence within a life history detaches statements from the context that made them intelligible. Archives have responded with graduated access, embargo periods and contextual framing, none of which fully resolves the difficulty. The general point is that the digital archive changes the meaning of access, and that consent frameworks written for the analogue archive do not transfer without amendment.

CONCLUSION

Oral history matured by abandoning the claim that made it initially respectable. It is not principally a way of filling gaps in the documentary record with equivalent facts. It is a way of studying how people make sense of what happened to them, and its distinctive evidence is exactly the material that a documentary standard would discard as error.^{2,3}

That repositioning has been matched in archival thinking, where the archive has come to be understood as an active and interested institution whose silences are produced rather than accidental.^{10,14} The two developments meet in the community archive and in the recording projects that serve populations whose histories the institutional record was never designed to hold. The remaining difficulties are practical and largely unglamorous. Communicative memory of any event has a fixed and short window before it becomes cultural memory or disappears.⁸ Ethical frameworks written for analogue deposit need revision for a digital environment. And the collections that this work generates require sustained curation of a kind that project funding rarely provides. None of these is a theoretical problem, and each will determine how much of what is currently recoverable is still there in fifty years.

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