

# Can oral history be trusted

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The 21st Century, a time we live in where nearly everything is documented. Whether it be written and put into archives or posted on Facebook.

Things were much different in the early stage of man up until now. The cave people documented things by writing on walls, but can this be trusted? Even documents that have been written down cannot be trusted so can stories or myths have been written by people in their own diaries or in letters so loved ones be trusted? Essentially, when thinking about oral History stories such as Troy and how they were passed down the generations to come up with the story we now know. As it has been passed down for such a long time without being written down, or even if it has being written from certain people ( which means we would only get their side of the argument ) would mean that we can't look at something and say it is true. With no real account of information actually documented in archives, which is made by historians we can't come out and say that it is feasible and can't can be trusted. By this is it meant that information found about the time is only found in the form of letters and/or diaries. If this is the case it is known that people do tend to over-exaggerate the event, this could either be because they are wanting to gain revenge over an old or current rival ( as Peter Oliver states “ The fact is that oral testimony . .

. is frequently used as means of paying off old scores” (1) . In Oliver's mind, someone would manipulate a source so that they could make someone they dislike look bad ), or to make others feel sorry for them because of what they have been through. It can also be said that “ tricks that the memory can play, to efforts at rationalization & self-justification that all of us make, even if only subconsciously, or to the terrible telescoping of time which

an interview often encourages and which runs counter to the very essence of history” 2 This can also happen with age, it is argued that if you are older then your mind is weaker and less likely to remember the specific’s, which could have a major impact on what the outcome of the information is.

Whereas if you were younger your mind is still ‘ fresh’ and will remember things better, but this is too argued that even though you are not likely to remember things, the mind has a big imagination especially when you are young, so again this means that events that happened could either be over-exaggerated or maybe didn’t even happen. This is basically saying that the mind can forget or tend to make something seem worse or better than it really was if it didn’t or did enjoy it. As it says, this doesn’t have to be deliberate; the mind can do this by itself while the person would be at no fault of how it had been over or under exaggerated.

One of the main and most wanted sources of oral history is the use of interviews. These can cause many problems however, as the interviewee may not want to admit to certain things that they did or say they wanted to do it, such as in Nazi Germany where a lot of the Germans all say they were forced to do certain things, whereas other accounts from the time show that the people were willing to do anything for Hitler. Other people in interviews may complain that they did not intend to say certain things or that it didn’t come out how it was intended, that an interview had been ‘ misinterpreted’. This can cause many problems in the sense that information given to us from one person may be completely different from another person, which would mean neither of the two interviews are unreliable. This isn’t a perfect way to gather information but sometimes it can be the only way, “ we are not gods;

our recourses are finite; time spent on interviewing is time not spent reading books, processing statistics, thinking about one's data, polishing one's prose, or whatever" 3. Some historians do believe that it is a waste of time because it is so unreliable but as this is sometimes the only way to gather information on the period or on certain things, what does this say about oral History? Of course however, where oral History has its disadvantages it has its advantages. Oral History can bring about some good information about the time that is being studied.

Civil Servants for example can be a great source of information. This is because if they have been in the civil service, for example forty years, then they have witnessed change of policies, problems, pressure groups and ministers who made a difference. They can give us good insight into the time and what change took and place and why it took place, whether this can be trusted is the question though and it has to be said that in this case, civil servant records are more reliable than anything else because they are always going to talk about the problems and how it was fixed rather than pinpointing one thing and making it out to be amazing or terrible. Even if someone is not from the civil service they can still be helpful, they can provide information that was not already known and help " piece together events" 4. An Historian once said " you can compare and collate documents, but you cannot create new ones to answer the questions which the old ones pose for you" 5. This basically means, that people can help you to fit all the pieces together and find out more about the time than was already known, but you cannot yourself put something in that you think is right without any

evidence. This is the main reason why oral history is so important and why we need to find more ways like this to get trusted documents.

Oral History is at it is best when we are looking for information on private lives and how good the conditions were ect. Whether these can be trusted is of course argued between many historians. It is argued that if things are going well, then it is more likely to be trusted coming from the non-elites. This is because they are not the people running the country and if things are going badly then the ruler/s are not going to want to admit that things are going wrong, whereas if you are a non-elite you are. Especially if things are going well, the chances of them over-exaggerating the facts is very low. In conclusion, it has to be said that Oral History cannot be trusted without lots of evidence and sources. With so many factors such as the human mind in place, most history is not very reliable.

Some points in History we only have accounts from letters and diaries, or interviews from older people. None of these can really be trusted because they are all going to say the persons side of the argument and not the opponents. To truly say that a period in History is fully understood would be totally wrong, this is because even now, we have a lot of evidence and sources on periods and yet historians still argue. The thing is the only people that really know what it was like living in these times or what really happened in a certain event are the people that were there or were involved in it. Other Historians will always argue with this view, but really the truth is nothing about History can really be trusted. History is written by the victor and the victor therefore dictates how the event or time was written about. An example is, if the Nazi's had gained World power, then we wouldn't be <https://assignbuster.com/can-oral-history-be-trusted/>

discussing how Hitler was bad and how he ruined Germany, we would be discussing how weak.