

Methodological problems faced by oral historians

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Oral historians face a significant burden when conducting interviews, as they are expected to locate past events, actors and actions in time and space, aiming, through words, to understand interviewees' oral narration of their memories; however, it is impossible to gain a complete history of the events from these accounts. This essay will focus on the methodological problems faced by oral historians: issues of gathering reliable data by asking relevant, informed questions, whilst providing an atmosphere that will not improperly influence the informant's responses; and, most significantly, analysing the possibly tainted interviewees' account. However, related to these factors, is the overriding issue of oral history's subjectivity and objectivity.

When interpreting violence and trauma, inherent difficulties lie in the lack of clarity in these terms' definitions and distinction. 'Trauma' navigates between two meanings: 1, an event in the external world, together with a subjective experience, and 2, the pathological consequences interpreted as having been initiated by the trauma. It is important to recognise a lack of uniformity in oral sources, given that traumatic events elicit multifaceted reactions. Understanding the violence through typical PTSD and psychological frameworks, and through its documentation, is innately limited, and often exacerbates trauma, whilst adopting Benezer's 'life story' framework, is non-interfering and enables the expression of the reconstruction of meaning of trauma experiences.

This method provides understanding of both personal trauma as viewed within a social context and of the social milieu as reflected in the individual's life, reflecting that oral histories are not recovered, but created. This method analyses the text's context and thematic organisation, rather than solely

focussing on the linguistic-narrative behaviour of the interviewees, recognising that trauma is not just the event itself, but is imbued with the meaning for the individual, in terms of their life story, personal biases, priorities, and sensitivities. The degree of trauma is not in a social vacuum, but rather dependent on social context, as particularly evident in the Ethiopian environment, where there is increased vulnerability and trauma following separation from parents, given family life's societal importance. It must be further acknowledged that traumatic events are not exclusionary, but rather have a knock-on effect, whereby one violent incident lowers the victims' overall resistance to potentially traumatizing events.

This is pertinent in the Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel via Sudan, in Benezer's analysis that the impact on the Jews was not only as a result of the journey, but became impactful upon their encounter with Israeli society, significantly affecting both individuals and community, and their societal adaptation. Violent and traumatic events, can become 'limit experiences', which puncture the boundaries of the victim's sense of self in terms of its linguistic and psychological framework. However, this is insufficient to explain why trauma manifests in different ways after violent events, specifically inarticulation, over-emotiveness and incomprehensibility, reflecting that there is no uniform set of symptoms. Trauma cannot be read from an original event, but rather in terms of the way it shaped the temporal relationship between the violent event as past experience, and the event's present adaptation and remembering.

According to Field, the sense of the 'self', as shaped by the violent event, constantly oscillates between cohesion and fragmentation, the latter of <https://assignbuster.com/methodological-problems-faced-by-oral-historians/>

which increases greatly following violence. By failing to recognise this concept, historians fail to account for historic shifts and ruptures in the individual over time. By recognising limit events, historians will recognise violence's traumatic impact, and not solely its 'evil, extremity or quantity'. Historians need to accept the challenge of the ambiguity of trauma's comprehension, that can be alleviated by adopting 'limit events'. In contrast to accepting a PTSD or psychiatric definition of trauma, which limits historians' understanding, attention must be given to how the traumatic experience impacts ways in which people construct, filter, mediate, interpret and make meanings from these experiences, requiring an understanding of the individuals' pre-existing social and cultural context.

Moreover it is crucial to understand that limit experiences, shaped by popular myths, need to be traced within specific cultural formations, as the boundaries that define what is 'limit experience' is not universal, and cannot employ a Eurocentric standard of what is 'traumatic'. Due to this rupturing and victim's increased vulnerability following the event, they suppress this experience. This inability to separate the event and experience, causes the survivor's isolated feeling, or results in their emotional suffering as indicative of their failures. Thus survivors' often feel blameworthy, particularly women, reflecting Ntsimane's plea to recognise men and women's different social standings, particularly given traditional African society's patriarchy, causing serious societal implications for the survivor.

Violence and trauma intrude into survivors' ability to story-tell, in the inability to verbalise. Visible traces in the mind are often too terrifying to voice, such as flashbacks, unstable imagery, which are jarring and piercing.

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This causes the event's manifestation as timeless or dislocated, presenting a challenge as the historian must probe for facts. This is articulated in Benezer's encapsulation of the difficulty of recounting violent events to oneself and others, by stating that 'trauma is unnarrateable, as it is too emotionally charged, when still alive', as the separation between the act of narration and the event itself has not yet been processed and connected to life histories.

The barrier between the self's experience of the violence (as the past singular event) and the 'constructing self'(of the present), inevitably collapses, preventing narration, creating a 'hidden' event. Given the likeliness of these 'hidden events' it is crucial that interviewers probe the interviewee as a means of uncovering this, as they do not arise in the first flow of narration. Contrastingly, verbal references to trauma are the traces of its 'afterwardness', rather than the trauma itself. Historians can resolve this issue by attempting to frame 'traces' of it through survivors' flashback narration, acting out or the repetitions of the incomprehensible or uncanny. These reflect survivors' cognitive disorientation and inability to concentrate or construct a rational sequence of sentences.

However, this simultaneously poses the question of whether the trauma is a product of internal psychic responses to exterior violence or the internal self's rupturing by external social events. The uncanny, repressed traces from the unconscious or deep memory of structural trauma suggest that trauma memories cannot have a simple referential 'past to present' relationship, but have no sense of chronological time and are unable to precisely locate where and how its pain is derived. Typical PTSD and <https://assignbuster.com/methodological-problems-faced-by-oral-historians/>

psychological models reduce trauma to historical events, family histories and unconscious dynamics, failing to account for their intersection enabled by the non-referential approach. This is encapsulated as 'melancholia', whose continued and open relationship to the past, allows the historian to gain new understandings of the violence. This reflects the inevitable inability to gain a full understanding of the violence, and of the victims' inability to gain 'closure', inadvertently creating greater trauma. Rather, by viewing the violence through 'melancholia', the intolerable is made more tolerable, as victims are able to conceptualize more positive futures.

Historians must be cognisant of the interviewee's cultural background and gender, as this influences the oral history's presentation and the communication with the interviewer, most commonly affected by the interviewer's supposed 'superior' position. Sensitivity is imperative in the interview process for clarification: particularly regarding gender (women are more likely to be intimidated by male interviewers) and customary etiquette, including eye contact, handshaking and gender spatial positions. Women's modesty may affect their recounting, resulting in factual misrepresentations, and perpetuated vulnerability. It is important to recognise the interview's potentially dangerous implications in the community, who may feel threatened, and consequently threaten the interviewee, thus leading to a repercussionary form of violence.

Therefore the interview's effect may be empowering or disempowering, particularly when the interviewer is focussed on research agenda and certain themes, and improperly influences the interviewee thus limiting the scope of the violence uncovered. Historians must equally not equate oral story-telling

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to therapy, argued by Colvin as part of the TRC's discourse, as this causes trauma to become an exclusionary term, in which those who gave testimony were 'officially classified as victims'.

This model is flawed as it promotes trauma defined as a singular, extraordinary event leaving a deep, uninterpretable wound on the individual psyche, and implies that therapeutic storytelling 'heals' the suffering, resulting in the narrator's ability to reflect on and vocalise it.

Simultaneously, by encouraging the 'taming' of haunting memories, they are re-exposed, sometimes increasing suffering. The TRC's role is arguably 'perpetrator-friendly' and reveals that its promotion of a singular event as the cause of trauma ignores Apartheid's inherent chronic suffering, causing the memory's endurance, essentially a repeat abuse. The TRC's promotion of speaking about prior suffering for 'the good of the nation', is premature, limiting the individual's growth, insulting and politically suspect.

This reduces SA's written history to be solely made of traumatic events, ignoring social, political and economic structures that made Apartheid a condition of chronic suffering rather than traumatic suffering, thus inadvertently reducing the impact on sufferers as limited and curable. This furthermore reduces oral storytelling's significance, ignoring its usefulness for facilitating interracial, post-conflict understandings. History storytelling must be recognised rather as a means of strengthening intra-group bonds in the face of continuing suffering, than as a redemption and reconciliation exercise among antagonists as this therapeutic model promotes, reducing trauma to a victim-centred, finite entity, in which uncovering and storytelling benefits others.

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Alternative forms of storytelling must be recognised, where theatre group enactment, wherein the self is removed, enables the victim's portrayal of trauma. Contrastingly, the lack of justice and perpetrators' formal prosecution, caused by the TRC's methodology, leads to 'exposure' to more abuse, exacerbation of trauma and the victims' perception that 'they are not free'. This reflects that the TRC is not uniformly helpful, failing to 'cure' through forgiveness and reconciliation. Thus historians, in attempting to understand the victim's recounting, must not adopt the TRC's methodology, as this potentially causes the victim to feel 'used', as Ntsimane's subject felt the TRC used her story, not by her own grace, but solely for the nation's good.

Historians' essential challenge when collating history is thus to adopt a 'critically empathetic' and 'emotionally attuned sensibility' approach in evaluating oral history dialogues and interpretation. The adoption of an empathetic and imaginative stance regarding the victim's perspective, and recognition of the variety of ways in which survivors work to translate, in psychic and cultural terms, whilst maintaining critical analysis is vital in recording history, rather than attempting to uniformly search for reconciliation and equality.