

Historical research methods: strengths and weaknesses



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What are the strengths and limitations of using biography, autobiography and oral history as historical sources?

The combination of autobiography, biography and oral history is enrichment to the study of history through placing an emphasis on the role that personalities and individuals have in historical events. They form important sources for historical study both primary and secondary. It has been claimed that the relative merits of biography and oral history, although intrinsically flawed, are an essential element in the writing and study of history. Oral history as a source can conceivably be controversial because it could be perceived as unreliable and mercurial. Memory and the passage of time can intentionally or unintentionally, distort or omit details; seeming spontaneity in response can be over-elaborate or exaggerate an individual's contribution; oral dialogue can personalise events and confirm them but a personal perspective could also diminish and simplify the same events. Interviews, despite possible lack of detail, lapses of memory and tricks of the imagination, give access to a valuable historical source which could create a lost world. History is not just an evaluation of causes and consequences; it is also a study of human nature. Autobiography, biography and oral history can give illustration and colour to what could be perceived as a dry and dusty subject. They can add personal insight into an event and because of this they can also be unreliable. They can modify or distort the truth according to the author's motives for writing the piece or agreeing to the interview. It could be argued that history is a record of human progress, achievements and endeavours so without the contribution of personalised accounts whether through oral recordings, biography or autobiography, the

study and analysis of history would be a one-dimensional digest of facts. History without some personal focus would be tedious and unbalanced; personal records prompt deeper historical reflection and research.

Biography

It is hard for the biographer, for instance, to rise above his own preconceptions and be truly objective. Biographies should be used as sources but it always should be borne in mind that they are often subjectively and not always objectively written. The one of the strengths of using biographies are that there is a direct focus on an event and the biographer might give an event more depth and detail than a general history book would and perhaps give it a human slant. Biographers can be biased, they are sometimes said to fall in love with their subjects. Whilst this maybe an exaggeration there is some truth in the fact that it is hard to be objective about a subject that the writer has analysed in depth and feels they understand. Biographers are selective through necessity as no biography can ever be a full unvarnished story of a life. In this selection the biographer has to make a decision as to whether he is judgemental or whether he presents a selection of facts from which his reader can form their own opinion of the subject. In presenting such a selection, the biographer will be allowing his own views and background colour his choice. It is the attempt to be even-handed with the subject of the biography that can cause controversy as the biographer is accused of rehabilitating history's villains on one hand or denigrating its heroes on the other. Revisionist theories about notorious historical figures can cause outcry and condemnation as was well illustrated by David Irving's biography of Adolf Hitler. Even with all the

problems, they still are a good source of information and the reader should always consider other books about the same person if they are unsure of the treatment of the subject matter. The wisest thing to do is to cross reference biographies/history books and use more than one source, in order to get a better and more informed opinion.

Autobiography

Autobiography can provide unique insights since nobody knows better than the subject about themselves. On the other hand they can be economical with the truth or written to cause sensation; the facts could be skewed because the writer will not doubt be attempting to present himself in the best light. It is also probable that only one point of view of events will be given so the account might not be well-balanced. That being said, autobiography is a good first source of information.