

APPLYING PRINCIPLES OF HISTORICAL CRITIQUE: AUTHENTIC ORAL HISTORY?

Marietjie Oelofse¹

Abstract

To reconstruct the past, oral historians are concerned with the depths of memory as a potential source of information, evidence and meaning at their disposal. Unfortunately, memory can never be absolutely certain, wherein lies its weakness as a source of knowledge of the past. The researcher has the important task of implementing historical interpretation and principles of historical critique in searching for authenticity in sources. Taking into account the nature of memory and the factors that may negatively affect its objectivity, the article will examine which reliable techniques and methods may be implemented by the oral historian to minimise problems and inaccuracies, as well as examine oral evidence for factual credibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

Memory is still recognised as the “raw material of history” and “the living source from which historians can draw”. In this view the historical discipline “nourishes memory in turn, and enters into the great dialectical process of memory and forgetting experienced by individuals and societies.”²

Oral historians are concerned with memory as a potential historical source of information. This is done to provide an explication of the reliability of the recollection of events and circumstances compared to the written history, with both presenting the past.³

Before the emergence of manuscript literacy, knowledge of the past was largely conveyed orally where the world trusted the authority of the spoken word. Modern print culture has led to a search for the certain and the true, which must include acts of recollection and of repetition.⁴ However, the elimination of “memory” may take place in the form of censorship, banning, the confiscation of materials, incarceration and a range of related actions. Any attempt to reconstruct the past should involve the recovery of these memories.

1 Senior lecturer, Department of History, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. E-mail: oelofsem@ufs.ac.za

2 P Ricoeur (translated by K Blamey and D Pellauer), *Memory, history, forgetting* (Chicago, 2004), p. 386.

3 P Burke, “History as social memory” in T Butler (ed.), *Memory history, culture and the mind* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 99-100.

4 PH Hutton, *History as an art of memory* (London, 1993), pp. xxii, 48.

Therefore, the past that exists in people's living memory needs to be remembered, especially if it can serve a present need. It is consequently the privilege, as well as the definitive task, of the historian to implement historical interpretation in unlocking and reconstructing memories hidden in the recesses of a distant past in which images and ideas are directly connected, resulting in the past coming alive once more. Considering the variables influencing and shaping memory, using oral history methods, may yield challenges to the researcher, especially in searching for authenticity. Against this background the article will examine the challenges confronting oral history and then focus on general factors and criteria that can be taken into account, as well as implemented for examining oral evidence for reliability and objectivity in order to pursue the aspiration of truthfulness. The article does not focus on a specific country or culture group as these criteria can be implemented within a wider, universal context by all oral historians.

2. CHALLENGES CONFRONTING ORAL HISTORY

All memory, short- as well as long-term, is stored through a process of selection and interpretation. Immediately after an event, sifting and shaping occur to a large degree and continue in the long term in a slower and subtler way. The process of ordering, discarding, combining and selecting is a continual one, resulting in memory bringing together the objective and subjective, facts, opinions and interpretations. Therefore, the researcher can never assume the information produced from memory to be unadulterated fact.⁵

Memory is known to be fallible, due to such factors as passive decay, interference between traces such that similar memories cannot be distinguished, retrieval forgetting, systematic distortions of memory traces and displacement of existing memories by incoming material.

A key aspect of oral history is the retrieving of memories of the people being interviewed who are given a chance to convey their story. The past is continually reinvented in our living memories, making them highly unreliable as a guide to what actually transpired and their imagery should be interpreted for hidden agendas. Notwithstanding, given oral history's special benefits and attributes, memory is in and of itself simply subjective.⁶

This particular problem area of oral history concerning the retrieval of memories connected with the unreliability of the interviewee's memory with regard to hard and specific facts and the chronological order thereof, is highlighted by historian Patrick O'Farrell, who wrote in 1979 that oral history was moving into

5 H Slim *et al.* (eds), *Listening for a change. Oral testimony and community development* (London, 1995), pp. 140-141.

6 Hutton, p. 7; J Fentress and C Wickham, *Social memory* (Oxford, 1992), p. 7.

“the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity ... And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth.”⁷

Concerning the problematic nature of oral history, with memory as a potential source of evidence, there are numerous factors that may negatively affect and dilute its reliability. However, contrary to what many historians believe, these factors are not insuperable and they may be overcome by utilising reliable techniques developed over the years by historians who are involved with oral history.

3. PURSUING TRUTHFULNESS AND FACTUAL CREDIBILITY IN ORAL EVIDENCE

3.1 The unique nature and value of oral sources

When using oral history with memory as the core, it is crucial to be aware of the unique nature of memory as a source of evidence. Memory should not be treated as a source in the same way as written documents. Both types of sources require different and specific interpretative instruments, as both have common, as well as autonomous characteristics.⁸

Any oral historian needs to be aware of the basic processes of human memory and how these processes will determine the information that will be recalled by an interviewee. Human memory will never provide the complete record and it therefore depends on other sources for reconstructing the past.⁹ For Thompson, the historian should be aware of memory’s impact on the information gained from the narrator and should confront such information gained “neither with blind faith, nor with arrogant scepticism, but with an understanding of the subtle processes through which all of us perceive, and remember, the world around us and our part in it. It is only in such a sensitive spirit that we can hope to learn the most from what is told to us.”¹⁰

Oral sources may indeed convey “reliable” information, but to treat them as “simply one more document” is to ignore the special value which they have as subjective, spoken testimony.¹¹ Taking into consideration that the purpose of any

7 P Thompson, *The voice of the past Oral history* (3rd ed., Oxford, 2000), p. 159; A Thomson, “Fifty years on: An international perspective on oral history”, *The Journal of American History* 85(2), September 1998, p. 585.

8 A Portelli, “What makes oral history different” in R Perks and A Thomson (eds), *The oral history reader* (New York, 1998), p. 64.

9 DA Ritchie, *Doing oral history. A practical guide* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2003), p. 119; B Allen and L Montell, *From memory to history. Using oral sources in local historical research* (Tennessee, 1982), pp. 15-22; A Parkin, *Memory. A guide for professionals* (New York, 1999), p. 19; T Butler, “Memory: A mixed blessing” in Butler (ed.), p. 14; T Lummis, *Listening to history. The authenticity of oral evidence* (London, 1987), p. 147.

10 Thompson, p. 172.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 118.

piece of evidence is essential in making accurate evaluations, one should realise that no source is either reliable or unreliable for every purpose. Every source may be used by someone in some way, either to prove or disprove findings. In other words, it is necessary to understand precisely what it is the researcher is about to evaluate. Besides, all data of any sort should not be trusted completely, because all sources need to be evaluated and tested against other evidence. Oral testimony, as evidence and the limits of memory, make it appropriate for some enquiries, but unsuitable for others. The historian has to make a choice of which sources he/she sees as reliable (or unreliable and not useful) for his/her specific purpose and research.¹²

It is worthwhile remembering that documents by themselves may be as misleading as human memory. The characteristics of selectivity and interpretation form part of all messages, as every person, either with writing or speaking, chooses information to convey, orders it and colours it. Just as recorded documents should be examined for relevance and accuracy, so will oral sources require judgement and discernment. Memory is a form of historical evidence, which needs to be evaluated, like any other type of historical evidence and both forms of evidence should undergo careful scrutiny. Internal tests which evaluate the material in terms of its self-consistency and external tests, which compare and contrast oral information to written documents and physical evidence, may be applied to oral sources.¹³

Thus, neither oral nor written evidence may be taken as superior, because the difference is not so much in the integrity and reliability of the sources, as in their format and context. In searching for the authenticity of oral history, one must understand oral history as, apart from an exercise in fact finding, an interpretive exercise of past events.

Oral historians have highlighted the unique advantages of oral history against the written document, where the latter is definitely not “problem free”¹⁴ as a source. Written documents may be as deceptive as memory where “even the most genuine of documents should be regarded as guilty of deceit until proven innocent”.¹⁵ Non-participants usually compose written documents and normally the documentation process happens after the referred event. Contrary to this situation, an oral history interview leads to direct and personal involvement where the narrator makes an

12 J Worthington and P Denis, *Working draft. Training manual. Oral history project* (Durban, s.a.), p. 21. (This oral history project is now called the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa with Prof. P Denis as the director); Ritchie, p. 26; S Caunce, *Oral history and the local historian* (London, 1994), p. 103.

13 Allen and Montell, p. 71; J Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (London, 1985), p. 191; Lummis, p. 130.

14 Written records may carry personal and/or social biases and may occur within a social context. It may also be viewed through the screen of contemporary experiences, making it partial and distorted and causing it to suffer from historical inaccuracy.

15 L Gottschalk, *Understanding history. A primer of historical method* (2nd ed., New York, 1969), p. 144.

effort to make sense of the past and place it in the appropriate historical context. The researcher may also return again and again to the narrator and ask him/her to tell more.¹⁶

On the other hand, the true distinctiveness of oral history evidence lies in the fact that it presents itself in an oral form. The recording may be a more reliable and accurate account of an interview than a purely written record, with the interview bringing the information much closer to the human condition. The speaker can be challenged immediately and, even more importantly, all the precise words used are there, as they were spoken, with the “social clues, nuances, humor or pretence as well as the texture of dialect that was used. It conveys all the distinctive qualities of oral rather than written communication.”¹⁷

Allen and Montell argue the trustworthiness of memory by pointing to research among groups of people around the world who have “a marked propensity for retaining historical truths over long periods of time”.¹⁸ Especially in favourable social and cultural conditions, people in countries like Africa, America (the Indians) and South Asia, preserved their orally communicated history with significant accuracy.

Allen and Montell debate further that truth in oral history does not always lie in its factual accuracy. “What people *believe* happened is often as important as what actually happened, for people think, act, and react in accordance with what they believe is true.”¹⁹ Underlying truths embodied in beliefs, attitudes, values, exaggerations, distortions and seeming contradictions of historical fact, should consequently be identified by the researcher. Slim and Thompson confirm this idea by explaining that these “not factually exact or literally true” stories of people who combine and re-order their memories, may often be regarded as the “clearest indicators of people’s consciousness, their ways of thinking and sense of self”.²⁰ For them, the very mixture of the subjective with the objective makes oral testimony such a “rich source of information revealing as much about values and perceptions as about material realities”.²¹

Thompson adds to this by stating that history is not only about structures or events, but also about how these are experienced and remembered in the imagination. “(W)hat people imagined happened, and also what they believe *might* have happened – their imagination of an alternative past, and so an alternative present – may be as crucial as what did happen.”²² Joan Sangster goes even further

16 Portelli, pp. 68-69; RJ Grele *et al.*, *Envelopes of sound. The art of oral history* (2nd ed., New York, 1991), p. 141.

17 Thompson, pp. 125-127.

18 Allen and Montell, p. 69.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

20 Slim *et al.*, pp. 144-145.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

22 Thompson, p. 162.

with this idea and contends that “(w)hen people talk about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a little, exaggerate, become confused, get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths ... the guiding principle for [life histories] could be that all autobiographical memory is true: it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, and for what purpose.”²³

Although the above viewpoints are controversial and are, in fact, disputed by many historians, there is an element of truth in them. The fact is that all oral sources have limitations and should be assessed with a critical approach. That is not to say that all oral sources are unreliable by implication. It is rather a realisation by the researcher as to what these sources may contribute.²⁴

Consequently, one may conclude, taking into account the limitations and imperfections of the historian and the objects of investigation, that complete neutrality and total objectivity in history are not possible. The historian should research his/her topic as thoroughly as possible and apply the principles of historical criticism to all sources to pursue truth and objectivity, as far as possible.²⁵ Gottschalk reminds the researcher that what is meant by calling a particular source credible, is not that “it is actually what happened, but that it is as close to what actually happened as we can learn from a critical examination of the best available sources”.²⁶

3.2 Implementing methods and techniques to check the factual credibility of oral sources

Most oral historians claim that the unique nature of memory and its related processes require an appropriate methodology that is suitable for effectively accessing information stored in people’s memories. The oral history interview in all its forms may thus be the most suitable methodology. The value of any source also depends upon the questions the researcher seeks to answer and/or the information he/she wishes to acquire. As is the case with all historical sources, oral evidence should also be subjected to consistency in the testimony (reliability) and accuracy (validity) in relevant factual information.²⁷ Oral historians agree that oral

23 J Sangster, “Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history” in Perks and Thomson (eds), p. 87.

24 Vansina, p. 197.

25 JP Brits, “*Doing history*”. *A practical guide to improving your study skills* (Cape Town, 1993), p. 10.

26 Gottschalk, p. 139.

27 “Validity refers to the degree of conformity between the reports of the event and the event itself as reported by other primary source material, such as documents, diaries, letters or other oral reports. Reliability, on the other hand is the consistency with which an individual will tell the same story about the same event on a number of different occasions.” AM Hoffman and HS Hoffman, “Reliability and validity in oral history: The case for memory” in J Jeffrey and G Edwall (eds), *Memory and history. Essays on recalling and interpreting experience* (Lanham, 1994), p. 109. See in detail this chapter where the wife-husband team, historian AM Hoffman

evidence should not only be convincing, but also verifiable with other sources for corroboration and authentication.

Paul Thompson believes that the factual credibility of oral sources should be checked against all the established criteria of historical critique that apply to every document. He goes further by explaining that there are no absolute rules, but rather a number of factors to be taken into account.²⁸ By checking the reliability of a source, the researcher can gain greater knowledge and understanding of a source and the role it plays in the recording of the event under study. Certain steps and methods may be implemented.

Firstly, as with all other sources, the researcher should be aware of the issue of potential bias in all sources, i.e. the tendency to favour a viewpoint in the retelling of an event. In every source, the information is shaped, filtered and selected through a distinctive view.²⁹ The reasons for bias in sources lie on different levels, which may include that the source was produced for its time, to meet the purposes or needs of that specific time; and/or shaped by the beliefs of the researcher who could also have had limited access to information. When evaluating any type of source, the researcher should determine how reliable the sources are for his/her specific purpose and if the sources contain facts or opinions. The following questions need to be answered: Is the topic of the researcher addressed directly or just mentioned vaguely? Can the source give a usable account of the event or part of the event? Is the evidence presented the informant's own personal assessment? Under what circumstances was the informant able to make the observations on which his/her assessment is based? What are the underlining conditions for the informant's assessment? What biases might have shaped the original perceptions? What subsequent incidents might have caused interviewees to rethink and reinterpret their past? How closely do their testimonies agree with other documentary evidence from the period and how do they explain the discrepancies?³⁰

After taking into account the issue of underlining bias in all sources, the historian should work his/her way through the information he/she has in order to get to the facts of the events. Nevertheless, according to Thompson, it is in all fairness impossible to get to these facts, because "information lies between the actual social behaviour and the social expectations or norms of the time - therefore, neither contemporary nor historical evidence is a direct reflection of physical facts

and psychologist HS Hoffman, discuss their project on the reliability of memory, in which they compare documented fact with individual long-term memory.

28 Thompson, pp. 119, 153, 160-161.

29 Worthington and Denis, p. 21.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21. See also W Moss, "Oral history: An appreciation" in DK Dunaway and WK Baum (eds), *Oral history. An interdisciplinary anthology* (2nd ed., London, 1996), pp. 117-118 where the author lists a number of questions that may be applied to an interview or group of interviews when evaluating the content.

or behaviour".³¹ The question of subjectivity immediately arises again. Thompson elaborates on this issue by saying that "the very subjectivity which some see as a weakness of oral sources can also make them uniquely valuable. For subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts'. What the informant believes is indeed a *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he/she believes it) just as much as what *really* happened."³² Valerie Yow supports this view, maintaining that there is "never absolute certainty about any event, about any fact, no matter what sources are used. No single source or combination of them can ever give a picture of the total complexity of the reality. We cannot reconstruct a past or present event in its entirety because the evidence is always fragmentary."³³ This, however, does not mean that the researcher should not try to get to the facts of the events he/she is recording. It is rather observed that one will get close to the facts, but seldom to the entire "truth" of an event.

The second step in pursuing the reliability of a source will be through background research on the life history of the interviewee, as well as on the chosen subject. For oral history, this is absolutely essential before conducting an interview.³⁴

If an interviewer is informed about the existing oral and written sources, it will be considerably easier to assess the integrity and objectivity of those sources gained from an interview. Background information about the interviewee who recounts the information needs to be gathered. Attention should be given to who the interviewee is; whether he/she has a personal or social agenda and what kind of event is being discussed. By gaining as much information as possible from the person supplying the evidence, the researcher can discover why a particular statement has been made. During the preparation and research phase, the oral historian should acquaint himself/herself with the norms and values of a specific culture and take it into consideration.³⁵ Needless to say, being informed of the available sources will also make the cross-checking of the oral sources more effective.

The third step will be to cross-check the source with other sources and this may be done on the corresponding subject and/or a similar period. Especially in cross-checking the researcher should be aware of any bias that may be present in the sources. By cross-checking all the sources against one another, the researcher is able to explore the sources and evaluate each of them on their worth and flaws, in the light of the aims of the historical study. If documented and oral evidence contradict

31 Thompson, p. 128.

32 A Portelli, *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories. Form and meaning in oral history* (New York, 1991), p. 50. See also Thompson, p. 160.

33 VR Yow, *Recording oral history. A practical guide for social scientists* (London, 1994), pp. 21-22.

34 Ritchie, p. 32. See also Lummis, p. 22.

35 Vansina, pp. 173-176, 187; Allen and Montell, pp. 26-29; T Sideris, "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for oral history in South Africa", *Critical Arts* 4(2), 1986, p. 46; A Seldon and J Pappworth, *By word of mouth. Élite' oral history* (London, 1983), p. 125.

each other, the researcher should dig even deeper to determine their accuracy.³⁶ Thompson emphasises the role of cross-checking: “If the study of memory ‘teaches us that *all* historical sources are suffused by subjectivity right from the start’, the *living* presence of those subjective voices from the past also constrains us in our interpretations, allows us, indeed obliges us, to test them against the opinion of those who will always, in essential ways, know more than ourselves.”³⁷

While cross-checking, the researcher can accordingly, in the fourth step, search for internal consistency in the sources. If the pattern of evidence is consistent and drawn from more than one viewpoint, the historical account or interpretation becomes credible. In searching for the source’s reliability, the researcher should be aware of the type of source he/she is using, since in oral history, the researcher encounters not only the facts of an event, but also the emotions and feelings of the people involved. Apart from this, the truth, as known by its narrator, is represented in each oral account. The researcher thus has to evaluate carefully the oral accounts and determine if they are based on personal experience or second- or third-hand reports. Although first accounts may also be fallible, they are usually more reliable than those derived from hearsay. The evidence therefore, also needs to be weighed against a wider context in step five, where in some cases oral evidence will be the best and in others, will be supplementary or complementary to other sources.³⁸

Consequently, with step five the researcher should also focus on the degree to which the memories of the narrator are set into a context of time and place. If the informant can tie personal experience to a specific time and can also accurately place it within the recalled material context of social factors, there are more grounds to accept these memories as valuable historical evidence.³⁹ The ability to tell the truth rests in part upon the witness’s nearness (in a geographical and chronological sense) to the event. The reliability of a witness’s testimony tends to vary in proportion to his/her own remoteness from the scene in time and space and the remoteness from the event in time and space of the witness’s recording thereof. Geographical and chronological closeness to an event will affect the observation, recollection and recording of the event, resulting in how much will be lost and the accuracy of what is retained.⁴⁰

With step six, before even starting with the interview, the interviewer should take special care when compiling a questionnaire. The ultimate purpose of the questionnaire or interview guide is to structure the interview and to guide the interviewee carefully through the interview process. The way questions are

36 Allen and Montell, p. 85; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Ritchie, p. 119.

37 Thompson, p. 172.

38 Allen and Montell, pp. 77, 81; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Thompson, p. 288; Ritchie, p. 34.

39 Lummis, p. 130.

40 Gottschalk, pp. 150-151.

phrased may change what people think they perceived or experienced. Therefore, the phrasing of the questions and the structure of the questionnaire are of vital importance and may in due course determine the result of an interview.⁴¹

For this reason, attention should be given to structuring the questionnaire chronologically and thematically; to using a combination of closed and open-ended questions; to formulating questions from the interviewee's point of view; to not asking leading questions, or asking questions of which the wording presupposes a certain state of affairs; not asking questions of which the wording implies a desired answer; not asking questions that are emotionally loaded, vaguely defined or unspecific; and finally, by asking questions that are simple and straightforward.⁴²

The interview itself, as step seven, is also crucial, as it is the response to a particular person and set of questions, as well as to the interviewee's attempt to make sense of past experiences. Grele describes the interview as a conversational narrative: "conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition – the telling of a tale".⁴³ During the interview, the interviewer should be alert to biases, contradictions and inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers. The content of oral sources depends to a large extent on what the interviewer puts into the interview in terms of questions, dialogue and forging a personal relationship. Thus, the interview needs to be evaluated as text, as types of content and as evidence.⁴⁴

The skills and motivation of the interviewer, as well as the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator may affect the quality of the evidence. The interviewer's special interests and the asking of adequate questions will determine the interview's direction and flow. The interviewer should be careful not to guide the interviewee's memory too much and should also be aware of the bias or influence he/she may bring to the interview. To minimise bias on his/her part, the interviewer should establish a sense of rapport with the interviewee so that he/she does not feel intimidated by the interviewer.⁴⁵

Another tactic for dealing with the above-mentioned problems is by probing (asking follow-up questions). To probe effectively requires a certain level of skill that

41 Parkin, p. 136; Ritchie, p. 93.

42 Worthington and Denis, pp. 27-30.

43 Grele, p. 135. See also pp. 136-138 where the author describes the relationships in this conversational narrative, which is of three types or sets, one internal and two external.

44 Portelli, "What makes oral history ...", pp. 70-71; Thompson, pp. 272-273; Lummis, p. 158; L Shopes, "Making sense of oral history" <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral.htm>>, *s.a.* See Moss, "Oral history: An appreciation" in Dunaway and Baum (eds), pp. 118-119, where the author sets out a number of questions that the historian should ask about the way in which any given interview or group of interviews was conducted.

45 Sideris, p. 43; Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-28; Ritchie, p. 34; RJ Grele, "Movement without aim. Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history" in Perks and Thomson (eds), pp. 43-45.

is developed only over time and should be done with sensitivity, so that the interviewee will not experience the interview situation as an interrogation. The interviewer should be a good listener and intervene with appropriate follow-up questions.⁴⁶

Seldon & Pappworth propose some interesting ways for the researcher to question and assess with “serious considerations” eyewitnesses while the evidence is being given. A variety of steps and methods may be used by interviewers to help them evaluate the evidence. These methods include the interviewer steering a narrator closer to the truth by asking follow-up questions and/or approaching the same topic/issue from several different lines of inquiry at different stages in the interview. To test how precise the informant’s memory is in general and if necessary, for specific facts/periods, the skilled interviewer may mark out in advance some specific facts to ask at certain stages during the interview. By doing this, the interviewer can compare and contrast information. Lastly, the interviewer can examine the interviewee with close attention. By not being too obvious and using eye contact, the interviewer may assess the interviewee’s responses. Here the interviewer is focused on the interviewee’s non-verbal behaviour, such as gestures and voice quality. In order to read and understand these clues, the researcher should develop sensitivity to the social pressures which have bearing on them.⁴⁷

All details surrounding a specific event in the past may very seldom be recalled by only one respondent. An oral historian therefore, should interview during step seven as many candidates as possible on the same subject in order to get to the truth. The way in which the oral historian approaches the interviewee, the wording of the questions and the interviewing style and technique may all be used to ensure the most objective response from an interviewee. The oral historian should also analyse the distinct descriptions, subtexts, non-verbal behaviour and silences in the interview and then cautiously contextualise it. By documenting evidence from a number of interviewees, detailed information may be gained, patterns uncovered and trends noted, facilitating the emergence and discernment of the truth.⁴⁸ In the end, the information gained from the interview should be, if available and possible, compared with other interviews on the same subject and with related documentary evidence to test its veracity.

Conducting interviews years after an event had occurred might lead to uncertain memories. Time and the passage thereof, reshape memory. Memory grows

46 Ritchie, pp. 94-95.

47 Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 127-128; C Davis *et al.*, *Oral history. From tape to type* (Chicago, 1983), p. 6; Thompson, p. 169.

48 Allen and Montell, p. 77; Lummis, p. 156; Sangster, p. 88. See P Denis and R Ntsimane (eds), *Oral history in a wounded country. Interactive interviewing in South Africa* (Scottsville, 2008), pp. 72-79, 109-128 for detail on ethics to be taken into account when doing an oral history project, as well as conducting interviews with different cultures and the differences to consider when interviewing men and women.

vaguer and there is a loss of detail. People's memories may take on an additional mature, developed or disillusioned cast with the passage of time. However, the opposite may also be true. Distance may give people a historical perspective on matters that may have been hard to grasp at the time that they occurred. The passing of time may enable people to make further sense of earlier events in their lives, since these events may now be weighed and may take on new meaning.⁴⁹

The question remains if it is possible to have detailed memories over long time intervals and how we account for the perseverance thereof. The frequency and recentness of activation will determine the intensity of an association. In other words, the more frequently an idea is rehearsed, the easier it is to retrieve it later. Our social milieu provides interpersonal encounters for repeated rehearsal and this will have an impact on the longevity of memories. The recall of memories may be required in cases where questions are asked about past experiences and/or where people are asked to defend their decisions, past actions, and attributions.⁵⁰

William Brewer, in reviewing the research literature on forgetting and remembering, concludes that characteristics of events that will lead to well-recalled personal memories include uniqueness, consequentiality, unexpectedness and emotion provocation. Single events that affected a life also have a high rate of recall. Events of public significance may also be easily recalled if there was an association with personal action and could affect the individual.⁵¹ Nevertheless, most events become more neutral with the passage of time and even strong positive or negative emotions are likely to become more so. It is a very rare event, often one of great emotional importance, that retains high affective levels over time.⁵²

In the search for the reliability and validity of oral sources, it is important to take note of the "unfinishedness" of oral sources that will have an affect on all other sources. The fact that oral sources (concerning a historical time, for which living memories are available) are inexhaustible, the ideal goal of going through "all" possible sources to complete the research, becomes impossible. Even written records tend toward the illusion of completeness when they are "sealed up in all the seriousness of a printed book". Nonetheless, after the book has been published, ideas are still developing and new discoveries lead to changes in the experiences which have been described, ultimately leading to new interpretations. Therefore, Portelli believes that historical work using oral sources will be unfinished, because of the

49 Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 31-32; Ritchie, pp. 26-27, 34, 39, 233; Vansina, pp. 174-176; DM Jones, "Stress and memory" in MM Gruneberg and PE Morris (eds), *Applied problems in memory* (London, 1979), pp. 203-205.

50 TM Ostrom, "Three catechisms for social memory" in PR Solomon and GR Goethals *et al.* (eds), *Memory Interdisciplinary approaches* (New York, 1989), pp. 214-216.

51 Yow, p. 20.

52 M Linton, "Phoenix and chimera: The changing face of memory" in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds), p. 80.

nature of the sources. This will result in the fact that historical work, excluding oral sources (where available), will also be incomplete by definition.⁵³

Thus, to have relative success with oral history interviews, the researcher should be aware of the peculiarities of memory and at the same time, be acutely conscious of its limitations, be imaginative in his/her methods of dealing with it and open to its multiple riches. The intensive practice of oral history methodology, combined with a critical and self-reflective approach to this field of history where the oral historian *really* listens and observes, may eliminate and reduce the dangers of testimonial complexity, unintended suppression, unconscious manipulation and unintentional historical imposition. Oral historians can further “add” to authentic oral history if they become even more willing to subject their work to serious collaborative evaluation.⁵⁴

It may be appropriate to end with the following cogent advice from Paul Thompson: “As every experienced oral historian knows, however, the simple assertion and counter-assertion that oral history sources are reliable or not, true or false for this or that purpose, obtained from this or that person, obscures the really interesting questions. The nature of memory brings many traps for the unwary, which often explains the cynicism of those less well informed about oral sources. Yet, they also bring unexpected rewards to an historian who is prepared to appreciate the complexity with which reality and myth, ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, are inextricably mixed in all human perception of the world, both individual and collective.”⁵⁵

4. CONCLUSION

Oral narratives may uncover how memory generates historical understanding in an attempt to make sense of the personal experiences of events in history. Many variables shape memory in the remembering of a narrative of historical events. Thus, there is a need to pierce the silences and reconstruct the stories in relation to a historical context.

Oral history may accordingly be accepted alongside documentary evidence as part of the available material for research. To make the most of oral sources requires a deep and broad critique of the possibilities and limitations thereof. Historians need to be aware of the challenges and understand the characteristics of these sources.

Furthermore, as historians, we must examine in detail the inconsistencies inherent in alternative interpretations of past events. The past is not dead, but lives

53 Portelli, “What makes oral history ...”, p. 71; See also Slim *et al.* (eds), p. 157.

54 A Skotness, “The people’s archives and oral history in South Africa: a traveller’s account”, *South African Archives Journal* 37, 1995, p. 69.

55 Thompson, pp. 156-157.

on in daily life and people, through their memories, and are the embodiment of the facts and processes. Therefore, historians must, by recognising the interchange and complementary relationship between history and memory, use the information gained from oral narratives to confront memory and its selection process, using criteria of historical critique to be able to investigate and expand the histories.