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## Oral History

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## Oral History

Amy Shuman

Straddling the fields of oral literature and historical documentation, oral history focuses on ordinary and momentous social events. Oral historians confront issues concerning both the validity of oral transmission as history and the responsibility toward their informants. The field also encompasses advocacy-based approaches developed by organizations such as *The U.S. Work Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project*. Initiated in 1935, this project collected oral testimonies, life stories, and folklore of ordinary people.

Oral history projects often are designed to collect the stories not told in official historical documents, and the distinction between official and marginalized stories drives at least some of the work. Thus, some oral history studies have an explicit social change agenda. Oral historians rarely remain neutral regarding their relationships with the people they study and the possible uses of their work.

Michael Frisch (1990) proposes the idea of “shared authority” to address the question of the relationship between the historian and the person interviewed. Oral historians view the practice of making histories as a craft shaped by cultural and political conventions. Frisch describes a continuum with individual authorities at one end and communal collective memories at the other. Oral historians both document events and create records of how events are conceptualized, represented, and interpreted by the people who experience and observe them. They are committed to the complex, often seemingly contradictory nature of events on the ground (see, e.g., Portelli 1991).

As the field of narrative research has proliferated, infiltrating humanities and social science disciplines such as literature, rhetoric, women's studies, anthropology, and even medicine and law, problems in the world are increasingly described through the lens of personal trauma stories. The documentation of the stories of disenfranchised and traumatized groups and individuals results in the encounter between politics and history. At issue is whether the circulation of these stories assists the individuals

involved in healing, in changing their status, or in creating social change. If the increasing circulation of such narratives only confirms the marginal social status of the narrators rather than creating individual or social change, then all that has been accomplished is an act of display that further distresses the already tormented.

Some answers that oral history scholars suggest are “shared authority” (Frisch 1990); “reflexivity,” a merging of the subject and object of research (Myerhoff 1992); or “conversational narrative” jointly created by the interviewer and interviewee (Grele 1994). What differentiates oral history research from other narrative trauma research is that oral history often begins with the premise that the research itself presents a potential conflict over interpretation. While oral history is not the only field to acknowledge that research relations are social power relations, it addresses the crisis of interpretation rather than the crisis of representation. Oral historians, drawing on their advocacy-based research inheritance, continue to assess the human consequences of their work.

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