

CAN LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSTITUTE A RELIABLE SOURCE OF HISTORY?

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ABSTRACT

Historians have at times expressed doubts concerning the credibility of memory itself, the psychology of the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator during the interview, and generally the relationship between memory and history. There is a complex relationship between narration, time and memory. Narration is a lived experience of the past while, at the same time, it provides ways so that people can perceive the present. Oral history has also been described as “the interview of witnesses who participated in the events of the past, with the aim of reconstructing the past”. For many and various reasons, historiography has suppressed or forgotten or neglected or deliberately avoided historical facts which can be retrieved through oral history. The research of oral history does not aim at collecting information about certain events but rather looks for the subjective experience of the event that took place. He is not only interested in what happened, but also in how narrators experienced it. Historians are reserved towards oral accounts as the narration itself is a product of memory. The historian, as a subject of the historical speech, respects the objective existence of historical events

Keyword: Memory, history, narration, oral history

INTRODUCTION

Memories are living history. According to an African saying, “Each elderly person dying is one library getting burnt”. As researchers converse with their sources, they transform the practice of history in many ways. Apart from recalling memories of the past, a narrator also shares his personal perception of the past. However, historians have at times expressed doubts concerning the credibility of this source of history. They are concerned about the credibility of memory itself, the psychology of the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator during the interview, and generally the relationship between memory and history, the present and the past (Perks & Thomson 2006: 8-11). In many countries of Europe, such as Greece, oral history started becoming accepted in the framework of historiography during the last decade. Namely, it became accepted as a credible source of history and as a new conception of history through lived experience of everyday people (Thomson 2008: 23). There is a complex relationship between narration, time and memory because we reconsider and produce the part we have remembered in order to get square with our identity in the present. Narration is a lived experience of the past while, at the same time, it provides ways so that people can perceive the present (Riessman 2008: 23). Researchers of oral history examine events of the past that vary from an extended issue to a more specific one. A researcher requires the possibility and ability to reconstruct the history of

the past, as he connects the pieces from the stories of people that have taken part in a discussion. From the interviewers of oral history, some focus on eminent people, while others are interested in everyday people and their experiences. Life stories are very similar to oral history. However, the difference between them is distinct: in life narrations, people are asked to account the various phases of their lives, while in oral history, interest is focused on the participation in and experience of a particular historical moment(Rubin & Rubin 2005: 7-8).

1. The historical value of narrations

Although lived situations took place in the past, they arrive to the present as a narration, viewed through a context consisting of later changes which affected values and behaviour patterns. As the subject has later acquired new experiences and perceptions and has been affected by them in the meantime separating the historical event from the narration, he reconstructs the past through a new context(Thomson 2008: 168). At the level of lived history, a historical concurrence may affect the reminiscence of events while it is even possible that the initial feeling is later transformed into its opposite: boredom or cowardice into heroism, pride into shame, self-confidence into guilt. Life narrations that are recorded sometimes enhance an official myth, while other times they vitiate it, they sometimes make painful confessions, while other times they are entrenched in silence(Van Boeschoten 2002: 135-155). Considering that the narrator knows the story he accounts and this story is real, we should consider the narrator both as an expert and as an authority on his personal life(Atkinson 1998: 59). However, it is true that in the narration of life stories, disbelief is also implied, because everyone has their own explanation for the events and each one of them has its own value(Clandinin & Connelly 2000: 85). The historical truth is not the purpose in the narration. A narration of a story also involves a specific, and maybe unique, view of the events of history. Two people saying the same story express it in a different way. What we are looking for in the life stories is actually the subjective truth(Atkinson 1998: 60). Oral narrations, however unreal they may seem, are the subjective truth of the narrator, and this truth is part of the historical reality of the period. However, when a personal narration concerns events which happened decades ago, it is hard for the researcher to distinguish what really happened, what the subject of the narration wants to remember or even what the subject would wish to have happened. Although an oral narration involves subjectivity, this does not make it inferior compared with written narration, as it is also subject to subjective opinions and references(Van Boeschoten 2002: 136). In oral narrations, as they take the form of life narrations, the personal life of the narrator is also the vehicle of the historical experience. Of course, a single life narration presents not only the life of one person, but also integrates experiences of other people(Thomson 2008: 326)

In life narrations, the narrator represents an image of himself through the narrations and reference of specific events of his life. This image of himself is a combination of old experiences and those later lived, of the old explanatory framework and the new one. The self-representation through personal narrations creates a complex image which, according to the narrated events, changes. The personal choices of the narrator or his personal responsibility towards the events he narrates often turn him into a hero or on the contrary, a victim. In other cases, the narrator presents himself as an involuntary viewer who was involved in the tumult of the period's events

against his will. However, while in the case of a hero, the subject has freedom of decisions and action, and in the case of a victim, the subject has no choice, in the case of an involuntary viewer, the subject is affected both by external factors, and by the social group to which he belongs(Boeschoten 2002: 143).

1.2 Narrative analysis

In contrast to other quality frameworks, narrative research does not offer automatic start and end points. Since the definition of the term “narration” is still discussed, there are no self-evident categories on which someone can be based, as there are in the thematic approaches based on a text or the analysis of particular elements of the language. Moreover, in contrast to other perspectives of quality research, narrative analysis does not offer general rules regarding the appropriate materials or models of research, or the best level at which someone can study the stories. We do not know if we must look for stories in everyday speech, in interviews, diaries or newspaper articles. We do not know if someone must analyse the stories as individual or integrated in a general context, or what scientific value one must give narrations(Squire et al. 2009: 1). Oral history may be presented with the form of re-composition. Oral accounts offer the raw materials to support a hypothesis regarding events of the past, as the accounts themselves are subject to comparative analysis. Moreover, oral accounts may be used for quantity calculations(Thomson 2008: 327-328). During the comparative analysis, a comparison between the facts arising among interviews is made, and these are then compared to evidence from other sources. In case the oral evidence does not agree with the written one, this does not mean that the one source is more credible than the other, or on the contrary, less credible. An interview may discover the truth that may hide behind an official document. Many accounts that source from personal experience provide facts of unique value, because there is no other way one can collect this information(Thomson 2008: 330). Social scientists in narrative research have suggested that narrations should be considered as an organisation of a sequence of events within a whole, so that the importance of each event can be understood through the relationship of this event with the whole. The triangle sequence-importance-representation creates a framework within which narrative research has been placed(Tampoukou 2008:284). Although oral accounts are a source of history, if one takes account of the fact that interviews refer to older times, one understands that the speech of narrators may involve a falsification of events. Although lived situations happened in the past, they arrive to the present as a narration, viewed through a context consisting of later changes which affected values and behaviour patterns. The past is reconstructed through modern narrations, affected by the experiences and conceptions the subject acquired in the meantime separating the historical event from the narration(Thomson 2008: 168).

1.3 The credibility and validity issue

Regarding research focusing on narrations of people, the issue of credibility and validity arises. While credibility is generally defined as stability of the findings of research, validity refers to the ability of a research to depict an external reality. Moreover, there is a difference between internal and external validity: internal validity refers to the ability to produce results which are not just a product of the research planning, and external validity is the index of the extent to which the findings of research relating to a particular sample can be generalised so that they can be applied

to a wider population(Elliott 2009: 22). Regarding, oral accounts, credibility can be checked with the following ways: firstly, by checking the internal cohesion of speech, secondly, by detecting the frequency of suppression and avoidance of answering the questions of the researcher, and thirdly, by comparing the information with other sources(Thomson 2008: 329-330). However, the research of oral history does not aim at collecting information about certain events, namely at discovering the historical “truth”. The researcher looks for the subjective experience of the event. He is not interested in what happened, but in how narrators experienced it. Historians are reserved towards oral accounts as the narration itself is a product of memory. However, in humanities, description is not made in such a way that the object is separated from the subject, as in science. In humanities, “subjective” facts are integrated in “objective” ones, within the framework of a narration, without this meaning that the difference between false and true description is covered(KiriakidouNestoros 1987: 177-188). In oral history research, there has often been an identification of the concept of subjectivity with the concept of identity. As a historical concept, identity is defined as the depiction of values and behaviours which are fixed at a certain moment. However, this approach of the concept of identity does not take into account that each identity is not firmly detected in a single empirical fact, but on the contrary, moves from the one content to the other (Passerini 1998: 32). Considering that oral sources have a subjective aspect, they cannot lead to reconstruction of the past, but they connect the past with the present in a relationship with a symbolic meaning (Passerinni 1998: 101). Initially, subjectivity was considered as the transition from externality to internality. However, this transition is not from the object to the subject, but a transition from a situation where subjectivity and objectivity are clearly separated to a new one where boundaries are unstable. In this situation, even subjectivity can become a source of scientific procedures (Passerinni 1998: 37). Although the historical source which arrives to the research with the mediation of the human perception is subjective, it allows us to converse with this subjectivity. However, it is doubtful if, in the end, a narrative interview can be completely subjective. All necessary information the interviewer gives at the beginning of the interview (aim, social framework, use of interview) create expectations which affect what narrators shall say(Thomson 2008: 280). During the procedure of collection of oral accounts, a series of relationships is created between the researcher and the subject, as two different worlds meet, the researcher’s world and the narrator’s world. This meeting creates obstacles itself, as inequalities sourcing from educational or other qualifications impinge on it. In detail, the researcher acts from a power position, as he specifies the main directions of the conversation, and also directs its progress. However, in a society, there are various exclusion procedures, most obvious of which is prohibition. In an organised and structured society, where there is a pattern of values, attitudes, moral constraints and taboos, it is known that we cannot talk about everything; we have no right to tell everything. In other words, there are prohibitions in speech relating to and imposed by the authority. Thus, under this pattern, the narrator also exercises a form of power. The rescue of accounts initially goes through the pre-choice of the subjects themselves regarding to what they shall say, and the subjects talk only if they want to or deem it necessary, avoid pressures by the researcher and lastly often try to impress(Petronoti 2002: 73-77). Oral history has also been described as “the interview of witnesses who participated in the events of the past, with the aim of reconstructing the past”. Oral history supplements historical facts, and also often creates new that did not exist until then.

For many and various reasons, historiography has suppressed or forgotten or neglected or deliberately avoided historical facts which can be retrieved through oral history. As oral history gives the right of expression to groups considered as excluded from historical reality due to economic, political or social reasons, it may also be considered as a power of democratization (Del Giudice 2009: 6). Moreover, the historiographical speech is dominated by objectivity, since, if the historical events and their objective effects feeding the historiographical speech did not exist, it itself would not exist. The historian, as a subject of the historical speech, respects the objective existence of historical events. However, this does not mean that the historiographical speech is not subjective, also taking into account that the subject of the historical speech, as the subject of any speech, is characterized by an ideology (Doksiadis 2008: 172).

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Brief Bio

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