ORAL HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE

1. INTRODUCTION

Every individual, family and place have a history of its own which may contribute knowledge and understanding to the study of history and wider themes. Unfortunately, written sources are not always available on all themes or time periods and/or are, at times, not adequate. Oral history may provide a type of historical source among others, to gain information, fill the gaps and add to a more balanced view of events and occurrences.

The use of oral history leads to new methodological approaches to the recapturing of the past and a reassessment thereof. By using oral history methods, the researcher may obtain from the lips of the living survivors/victims, a fuller record of their participation in events of historical significance by attending to the complex legacy of memory. In the process, human experience in all its richness is collected, as well as a record of the past gained and even more, through oral history interviews, an on-going discussion about the meaning of the past may continue.

2. DEFINING ORAL HISTORY

The use of oral history is not new; it is as old as history itself and predates the written record. Oral history already existed when academic history was developing among the educated strata of society. The use of personal testimony[1] in the gaining of knowledge about society has never ceased. It was a community-based tradition, since most societies have always recognised the worth of preserving and passing on some kind of knowledge of the past, protecting an accumulating heritage.[2]

Stricklin and Sharpless remind us that the 'inexhaustible voice' "precedes and will outlive the written word as the deepest and most permanent expression of the human heart".[3] Still and Thompson add even more power to the spoken word when reasoning that: "words from the heart are more alive than your scribblings. When we speak, our words burn".[4] It is true that one would rather listen to someone speaking directly, than

[1] "'Testimony' derives from the Latin for 'witness'. In turn, 'witness' draws on notions of seeing and becoming conscious or aware. Becoming aware entails the interpretation and attribution of meaning to experience. To testify is therefore to make knowledge, both about oneself and about one's world." N. R. White, "Marking absences. Holocaust testimony and history" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The oral history reader*, p. 177.

[2] S. Caunce, *Oral history and the local historian*, pp. 100–101; D.A. Ritchie, *Doing oral history. A practical guide,* pp. 19-20; V.R. Yow, *Recording oral history. A practical guide for social scientists*, p. 3; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22; S.E. Everett, "Oral history techniques and procedures", <http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/bodcs/oral.htm>, 1992.

[3] D. Strickin and R. Sharpless (eds), *The past meets the present. Essays on oral history*, p. v.

[4] H. Slim *et al.*, (eds), *Listening for a change. Oral testimony and community development*, p. 1.

reading about him/her through another's words. Words, therefore, have an authenticity and effectiveness which is difficult to match. These authors go further and give authority to oral testimony when explaining that: "The spoken word cuts across barriers of wealth, class, and race. It is as much the prerogative of ordinary people as of those in positions of power and authority. It requires neither formal education, nor the ability to read and write, nor fluency in any national or official language".[5] Grele confirms all these ideas by concluding that even in our age of general literacy and pervasive media communication "the real and secret history of humankind" is shared in conversations. In other words, most people still form their "basic understanding of their own past through conversations with others".[6]

Oral history differs from oral tradition, which works not only on the level of fact, but also on that of myth and applies both to a process and to its products.[7] The products of oral tradition are a collection of oral messages and narratives passed down and transmitted verbally, and only verbally, from person to person and from generation to generation, beyond the lifetime of any one individual. Jan Vansina[8] describes oral tradition as "reported statements from the past beyond the present generation".[9]

Oral traditions are not contemporary and include oral traditional accounts of past events, stories, sayings, memorised speeches, and songs – spontaneous expressions of the customs, purposes, functions, identity and generational succession of the group of people among whom they emanate.[10] Moss contends that oral tradition is: "broad understandings of the past that originate organically in and out of the cultural dynamics of an evolving society. They come about and exist quite apart from any written language or recording devices and do not depend on them for durability. Oral traditions are the experiences of a whole ethos of previous generations, acquired from the last immediate one and retold in the present, as they are understood by the present generation. They contribute to the social cohesion, dynamic evolution, and durability of the culture they represent. They are changed by the changes in the culture around them, and in turn they serve to shape and mold the evolving culture".[11] In contrast to

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[5] *Ibid*.

[6] R.J. Grele *et al*., *Envelopes of sound. The art of oral history*, p. xv.

[7] M. Ferro, *The use and abuse of history or how the past is taught*, p. 14; J. Vansina, *Oral tradition as history*, p. 3; W.W. Moss, "Oral history: What is it and where did it come from?" in Strickin and Sharpless (eds), p. 10. With oral tradition there is no written evidence available to support and/or cross-check the oral evidence where problems with validity are encountered in the process of transmission. This leads to the situation where oral tradition is not known for the unquestionable reliability of facts.

[8] From the 1950s, led by the Belgian scholar Jan Vansina, historians began to collect their own oral material in the field in Africa, alongside anthropologists, exchanging experience of methods and interpretation. Jan Vansina's first recording was in the Congo in 1953, of a Bushong poet-historian who told him, 'we carry our newspapers in our heads'. P. Thompson, *The voice of the past: Oral history*, p. 326.

[9] Vansina, p. 27.

[10] Texas Historical Commission, "Fundamentals of oral history. Texas preservation guidelines", <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/publications/guidelines/oralHistory.pdf>, *s.a*.; Moss, pp. 9-10; L. Witz, *Write your own history*, p. 40; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22; *New Era*, 8-15.6.1995, p. 8.

[11] Moss, pp. 9-10.

this, oral history is the direct, immediate, personal experience of those who hold them in memory and involves the eyewitness accounts of events and experiences during the lifetime of the narrator being interviewed; in other words, a type of "immediate history".[12]

Oral history, on the other hand, is nothing more than a branch of historical research. In this context, oral history arises from history's most ancient technique, as well as its most modern technology. The technique of collecting eyewitness accounts of history had already been used by the ancient Greek historians more than two thousand years ago and the recorder, which is part of the modern age,[13] is now used to record oral history. It is an activity that draws upon the most sophisticated skills of professional historians, but it may also be undertaken productively by weekend amateurs, simply by using the basic skill of human conversation.[14]

This "living memory of the past"[15] involves collecting memories and personal commentaries of historical significance by means of recorded interviews.[16] In the process of obtaining historical information and evidence, memory forms the core of oral history.

A basic definition of oral history interviewing would be: "A systematic collection, arrangement, preservation and publication (in the sense of making generally available) of recorded verbatim personal accounts, opinions and reminiscences of historical importance of people who were witnesses to or participants in events or experiences they recount."[17] Trevor Lummis adds to this, providing a formal definition of oral history as: "an account of first-hand experience recalled retrospectively, communicated to an interviewer for historical purposes and preserved on a system of reproducible sound".[18] Consequently, it is primarily a record of perceptions of the person interviewed, whatever that person's position, occupation or circumstances. It provides a record of language and of eyewitness accounts giving insights into society, its changing attitudes and values.[19]

Several terms are used interchangeably with oral history which includes: life history, self-report, personal narrative, life story, oral biography, memoir, recorded memories, the recorded narrative and life review.[20] However, the fact remains that oral history

[12] Vansina, p. 13.
[13] Tape-recorded interviewing was possible only after World War II, when portable mechanical recording machines became available.
[14] C. Davis *et al*., *Oral history. From tape to type*, pp. 1-4.
[15] H. Slim *et al*., (eds), *Listening for a change. Oral testimony and community development*, p. 11.
[16] The word 'interview' literally means a 'seeing between' or a 'view between' which embodies the idea of a particular perspective worked out or created between two parties. Slim *et al*., (eds), p.149.
[17] W.W. Moss, *Oral history program manual*, pp. 6-7; D. Lance, *An archive approach to oral history*, p. 2; Ritchie, p. 19; *The Leader*, 5.8.1988, p. 6.
[18] T. Lummis, *Listening to history. The authenticity of oral evidence*, p. 27.
[19] J. Worthington and P. Denis, *Working draft. Training manual. Oral history project*, p. 1.
[20] Yow, p. 4.

involves the recording of what the narrator can recall from first-hand knowledge and through pre-planned interviews, where the interview is a unique and personal way in which the past and present intersect.[21]

Oral history makes use of the relatively painless medium of relaxed conversations based on well-planned questions to gather information regarding why, how and through what things came to pass. It is about asking questions; questions that, perhaps, have not been asked before, where the information is captured in question-and-answer form.[22]

Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarised, or indexed and placed in a library or archive. The recorded document is then available for future use as a source to be examined for historical analysis. It thus represents the 'preservation of otherwise perishable historical data' with the human memory as the raw material, to collect reminiscences, which only survives as long as its possessor lives.[23]

As such, oral history, "the history built around people"[24] as a source, becomes a social challenge and an adventure in searching for historical evidence in such a source, with both opportunities and limitations.[25]

3. THE CURRENT STATUS OF ORAL HISTORY

The status of oral history has increased tremendously over the past few decades and the discipline has gained considerable ground.

After the first organised oral history project in 1948 by Allan Nevins[26] from Columbia University in New York, who began a systematic and disciplined effort to record the spoken memories of the white male elite, the interest in recording memories of ordinary people became dominant.[27] In the post-war context, oral history developed into a serious and widely accepted process. Its scope widened even more from the

[21] W.K. Baum, *Oral history for the local historical society*, p. 7; Stricklin and Sharpless (eds), p. vii; A. Thomson, "Fifty years on: An international perspective on oral history" in *The Journal of American History* 85(2), September 1998, p. 584.
[22] L. Shopes, "Making sense of oral history", <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral.htm>, *s.a*.
[23] Ritchie, pp. 19, 46; Davis *et al*., p. 4; Moss, "Oral history: What is it …", p. 11; J. Moyer, Step-By-Step guide to oral history", <http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oral History.htm>, 1999.
[24] Thompson, p. 23.
[25] Baum, pp. 7-9; Moss, *Oral history program …* , p. 9.
[26] Allan Nevins – biographer, historian, and journalist – suggested the establishing of "some organization which made a systematic attempt to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans who have led significant lives, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the last sixty years". A. Nevins, "Oral history: How and why it was born" in D.K. Dunaway and W.K. Baum (eds), *Oral history. An interdisciplinary anthology* (2nd edition), pp. 8-9.
[27] Yow, p. 3; Thomson, p. 581; Shopes; L.M. Starr, "The art of the oral historian", <http://www.library.ucsb/edu/speccoll/oralhlec.html>, *s.a*.

1960s and onwards because of the growing interest in the experiences of the 'non-elites'.[28]

Several organisations have, for some time, been engaged in the systematic collection of oral testimony. Oral history associations and societies and oral history journals and circulars have been debating and discussing ideas and problems regarding oral history. Furthermore, many academic historians have used oral sources in their work. It is no longer an activity pursued by only a few individuals, but is also utilised by historical societies, museums, schools, reminiscence therapists, archives, and academic historians. In the process, it is the 'discovery' of oral history as one of many kinds of historical sources again, but also a 'recovery' of giving back to historians the oldest skill of their own craft.[29]

The recording of conversations has captivated the public attention and has also led to increased governmental interest. This oral history 'boom' is leading to a dramatic increase of oral history programmes around the world, the expansion of oral history instruction at tertiary level and the uses thereof within local historical groups. People are drawn to oral history because of their interest in collecting and preserving the past through interviewing. At the same time, oral history reveals a personal, private world that produces bridges between regions, races, gender, and age groups that bind people together from all over the world. This situation has led to "thousands of practitioners, tens of thousands of hours of recorded interviews, and millions of pages of transcript".[30]

Prominent oral historians are pointing to the 'globalisation of oral history', stating that there is not a place on the globe where people are not doing oral history at present. The digital information revolution, together with worldwide political and social changes, has accelerated the need and even demand, for oral history. Historians are confronted with the inadequacy of archival documentation; whereas newly emerging nations in especially Asia and Africa use oral history to recover forgotten national identities. Certain countries use personal testimonies to re-evaluate, and rewrite discredited official histories and/or to understand the experiences of those who lived under dictatorships or state terrorism.[31]

The need for the collection of oral history in Southern Africa has been widely recognised since mid-1970. Particularly since the 1980s in South Africa, oral history has been recognised and used as an important method for documenting the

[28] For a more detailed description of the history of oral history see A. Seldon and J. Pappworth, *By word of mouth. 'Élite' oral history*, pp. 6-11; Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 12-15; D. Henge, *Oral historiography*, pp. 7-22; Thompson, pp. 25-81.

[29] Thompson, p. 81.

[30] Davis *et al*., p. 1; C. Davis, "Success and excess: Oral history at high tide" in Strickin and Sharpless (eds), p. 77; Henge, p. 108.

[31] Ritchie, pp. 13, 23; T. Sideris, "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for oral history in South Africa" in *Critical Arts* 4(2), 1986, p. 50; *The Leader*, 5.8.1988, p. 6; *New Era*, 8-15.6.1995, p. 8; Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 12-13.

experiences and oppression of those who lived under Apartheid.[32] Emphasis was placed on attempts to document a 'history from below'; to 'uncover what might otherwise be hidden'; to 'answer questions and gain insights'; to 'uncover', with the primarily focus to 'gain a fuller understanding of the lives and struggles, experiences and consciousness of the ordinary working man and woman' in South Africa.[33]

From a local to a national level, government has come to realise the value and potential of oral history. In South Africa, the government of the day values oral history and has emphasised the importance thereof, through the establishment and funding of specific projects and by making it part of governmental policy.[34] The part oral history may play in the reconciliation, reconstruction, development and transformation processes in the country have also been highlighted recently by various museums and prominent groups, academics and individuals, as well as the government, especially through the workings of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.[35]

Looking at the tendencies in the oral history field, it will be safe to argue that the rising interest in this field, combined with the interdisciplinarity characteristics thereof, will continue in the future.

4. ORAL HISTORY SHIFTS THE FOCUS AND TRANSFORMS THE CONTENT OF HISTORY

Oral historians claim to write, rewrite and add to history from the bottom up, taking into account the historical significance of this approach and tapping into the experiences of ordinary people. In the process, oral history may change the focus of history itself, becoming a means of transforming the purpose and content of history, breaking down barriers, opening new areas of inquiry, allowing evidence from a new direction, and finally, giving all people, through their own words, a central place.[36]

The elitist, political focus of history, which divided up historical time according to reigns and dynasties, has shifted radically in recent years. Initially, oral history was used in the sense of adding to the profuse written records of celebrities and other important

[32] Sideris, pp. 41, 50; A. Manson *et al.*, "Oral history speaks out" in *Social Dynamics* 11(2), 1985, p. 1.
[33] P. Denis (ed.), *Orality, memory & the past. Listening to the voices of black clergy under colonialism and apartheid*, pp. 1-2.
[34] Ritchie, p. 13; Sideris, p. 50; Denis (ed.), pp. 1-3; *Volksblad*, 25.3.2000, p. 19; *The Leader*, 5.8.1988, p. 6; *Natal Witness*, 3.7.2002, p. 9.
[35] According to the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) discussion document, Legacy Project 1996, "every effort should be made, through research into surviving documents, photographs and particularly oral history, to trace the direct involvement of all concerned with a particular memorial. In particular, the formerly silenced voices must be heard. Commemorations of conflict and war should include multiple perspectives – there should be a feeling amongst all South Africans that their own history is respected and reflected, directly and indirectly in commemorations". S. Field, "Memory, the TRC and the significance of oral history in post-apartheid South Africa". Paper presented at the History Workshop "TRC: Commissioning the past", University of Witwatersrand, Pretoria, 11-14.6.1999, p. 9.
[36] Thompson, pp. 3, 6.

people. However, many historians are now deliberately concentrating on the stories of ordinary people and there is an ever-increasing interest in recording social history. Here, the historical focus is on 'ordinary people', and not on 'great men' such as heads of government, military leaders, or politicians. A change in focus was necessitated by the general trend throughout the history profession towards interviewing ordinary people who had previously been considered too unimportant to merit much attention and to record their history. Increasingly, interviews have been conducted with blue-collar workers, women, labour and political activists, racial and ethnic minorities, together with a heightened interest in the lives of factory hands, migrant workers and ghetto dwellers, as well as a variety of local people whose lives typify a given social experience.[37] The emphasis is thus on a more socially oriented history, purpose and consciousness, where social history may benefit immensely from the ability of oral history to throw light on certain topics.

The South African historian Tim Keegan argues that "in the narratives of ordinary people's lives we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past".[38] In the process, oral history allows the emergence of heroes, not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of ordinary people.[39]

The shift is not only from political to social history, but the focus of history has also moved to local history. In view of the grass-roots level at which oral history functions, it has a higher potential for influencing the more limited scope and subject matter of local history. This may lead to a better perspective on the events and forces that have shaped local life and thinking, which, in turn, not only lead to a better understanding of the past of a particular community, but also of the past of a region or nation. Local history thus serves as a microcosm of a nation's history.[40]

There is also a definite relationship between history and the community. Through oral history, historical information may be given to the community for interpretation and presentation. The shift in focus to an active community-oriented approach may bring history into and out of the community, broadening the knowledge of what constitutes a community's history. In view of its focus on the day-to-day reality of lived experience and the smaller details of family and community subsistence, oral history lends itself well to community-based activity and collective ways of producing history. Apart from its contribution to political and institutional structures, it also adds to the economic development and the occupational and ethnic composition of its population. Some community-based local history projects have made much progress in bridging the gap between the experts and ordinary people. Members of these community projects not

[37] Davis *et al*., p. 2; Ferro, p. x; *The Natal Witness*, 20.8.1998, p. 19; Shopes; N.J. Wilson, *History in crisis? Recent directions in historiography*, pp. 69-73.
[38] G. Minkley and C. Rassool, "Orality, memory, and social history in South Africa" in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa***,** p. 91.
[39] Thompson, p. 23.
[40] B. Allen and L. Montell, *From memory to history. Using oral sources in local historical research*, p. 6.

only provide information, but are also integrally involved in the writing, production and consumption of historical material.[41]

The active community-oriented approach is of crucial importance in view of the lack of even the most basic recorded information regarding significant segments of South African society. Cubbin stresses that in the light of this barren field of research, all communities – whether urban, rural, industrial, or commercial – are potential subjects for oral history projects. It is within this context that the strong relationship between oral history and community history should be emphasised. Therefore, the most effective way to utilise oral history as a teaching tool, is to use it specifically for the teaching of community history.[42]

Oral history may also be important to families specifically and to society at large. Family sagas and the events that shaped them illustrate the role of the family in the larger social structure of the community. Family history is also important for identity formation and the way in which a sense of culture and heritage is imbibed.[43] Through history, people seek to comprehend the changes, uncertainties, and upheavals they experience in their own lives. Oral history becomes essential in this 'people/family-centred' method of collecting information.[44] By presenting this personal dimension, oral history may modify and enrich people's understanding of the historical process in their family, community and country, by encouraging people to see the world through the eyes of other people and connecting real people to the past.

The shift in the focus of history was necessary in South Africa, particularly after 1994. The country's official history focused chiefly on political history, which was often biased and partial. Substantial groups of people who had been ignored, needed recognition and acknowledgement for their role. There was a need for a more realistic reconstruction, a more balanced account of the past. Paul Thompson, the well-known British oral historian, sees this shift in focus as "setting in motion a cumulative process of transformation. History becomes, to put it more simply, more democratic".[45]

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[41] Sideris, p. 44; Ritchie, p. 223; Thompson, p. 17; Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 14-15; Allen and Montell, pp. 64-65.

[42] T. Cubbin, "The opportunity of local history in rehabilitating the relevance of history in our emerging society." Paper presented at the Biennial Congress of the South African Historical Association on "History: Its problems and its challenges with the advent of the new millennium", University of the North, Pietersburg, 28.6.-1.7.1998, p. 4; S.J. Esterhuizen, "Plaaslike geskiedenis – 'n geleentheid om kreatief te onderrig" in M.H. Trümpelman (ed.), *Kreatiewe Geskiedenisonderrig*, pp. 54-60; S. Krige *et al.*, *History for the future: Taking another look at "What is history?"*, p. 23.

[43] Thompson, p. 8; *Natal Witness*, 11.7.2000, p. 9; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22; Ritchie, pp. 231-233; R. Brooks *et al.*, *The effective teaching of history*, pp. 30, 153; I.M. Olmedo, "Family oral histories for multicultural curriculum perspectives" in *Urban Education* 32(1), March 1997, pp. 52-53; P. Dillon, "Teaching the past through oral history" in *The Journal of American History* 87(2), September 2000, pp. 602-605. See also Yow, pp. 192-214 for detailed information on how to do family research for oral history projects.

[44] H.J. du Bruyn, "Oral history: the key to unlocking our Community History" in *Free State Libraries*, October-December 2003, p. 7.

[45] Thompson, pp. 8–9.

History as a subject in its educational form also had to be freed from its institutional retreats and limitations so that it could move forward by opening up new skills for learners.

Studies conducted in both Britain and the USA since the 1950s have indicated that learners and students of all ages and at all stages of social and intellectual development, respond more positively to oral history as a teaching tool.[46]

Ritchie argues that oral history helps learners to break loose from their textbooks and become their own collectors of information. Learners appear to learn best from what they have researched themselves. Oral history interviewing turns learners into historical investigators: they must be able to choose a topic, identify suitable interviewees, do the research, conduct the interviews, and transcribe the interviews themselves. During this process, they acquire numerous essential skills that are usually neglected in many schools.[47] Oral history thus offers the opportunity of allowing active participation in the collection of evidence and ultimately the learning process.

Within the South African context, one can safely argue that oral history fits in with the modern teaching trend of focusing also on social history. In order to bring history in line with outcomes-based education of 'active-learning', to make learners more responsible for their learning, the focus of the subject should also shift to a field related to social history, namely community history or micro-history. The history of everyday life, the role of the ordinary citizen in shaping events and the importance of social issues such as racism, reconciliation, and women's rights, are undoubtedly gaining prominence in current curriculum developments. It is in this regard that oral history as a teaching tool is coming to the fore. As a teaching device, oral history allows learners to meet, listen to and engage in discussions with people who have played a personal role in certain social issues. In this way, oral history presents learners with different viewpoints and exposes the individual beliefs, opinions and experiences that underlie people's social concerns and opinions.[48]

[46] Ritchie, p. 188; Davis, "Success and excess…", p. 77; A. Thomson, "Teaching oral history to undergraduate researchers", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/oralhist.htm>, *s.a*. For more detail on the teaching of oral history on each level of education see Ritchie, pp. 188-221.

[47] Ritchie, pp. 188, 197.

[48] Sideris, pp. 42-43; Ritchie, p. 199; J. Porter, "Contextualising teaching and learning: the history curriculum for the future", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/skillsdevhist curric.htm>, *s.a*.

THE VALUES OF ORAL HISTORY

In 1950 Louis Gottschalk explained the complex process of recording the past as follows: “Most human affairs happen without leaving vestiges or records of any kind behind them. The past, having happened, has perished with only occasional traces. To begin with, although the absolute number of historical writings is staggering, only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed … And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to historians’ attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian”.[49]

In the process of recording these narratives into a more inclusive history, oral history may increase the scope of historical writing, making it a valid and valuable source of historical information. When used carefully and scientifically, oral history can be a complementary and supplementary tool of the historian’s trade.

The value of oral history lies on different levels, particularly in the following aspects, evaluated against the background of the changing socio-political environment in South Africa since 1994.

1.1 Oral history records unwritten and/or lost history

Oral history has performed an important service in *providing access to the history of groups whose heritage might otherwise be lost*. This is particularly true of groups and cultures that have a predominantly oral tradition, rather than a written one. Among illiterate and semi-literate societies, oral traditions are still the chief form of historical awareness and cultural continuity from generation to generation. Even in literate, record-keeping societies, much information goes unrecorded and in the current century, many transactions and business are done orally. For some decisions there are no written records and, in such cases, oral history becomes a fundamental and sometimes the only tool, making a substantial contribution by providing information that historians would not otherwise be able to acquire. In the process, oral history may foster appreciation for little-known or rapidly vanishing ways of life and verify the historicity of events which cannot be determined by traditional methods of historical research. In this regard, oral history recovers and preserves important aspects of a human experience that would otherwise go undocumented and provides information that is original in character for distinct subject areas.[50]

[49] L. Gottschalk, *Understanding history. A primer of historical method* (2nd edition), p. 45.
[50] Lance, p. 3; Moss, *Oral history program* …, p. 8; Vansina, pp. 198–199; Texas Historical Commission; Starr.

If weighed carefully, this value of oral history to *provide information about the past that exists in no other form*, is potentially its most valuable attribute and yet, until now, the one least exploited in local history research. Countless unrecorded topics of historical interest could be fruitfully pursued if people's memories were tapped. Without the use of orally communicated material, the task of researching these topics may never be successfully undertaken. For instance, a large part of our history will be lost if the stories of old people are not recorded now. When these people die, the stories are lost forever. Old people may be seen as "libraries"[51] in their own right and their unwritten stories need to be preserved for the future. Oral historians can assist in producing lasting documents of a subject under study by interviewing the living informants.[52]

There is another dimension to this when taking the situation in South Africa into consideration. Tina Sideris, who was a member of the Oral History Project of the South African Institute of Race Relations (1982–1984), argues that, for a number of reasons, the history of popular organisations has not been well documented. Illiteracy has militated against the systematic documentation of activities and organisations amongst certain groups. The informal nature of some popular organisations led to the non-existence of records and archival storage of the organisations' activities. If, for example, trade unions or political organisations did keep official records, these were often confiscated and destroyed by the former security forces. Many sources of historical investigation have also been removed and repressed in the form of censorship and banning. Academic writings about black people in general, have concentrated almost exclusively on their roles as fighters for or against the white authorities. Thus, material on black social history is very scarce. In addition, almost no material is available on the day-to-day lives of black people, particularly those who lived in rural areas. It is these areas, inaccessible to conventional methods of investigation, that the method of oral history allows the historian to explore.[53]

The TRC was confronted with the destruction of huge volumes of documentary records by the former security forces in an attempt to remove certain evidence. This process gained momentum in the 1980s and developed into a co-ordinated endeavour to destroy any access to certain documents entailing the functions and activities of the former State. By May 1994, an immense expunging of State documentary memory within the security establishment had been achieved.[54] In an attempt to reconstruct this loss of evidence, oral history methods may be used to recover these memories.

In the endeavour to construct a more comprehensive picture of the past, considering certain problems and the bias of official history and official records, oral testimony is, very often, the *only alternative source for obtaining information to correct and augment*

[51] "An old man dies … a book is lost." An African saying.
[52] Witz, p. 14; Allen and Montell, p. 20; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22.
[53] Sideris, p. 41; *The Sunday Independent*, 3.5.1998, p. 22; *Sunday Times*, 5.9.1993, p. 21.
[54] Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1, pp. 201, 229. For more detail on the TRC's view and handling of the destruction of records, see Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. 1, pp. 201-243.

an incomplete and inadequate official history. It often represents all we can learn about the lives of ordinary people. In South Africa, large sections of our history have been distorted and hidden. A lot of information about the past can be salvaged only by tapping the memories of those who have lived through it, or who remember hearing older members of the family or community talk about it. Academic history may be enriched in the process.[55]

With regard to the process of identifying significant sites in South Africa, for which there is no recorded history, oral history also plays a vital role in bringing together strands of South Africa's *heritage*. A specific place may have significance in people's memories and beliefs. If all the narratives concur, the researcher can find an interesting story to tell, and the heritage of South Africa is bound to be enriched by this contribution.[56]

Oral history may also lead to the *discovery of entirely new information*. The interviewee can draw the researcher's attention to documents whose significance might otherwise not have been so obvious or through interviewing, new information can be published that would otherwise remain unknown and/or unwritten. Oral history can also become invaluable in areas where *documentary evidence is particularly weak* on occasions that were considered, at the time, to have been failures or to have been embarrassing. The fact that the researcher has direct and close contact with the interviewee as an historical source, may sometimes provide 'fresh' insight into an event.[57]

Furthermore, oral history may make a contribution in supplying *information on personal roles and how personal and organisational relationships functioned and developed in practice*. Written documents seldom convey people's thoughts and rarely reveal the human side of the past. Thus, the oral history interview provides the chance to transmit this type of character information, making it very personal. Interpretations gained from this kind of information that 'does not get into official records' must be carefully examined and considered but may be of substantial value.[58] In this way, a broader perspective into organisations, roles, characters and events may be achieved.

The spoken reminiscences of ordinary people have helped historians to rediscover history and use it more effectively. In the process, one may come to appreciate the less fateful, but nevertheless important role played by ordinary people in the shaping of history.

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[55] Sideris, pp. 41-42; Allen and Montell, p. viii; *Volksblad*, 25.3.2000, p. 9.
[56] *Business Day*, 28.2.2001, p. 25; Ritchie, pp. 225-226.
[57] Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 38, 44, 48-49.
[58] Yow, p. 13; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 39-42, 49; Shopes. It's self-evident that not all oral history falls into the category of social history. Oral history interviews are also conducted with business leaders, politicians and their associates, as well as cultural celebrities. Apart from gaining information on the perspectives of those in power positions, the interview may also give the 'story behind the story' of personal rivalries and alliances, motives and the intricacies of decision-making that are also generally absent from the public record.

1.2 Oral history complements recorded sources

Oral history is a valuable source of historical information since it *complements other recorded sources of information*. Historical gaps of interest and importance may be filled by using oral history methods to *provide an intimate view and complete the picture* of the events described, to create records which otherwise would not have been available.

It is important to note that oral history cannot and is not intended to take the place of the written document. Written documents will remain important sources of historical information where documentary history is the mainstay of archives. Oral history, therefore, makes no claim to exclusivity. However, oral history can make a valuable contribution by supplementing and enriching the written record.

Historical written records are deliberately prepared in an objective and impersonal manner, giving the researcher only the 'bare bones', which means that the tension and influences often underlying the historical data are not reflected in the official records. The personal and anecdotal characteristics of recorded oral history interviews may provide flesh for the sometimes arid bones of history.[59]

Written sources usually provide the who, what, when, and where of history, while oral history can add better insights into the how and why, thereby giving a fuller historical record. Written records relate the facts of *what happened*, while oral sources provide insights into *how people felt about what happened*. Oral history often expresses how people felt about certain important events and movements, how they reacted to them, and how these events affected or even dramatically changed their lives. It can provide information on people's contribution to society, what guided people's decisions and choices and what people believed in and why. Oral history tells the researcher about events, but even more, about their meaning. Details of *what happened, as well as the emotional responses of individuals to the event itself*, provide a human dimension to eyewitness accounts of historical occurrences.[60]

This relationship between oral and written sources may be summed up as follows: "Alone, each one is incomplete, but together they form a harmonious union, with the one offering objective interpretation based upon sound evidence, and the other giving a personalized immediacy, a sense of being there and of participation".[61] Alessandro Portelli agrees on this relationship between written and oral sources as being 'not mutually exclusive'. He explains that both sources "have common as well as autonomous characteristics, and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other)".[62] Trevor Lummis yields to this

[59] Lance, p. 3; University of Kentucky oral history program, "The importance of oral history", <http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/Special/oral_history/introduction.html>, *s.a*.
[60] Ritchie, p 45; Allen and Montell, pp. 21, 58; Yow, p. 15.
[61] Allen and Montell, p. 3.
[62] A. Portelli, "What makes oral history different" in Perks and Thomson (eds), p. 64. For Paul Thompson the difference between the oral and written forms is more striking: "Written language is grammatically

perspective of written and oral sources where they do not contradict one another but rather enhance the value of one another when used together, because “they have been set down at different times and were subject to different personal biases, contemporary pressures and social conventions. They should be used to illuminate the defects of one another”.[63]

Apart from providing the interpretation of events, personalities and relationships through oral history interviewing, the latter may also assist the researcher in the use of documents themselves. For example, oral history may *provide clarification in cases of factual confusion*. If documents appear to contradict one another, interviews may help to clear the blockage. Documentary evidence may also fail to provide all the detail and answers the researcher need. Using oral history interviews, the *underlying unrecorded assumptions and motives can be revealed*.[64]

Secondary sources may not be adequately revealing and through oral history methods, the researcher can reach below the surface and discover what is fundamental and what is insignificant. Thus, both written and oral histories serve as existing histories and also as historical sources, from which evidence may be obtained to give a clearer picture of the events of the past.

1.3 Oral history gives a ‘voice to the voiceless’

The value of oral history lies specifically in the broadening of sources of historical information to include the *voices and perspectives of ordinary people*, thus expanding the historian’s database of evidence and information. Oral history’s potential lies here in “restoring the recording of the voices of the historiographically – if not the historically – silent”.[65] An attempt is made to *‘give a voice’* to the experiences and everyday stories of ordinary people and these historical narratives, as communicated through oral testimony, are a means of *overcoming the silence*. Oral history provides a voice to the voiceless, to the poor, the marginalised and the illiterate. This is particularly important in South Africa, where repression and discrimination have muted the voice of the majority of people.[66] A former resident of District Six, in Cape Town, once remarked: "We have a voice. We want to be heard. They don't have to give us anything. We just want someone to listen to us".[67]

Still and Thompson elaborate on the reasons for these ‘hidden voices’, explaining that “people are not consulted enough because the main debates take place in meetings

elaborate, linear, spare, objective, and analytical in manner, precise yet abundantly rich in vocabulary. Speech on the other hand is usually grammatically primitive, full of redundancies and backloops, empathetic and subjective, tentative, repeatedly returning to the same words and catch-phrases”. See Thompson, p. 279.

[63] Lummis, p. 155.

[64] Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 43-45.

[65] Shopes.

[66] Allen and Montell, pp. 21, 58; Moss, *Oral history program* …, p. 9; Minkley and Rassool, pp. 90–91; *Natal Witness*, 23.9.2003, p. 4.

[67] *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32.

which they do not attend or in documents which they do not write. Oral history can correct the situation by giving volume and power to the voices of people who are outside the development establishment".[68]

This could allow those who have limited access to formal channels of expression, to communicate their points of view to a public audience. At the very least, this oral evidence could then be presented in a form that is accessible to a wide range of people. For example, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, it was also ordinary people who appeared before the Commission to tell their stories unhindered to all. With slogans such as, "The Truth Hurts, But Silence Kills",[69] (sic) the TRC wanted all South Africans to realise that they had the opportunity to tell their stories. The stories told at the TRC exposed, apart from the silenced voices, also the methods implemented in silencing them. Antjie Krog describes it as follows: "Many voices of this country were long silent, unheard, often unheeded before they spoke, in their own tongues, at the microphones of South Africa's Truth Commission. The voices of ordinary people have entered the public discourse and shaped the passage of history. They speak here to all who care to listen".[70]

In this sense, oral history makes a *social contribution*, assisting the less privileged in their journey towards *dignity and self-confidence*. Oral history gives ordinary people confidence in their own speech as a means of expressing themselves, from their own memories and interpretations of the past and their ability to contribute to the writing of history. Approaching a person to record his/her story conveys the message that his/her life is of value and of significance in itself. This process captures an alternative view of History and reveals a great deal about an individual and about a culture.[71]

Oral history can assist the interviewee in *understanding people's fragmented memories and help to review and re-value them*. By adding an ever-widening range of voices to the story and by seeing and hearing their stories in the public realm, ordinary people may experience that they are not alone and actually have *shared memories*, which connect them to others. Through oral history the points of view of ordinary people can be presented in a form that is accessible to a wide range of people. Every person has a story, and many people are willing to tell their stories, while many are eager to listen.

1.4 Oral history adds to the sensory and personal

One dimension that is missing from written documents may be provided by oral history, namely *sound*. No written language is identical to its spoken counterpart. Seldon and Pappworth explain it as follows: "Even if every fact of conceivable historical interest

[68] Still *et al*., (eds), p. 4.
[69] D.M. Tutu, *No future without forgiveness*, p. 81.
[70] A. Krog, *Country of My Skull* (2nd edition), p. viii; *Rapport*, 23.5.2003, p. 24.
[71] Thompson, pp. 20–23; Caunce, p. 25; *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32; Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 8-9.

was recorded on paper, there would still be a role for oral history because of its unique advantage of providing historical material that can be reproduced in sound. Oral history interviews can thus be used in a variety of ways: on television, radio, pre-recorded educational cassettes, in museums and exhibition presentations".[72] The use of words and the structures of sentences, from the voices of the past, can significantly affect the meaning conveyed and may bring history in a clear form to an extensive audience, some of whom might never have been introduced to the same material, if presented only in writing.

Sensory information obtained from sound recordings contains *oral qualities*, where the core of the information is in the medium which carries it, as well as in the information itself. Oral history records and conveys, apart from information, the *emotions and feelings* of the narrator, thus adding to an essential human understanding.[73]

Moreover, oral history uniquely provides the *atmosphere, mood, character and colour of a particular episode or series of events or of a whole period*. This 'flavour' of a personality or an occasion is not conveyed over when reading written documents. Documentary evidence is often drained of human detail, resulting in colourless, impersonal collections of documents which limit the impact on the audience and carry little or no mark of a person's personality. Unlike documents, which seldom convey the way people think, interviewing offers insight into the *respondent's personality and thought processes*, as well as into the feelings of the person being interviewed through the tone of voice, the usage of language and emphasis, thus providing the opportunity of assessing an *interviewee's character*.[74]

When oral history is carefully contextualised, it can contribute to the reader/listener's understanding of personal experiences.

1.5 Oral history develops a variety of skills

Through conducting oral history, a new set of skills is required and obtained, while numerous skills are developed. Engaging in oral history encourages a whole range of skills which are essential to the growth of a society of informed and capable citizens.

The main focus of current curriculum strategies in South African, as well as in most Western educational institutions, is the promotion of so-called 'transferable skills'. Transferable skills, which include both subject-specific and generic skills, are basically skills that are seen as relevant to the needs of the contemporary world. Not only do the principles underlying oral history teaching closely reflect current ideas about

[72] Seldon and Pappworth, p. 52.
[73] Lance, p. 3.
[74] Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 47-49; W.W. Cutler, "Oral history. Its nature and uses for educational history" in *History of Education Quarterly* 11(2), Summer 1971, pp. 186, 188.

effective learning and teaching, but oral history also lends itself to the development of a wide range of personal and transferable skills.[75]

The following skills may be developed:

- *Research skills:* Researchers involved in oral history are exposed to the value of primary sources leading to searches in libraries and archives. Research and questioning skills are developed when confronted with contradictory evidence. Different people give different versions of the same event and the interviewee's story may differ from the written accounts. In the process, the ability to verify the different sources are developed and it also leads to the realisation that historical events do not affect all people the same way.[76]

- *Language skills:* The development of language skills includes both the written and spoken language. Formulating questions, conducting interviews and transcribing them develops language skills. In addition, listening skills are developed since the researcher has to focus on the interviewee's speech during an interview. By interviewing others, one can also gain confidence with regard to expressing oneself in words.[77]

- *Technical skills:* These skills are acquired mainly through the handling of equipment. The uses thereof for recording and transcribing an interview and how to use it in combination with other equipment, such as video cameras, are developed. An oral history project may also lead to the collecting of related artefacts and photographs. The researcher should gain knowledge of how to handle such items, take care of them and how to reproduce photographs.[78]

- *Social skills:* The interview process develops some important social skills during the researcher's interaction with interviewees. He/she should communicate with a variety of people from different social classes and age groups, should develop tact and patience, experience feelings of empathy towards others when confronted with conflicting values and attitudes to life.[79]

- *Cognitive and other skills:* Some of the most important skills acquired through oral history are the cognitive skills. These include an understanding of historical concepts and timelines, genealogy, cause and effect relationships and problem-solving skills. Writing reports about individual oral history experiences also

[75] T. Hitchcock and B. Shoemaker, "Skills and the development of the history curriculum", <http://batspa.ac.uk/history2000/skillsdevhistcurric.htm>, *s.a.*; Thomson, "Teaching oral history …".
[76] Thompson, p. 192; Ritchie, pp. 196, 199; Krige, *et al.*, p. 12; G. Timmins, "Progression and differentiation in history teaching", <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/history2000/progressdiff.htm>, *s.a*.
[77] F.E. Graves, "Sound and the teaching of history" in Trümpelman, (ed.), p.116; Thompson, pp. 192-193; Krige, *et al.*, p. 12.
[78] D. Weitzman, *My backyard history book*, pp. 56-57; Thompson, p. 193.
[79] Thompson, pp. 12, 193; Ritchie, pp. 193, 197; Brooks *et al*., p. 30; Weitzman, pp. 56-57.

develops analytical and composition skills. The by-products of developing these skills are the opportunities for self-revelation and the development of self-worth.[80]

1.6 Oral history - political reconciliation and nation-building

Oral history additionally has vital political importance, aims and outcomes. Understanding the past from the point of view of the oppressed people in South Africa, is a powerful way to uncover the 'past-present relationship' through memory. Oral history may assist societies and individuals to remember and understand better the trauma of the past. While they give words and meaning to their experiences, which had previously been ignored and/or silenced, they may gain support and attain public attention and recognition and ultimately, also find a form of therapeutic benefit in sharing their stories. Reconstructing past struggles, from the point of view of the ordinary people involved, may help to obtain a more comprehensive picture of their roles in the resistance period.[81]

For example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa uncovered the past by using the politics of historical and personal memory for the purpose of reconciliation in the future. The TRC broke the silence imposed by Apartheid through an official recording of memories. Oral history was also used as a resource and a way of restoring the rights of the victims. In the search for truth and healing, oral history became an important tool in confronting the experiences of ordinary people living under Apartheid during the period 1960-1994.[82]

The stories told by ordinary people during the TRC wiped out the possibility of denial and personalised the acts human beings did to other human beings. People used the platform given by the TRC to express their pain and grief in public. It resulted in a shared understanding of knowledge but was also an acknowledgement. In the process, the past was recorded, making these narratives part of national memory.[83] Krog describes this situation of shared stories and pain at the TRC as follows: "Now that people are able to tell their stories the lid of the Pandora's box is lifted; for the first time these individual truths sound unhindered in the ears of all South Africans … The personal pain puts an end to all stereotypes. Where we connect now has nothing to do with group or colour, we connect with our humanity …".[84]

Oral history may thus stimulate a 'cathartic release' of long-term repressed emotions and sometimes, not always, become a means of emotional support. However, it is

[80] Ritchie, pp. 197, 199-200.
[81] Sideris, p. 43; Thomson, "Fifty years on …", pp. 590-591.
[82] Minkley and Rassool, pp. 89–90; Ritchie, p. 23; *Rapport*, 23.3.2003, p. 24; *Democracy in Action*, 1.6.1995, p. 32; Thomson, "Fifty years on …", p. 591.
[83] *Independent on Saturday*, 14.8.1999, p. 8; *Weekend Argus*, 22-23.10.1994, p. 3; *The Star*, 29.7.1999, p. 18.
[84] Krog, p. 45.

important that the oral historian should keep in mind that the recollection of painful memories may have therapeutic, but also traumatic effects.[85]

The history of political resistance and political organisation may be documented systematically through oral history, so that it may be used for a greater political purpose. Communities who have gone through forced removals offer a good example. Under the threat and conditions of forced removal, communities develop a strong sense of their history and their right to land ownership. Recording the history of these communities and making it widely available, may help to justify their claims to the land.[86]

It is important to note that "no one group has an exclusive understanding of the past".[87] Especially in cases where oral history is used in a process of political reconciliation and nation-building, the interviewer should 'cast the nets wide' and record as many different participants to an event or members of a community as possible, to make the oral evidence more valid.[88]

Oral history has an important part to play in the reconstruction of the South African past where the "land belongs to the voices of those who live in it".[89] It corrects other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct it. It may provide a sense and even form of empowerment for individuals and groups, through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past. Oral history may then form the connection between the past and the political struggle, between power and knowledge, between political and social history, and between memory and history.[90]

[85] Ritchie, pp. 234-237; B. Finca, "Learning to bless our memories" in Denis (ed.), p. 15.
[86] Sideris, pp. 51–52.
[87] Ritchie, p. 24.
[88] *Ibid*.
[89] Krog, p. 210.
[90] Minkley and Rassool, p. 93.

THE CHALLENGES OF ORAL HISTORY

Although many practitioners of oral history feel it is "time to hand the mike to the people"[91] and there are large numbers of ordinary people who still need to share their significant stories and memories, opposition to oral history still exists and doubts are still expressed in this regard. Some academic historians still perceive oral evidence as being too subjective, since human memories are incomplete, inaccurate, open to distortion, subject to subsequent changes in people's perspectives, subject to fluctuating access and recounted from a biased point of view.[92]

History is the 'life of memory', with memory forming the core of oral history. What makes oral history so distinct and sets it apart from other branches of history, is its reliance on memory and not on text. Unfortunately, memory can never be absolutely certain and therein lies its weakness as a source of knowledge of the past.[93]

All memory, short- as well as long-term, is stored through a process of selection and interpretation. Immediately after an event, sifting and shaping occurs to a large degree and continues in the long term in a more slow and subtle way. Ordering, discarding, combining, and selecting is a continual process, resulting in memory bringing together the objective and subjective, facts, opinions and interpretations. Therefore, the researcher can never assume that the information produced from memory to be unadulterated fact.[94]

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 the historian Peter Oliver: "It seems to me that those who prepare and use oral record have not yet given sufficient weight to the tricks that memory can play…".[95] This view is supported by historian Patrick O'Farrell who wrote in 1979 that oral history was moving into "the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity … And where will it lead us? Not into history, but into myth".[96]

Considering the variables influencing and shaping memory, such as perception, age, the narrator's health, the topic under consideration, the way questions are asked, emotion, the willingness of the narrator to participate in the interview, etc., one can obviously not ignore the problematic nature of memory as a reliable historical source. Although oral history may be as unreliable or reliable as any other research source,

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[91] Ritchie, p. 13.
[92] Sideris, p. 42; Caunce, pp. 214-219; R.J. Shafer, *A guide to historical method***,** p. 117.
[93] Ritchie, p. 20; See also P. Burke, "History as social memory" in T. Butler (ed.), *Memory. History, culture and the mind*, p. 97.
[94] Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 140-141.
[95] Seldon and Pappworth, p. 16.
[96] Thompson, p. 159; Thomson, "Fifty years on …", p 585.

an awareness of the special nature of memory as a source of historical information and evidence needs to be highlighted.

Using oral testimonies, therefore, presents a range of challenges for the researcher, especially regarding how people construct their memories, in order to gain a better understanding of why the information that is acquired is formed in the way it is and how this impacts on the findings.[97]

Attention will be given to some of the factors contributing directly and indirectly to a person's recollection of his/her memory and the influence thereof on gaining historical information and evidence.

Chronology is essential to history. The weakness in chronology and lack of precision is one of the greatest limitations of oral testimonies. Time is a continuum, but people periodise it, normally placing events and periods in time by relating them to other occurrences and/or by association with other episodes in the person's life. Therefore, it is rather the pursuing and gathering together of bundles of meaning, relationships and themes, across the linear span of a lifetime. Usually, the ordering principle that supersedes time is emotional associations people have with the events and/or the person being discussed/described. In the human perception of history, persons, events and places are normally more important than time as such.[98]

It is also important to take into account that Westerners and Africans have a different standard chronology. It is more common to the Western understanding and memory of the past to arrange the past according to a date or time period. However, the African perception is that the time is not as important as the events and places in their accounts of what took place in history. Furthermore, the chronological order of events being recalled is usually scrambled. Although the events are described accurately, one incident may be chronologically unrelated to another during the conversation. While the interviewer is focusing on reconstructing the past by means of chronological categorisation, the interviewee will tend to focus on recalling important events and people who formed part of his/her life.[99]

When talking about events that occurred months or years apart, people have a tendency to *telescope historical time* and omit incidents that occurred in the interim. Only the events that have a bearing on the present circumstances will be mentioned, leaving large sections of time not accounted for. At the same time, the actual actors in

[97] Worthington and Denis, p. 3.

[98] Vansina, pp. 173-174, 186-190; Allen and Montell, pp. 26-31, 81; Worthington and Denis, p. 18; Thompson, pp. 157-158, 167; A. Portelli, *The death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories. Form and meaning in oral history*, p. 63. See also E. Tonkin, *Narrating our pasts. The social construction of oral history*, pp. 66-75 where she explains 'Narrators and their times'.

[99] Vansina, pp. 173-174, 186-190; Allen and Montell, pp. 26-31, 81; Worthington and Denis, p. 18; Thompson, pp. 157-158, 167.

the historical event may be displaced. The events that occurred become of primary significance and the persons involved secondary.[100]

Accurate memory is more likely when it meets a *social interest and need* and when it concerns something that is important and exciting to the interviewee. In other words, memory depends on the perception process. Thus, the chances are greater that the interviewee will find it easier to remember aspects of an event that were of interest than to recall aspects considered to be less important. When something is fresh and invigorating, the memory will be most vivid, compared to memories of normal daily routine which may be too commonplace. The result is that the reliability of the interviewee's memory depends partly on whether the question asked interests the person.[101]

Memory begins with *perception*. This implies that no two people will tell a story in precisely the same way, since interviewees will speak from their own observations and points of view. Perceptions that are initially flawed will create distorted memories and it seems that lasting memories are produced by more dramatic, direct, and emotional situations. Furthermore, not every perceived event is preserved in memory – selection occurs.[102] Seldon and Pappworth explain it as follows: "Some witnesses will imply (perhaps to show they are 'in the know') that they were present when in fact they were not. Even if the informant *was* present and has perfect recall, his recollection may still not be accurate, because he might not be in possession of certain facts without which he cannot properly understand what is taking place, or he might not *physically* be in position to observe all that is taking place and may have missed a crucial occurrence. Even with perfect recall, and possessing *all* the relevant facts and 100% observation, an informant still cannot give an objective picture because subconscious selection processes will always affect the recollection of events".[103]

'Just where it is heard', in other words the *environment* in which the interview is conducted, may stimulate the ability to remember and how the information will be conveyed. An interview at home will increase the pressure of 'modest' home-centred ideals; an interview in the workplace will introduce the influence of work attitudes and conventions and an interview in a pub is more likely to emphasise 'dare-devilry' and fun. Moreover, connected with the environment will be changes in language. An interview in a pub will often be tainted with swearwords, compared to a recording inside a church.[104]

Crucial to remembering is the effect of the *context/setting* of evidence. In a group situation, such as a local celebration or a memorial service or in a pub, communal

[100] Allen and Montell, pp. 35-37; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 21-22; Thompson, p. 159; Vansina, pp. 174-176.
[101] Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Ritchie, p. 32; Thompson, pp. 131-132, 157-158.
[102] Ritchie, p. 33; Henge, p. 11.
[103] Seldon and Pappworth, p. 125.
[104] Thompson, pp. 142-143; Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Allen and Montell, pp. 40-45.

perspectives of memory are expected to exercise much more power than in more private reflections at home. The conducting of the interview in a quiet or busy place may influence the outcome of the interview. In a quiet place there may be more openness without the fear of being overheard, whereas in a busy place the interviewee may be more careful of what he/she says.[105]

The interviewee's *political and religious ideas* may also affect memory and may influence what aspects of an event will 'stand out' and how he/she will eventually construct the story. This may therefore cause a person to reject certain issues/facts and overemphasise others.[106]

The *presence of other people* while conducting the interview may affect the interviewee's ability to remember and to speak. Exaggeration and boasting may be reduced, but the inclination to conform will also increase significantly. According to Thompson, a group meeting may sometimes be helpful, for example in "bringing out conflicts in tradition about particular figures in a community's past from informants with different standpoints".[107] Sometimes a husband and wife together, may give a more accurate review of past events, by stimulating each other's memories or correcting inaccurate recollections. Nevertheless, the opposite may also be true in cases where a woman, for example, would be less open to the interviewer about certain aspects than she would have been if her husband were not present.[108]

The interviewee's perception of the interviewer as an *'insider'* or *'outsider'* may also, to a large extent, influence the respondent's ability to convey information. Are you part of his/her race group, community, gender, and church? These aspects may influence the interviewee with regard to what he/she considers worth sharing with the interviewer, or what he/she would prefer to withhold in the interest of protecting those who form part of his/her group. The interviewee may regard the insider as part of 'them' where they share a common cultural system based on similar customs, values, attitudes and symbols, as well as significant historical experiences. The insider knows his/her way around, understands the nuances, may be less easily fooled and begins the interview with far more useful contacts. It is also more likely that the interviewee will feel free to use certain social codes, for example the same frame of reference, as well as terms that have a specific meaning and language, which would be lost on an outsider. All this has to be learnt and constructed by the outsider, who may initially not even be familiar with the ethnography, language or geography of the community. However, for the outsider the advantage of being outside the local social network lies in the fact that he/she may more easily remain neutral and objective; can ask more questions for the explanation of aspects that seem obvious and/or taken for granted

[105] Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Thompson, p. 133.
[106] Worthington and Denis, p. 4.
[107] Thompson, p. 140.
[108] Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Thompson, p. 140.

to an insider and will not avoid exploring unpleasant aspects of a topic, as in the case of the insider who may fear offending the interviewee.[109]

In the African context particularly, the information received from the interviewee may be affected by a *person's loyalty* to his/her specific community. The interviewee may be cautious about frankly conveying information considered to be confidential. Certain information may be omitted for fear that it may hurt the community in some way and/or cause trouble for the interviewee if it were overheard by members of the community.[110] A Tanzanian in the Nango royal capital at Vagha exclaimed: "Forget that story; if we tell it, our lineage will be destroyed".[111]

The way *questions* are phrased and posed may affect the way the interviewee recalls evidence. Because of the fact that the researcher does not always know the nature of the particular things the interviewee may know, finding the right questions to ask is very important.[112] Questioning should not reflect the interviewer's personal bias. The interviewee may also mould answers according to what he/she thinks the interviewer wants to hear and this may have a direct influence on the information collected. Distortions of memory may be produced in cases where leading questions are posed to an eyewitness and/or victim. The choice of words and the way questions are asked may bias the subject's subsequent recall. Leading questions or even quite subtle implications may introduce errors in the memory of the event. Therefore, both the interviewer and interviewee should check his/her own credibility. To prevent any misrepresentation, the interviewer should be careful not to guide the interviewee's memory too much. The interviewer should therefore control the interview by maintaining a balance between the people involved and preventing any distortion of information, with the desired outcome being the best possible recollection of memory.[113]

During the posing of questions, the respondent may also feel awkward when his/her recall of the specifics of an event is vague. Many times, the interviewee does not want to reveal his/her ignorance and the person feels constrained to provide an answer. This may lead to a definite reply to a question being asked even though the recollection is vague and may even be inaccurate. In this case, a normal question can lead to false

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[109] Thompson, pp. 140-141; Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 34; Allen and Montell, pp. 11-13. See also A. Kikumura, "Family live histories. A collaborative venture" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The oral history reader*, p. 141, explaining that since both – the 'insider' and the 'outsider' – have the possibility of distortions and prejudice, Kikumura agrees with Robert Merton who emphasises the role of the researcher to appraise the unique advantages and limitations of each: "We no longer ask whether it is the Insider or the Outsider who has monopolistic or privileged access to social truth; instead, we begin to consider their distinctive and interactive roles in the process of truth seeking".

[110] Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 20; Thompson, p. 140.

[111] Thompson, pp. 167-168.

[112] Seldon and Pappworth, p. 34.

[113] A. Baddeley, "The psychology of remembering and forgetting" in Butler (ed.), p. 53; G. Cohen, *Memory in the real world*, pp. 77, 79-80; Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-28; Ritchie, p. 34; I.M.L. Hunter, *Memory. Facts and fallacies*, p. 98.

testimony. This type of incident is more likely to occur when questions are put in a suggestive form.[114]

One may observe a general tendency for *recurrent processes* to be better remembered than single incidents. Each telling of the story becomes a rehearsal for the next telling, embedding it all the more firmly in one's mind. Memory is much less reliable when it concerns events that neither recurred nor were recalled time and again.[115] Research indicates that people forget more in the first hour about a specific event happening than during any other time. Forgetting continues for nine hours afterwards. In other words, more is forgotten in the first day, than in the subsequent weeks, months and years.[116]

The recollection of an event does not always correspond with the truth, but with *alterations* perceived from how the events are disclosed *through the media*. Thompson explains this further: "In many events people did not know at the time what was happening, so that their retrospective accounts will be as much based on what they learnt from the news or from others as on their own participation".[117] Thus, interviewees may be unable to distinguish pure recollection of past events as they experienced them, from what they saw or heard afterwards.

Conducting interviews years after an event has occurred might lead to uncertain memories. Time and the passage thereof, reshape memory. Memory grows 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. Distanciation 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.[118]

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

[114] Hunter, pp. 100-101. See also U. Neisser, *Memory observed. Remembering in natural contexts*, p. 120.
[115] Thompson, pp. 158-159; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 26.
[116] Yow, p. 19.
[117] Thompson, p. 158.
[118] Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 31-32; Ritchie, *Doing oral history* …, pp. 26-27, 34, 39, 233; Vansina, pp. 174-176; D.M. Jones, "Stress and memory" in M.M. Gruneberg and P.E. Morris (eds), *Applied problems in memory*, pp. 203-205; D.L. Schacter (ed.), *Memory distortion. How minds, brains, and societies reconstruct the past*, pp. 348-349.

where questions are asked about past experiences and/or where people are asked to defend their decisions, past actions, and attributions.[119]

Nevertheless, most events become more neutral with the passage of time and even strong positive or negative emotions are likely to become more neutral. It is a very rare event, often one of great emotional importance that retains high affective levels over time.[120]

Memory is *subject to alteration* since it changes over time. History may be rewritten to include new evidence and to fit different interests and interpretive frameworks. In the same way, individuals may also re-explain and reconsider their past decisions and actions on the basis of insights gained from previous events, which could lend a new significance to past experiences. Even when memory is dormant, it is still subject to change due to the continuous input of new items that should coexist with older material and necessitate its reassessment and restructuring and, in the case of recurring events, its disappearance.[121]

Interviewees may *oversimplify* their role and memory of an event. They may have a tendency to reduce events and to 'downsize complex emotions into neat packages of verbal testimonies'. It could be that the interviewee does not want to go into the matter in depth and offers only to-the-point answers. Some interviewees may also be exceptionally modest and underplay their role in and contribution to an event and/or organisation. This should be treated with caution by the interviewer.[122]

The opposite may also happen. In this case, interviewees might genuinely believe that their role was indispensable and as far as their memories go, they have all kinds of achievements to their credit. Interviewees may "shamelessly put themselves in centre stage, or recall an incident as having happened to *them* forty years ago, when in fact they only heard about it third hand from somebody else."[123] Gottschalk explains that this form of 'egocentrism' is to be expected, as even a modest observer will tell what he/she heard or did, as those details were the most important things that were said and done. It is therefore impossible for the narrator to tell it any differently, since this is the only way he/she knows it.[124]

It is important to note that *age* plays a role with regard to personal recollections, and it is crucial for the historian to be aware of the correlation between the age of a person and his/her memory power. Research has shown that the majority of people's ability to remember declines as they grow older, and memory becomes less efficient with

[119] T.M. Ostrom, "Three catechisms for social memory" in P.R. Solomon and G.R. Goethals *et al*., (eds), *Memory: Interdisciplinary approaches*, pp. 214-216.
[120] M. Linton, "Phoenix and chimera: The changing face of memory" in J. Jeffrey and G. Edwall (eds), *Memory and history. Essays on recalling and interpreting experience*, p. 80.
[121] Ritchie, *Doing oral history* …, p. 33; Thompson, p. 129; Vansina, p. 161.
[122] *Ibid*., pp. 20-22.
[123] *Ibid*., p. 22.
[124] Gottschalk, p. 154.

age. It is generally accepted that after the age of 30 there is a progressive decline in the memory of a person. There are varieties in the way the forgetting process happens, but long-term memories of especially older people, are likely to be less retentive and precise. Things once remembered will be entirely forgotten or be recalled with a cumulative proportion of inaccuracy. The fact that the overwhelming majority of the potential candidates for oral history interviews are older than 30 certainly affects the average candidate's potential ability to recall past events. This reality, however, should not at all discourage researchers from interviewing the elderly, since the total memory store of people older than 30 is considerable. The interviewer needs to be aware of these perils with older informants and in many cases, it may be advisable to interview the same person, particularly in the case of the elderly, more than once in order to retrieve all the desired information.[125]

Gender may also play a role in the recalling of the past. According to Paul Thompson, the memories of men and women tend to focus differently. Women find it easier to share remembered feelings than men. The latter talk more readily about work, whereas women will place more emphasis on family life. There is also a difference in how the different sexes use words; women are more likely to report in detail than men. Variations also occur in the patterns of talking and listening, which affect the way in which the sexes talk, as well as the times and places in which it is socially acceptable to speak. For men, talking is often a mark of stature and social responsibility; a legitimate and valued activity, which results often in men speaking for women about things the former knows little about. This gender imbalance where men's voices are heard over and above women's in most societies may influence the information gained from the interview.[126] From a feminist perspective, Kristina Minister argues further that men and women conduct interviews differently. Women engage in a more interactive interview strategy, which opens up and sparks memories, leading to more effective communication and storytelling.[127]

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 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.[128]

Through the interview process the oral historian is relying on the interviewee to remember and recall a specific event, especially if the person was an *eyewitness* to the event. Therefore, it is vital for the interviewer to be aware and suspicious of the

[125] Henge, pp. 112-113; Thompson, p. 136; Lummis, p. 158; A. Parkin, *Memory. A guide for professionals*, pp. 52-56.
[126] Thompson, p. 179; Slim *et al*., (eds), p. 5.
[127] Thomson, "Fifty years on …", p. 584.
[128] Gottschalk, pp. 150-151.

(un)reliability of an eyewitness. The interviewer should take into account that even if a specific memory seems vivid to a person, it does not mean the memory is accurate. The reconstructive nature of human memory is one reason for the unreliability of eyewitness evidence.

Many variables may have an influence on the accuracy of an eyewitness. The way questions are phrased may change what people think they saw. Recollection of an event does not always correspond with the truth, but with what the interviewee thinks should have happened in a given situation. It also seems that eyewitnesses tend to overestimate the duration of events. If the eyewitness is exposed to new information during the interval between witnessing the event and recalling it, this new information may have an effect on what is recalled later. Original memory may thus be changed, supplemented or modified. If misleading information is subsequently presented, people frequently have difficulty in remembering details. Misinformation comes to 'overwrite' the old memory, effectively eliminating it and preventing accurate recall. This causes people to be vulnerable to misleading information about peripheral information in a sequence of events.[129] All these variables may make the memory for an event that has been witnessed, highly malleable.

Robert Buckhout emphasises these aspects by stressing that the ideal observer does not exist and distinguishes a number of factors that inherently limit a person's ability to give a complete, accurate account of events. The first source of unreliability is the insignificance of the events that were observed – at the time and to the witness – which did not motivate the person to adopt completely the selective process of attention. Moreover, the length of the period of observation will also limit the number of features a person can attend to. Fleeting glimpses are common in eyewitness accounts, especially in fast-moving, threatening situations. Contributory to this, less than ideal observation conditions frequently apply to the event being observed. Often distance, poor lightning, fast movement, or the presence of a crowd, may interfere with the efficient working of the attention process. In addition, the witness him- or herself is a major source of unreliability and may be observing under stress where his/her well-being or life is threatened, rather taking the necessary steps to ensure his/her survival or safety. A person under extreme stress is a less than normal reliable witness. Furthermore, the observer's physical condition may be a factor in that the person may be too tired, or too old, or too sick to perceive clearly, or he/she may simply lack the necessary faculty.[130]

Gottschalk expands on this, noting that not all witnesses are equally competent as witnesses. Competence depends, amongst other things, upon the degree of expertise,

[129] Parkin, pp. 135-142. Parkin describes the unreliability of eyewitnessing in the US judicial system: "a survey in the USA revealed that around 77 000 people are arrested each year on the basis of eyewitness identification. However, it is also claimed that eyewitness evidence accounts for more wrongful convictions that any other single factor in the US judicial system". See also R. Bull and B. Clifford, "Eyewitness memory" in Gruneberg and Morris (eds), pp. 172-176; Henge, p. 111.

[130] Neisser, pp. 117-119.

age, narrative skill and state of mental and physical health. Another important factor in the ability to tell the truth is the degree of attention.[131] He emphasises that "the common human inability to see things clearly and whole makes even the best of witnesses suspect".[132]

Emotions play an important role in both the retention and retrieval of personal memories. The ability to remember a certain event is enhanced if the individual experiences the same emotional state as during the original event. Those memories consistent with our mood are easier to remember than those that are not.[133] Emotion is also known to have a disruptive effect upon attention and perception and may cause a distortion of what is stored in the memory. It may also influence certain marginally painful memories to such an extent that they are repressed[134] or the memories become so dim that they may be lost entirely. This is especially true in extreme cases of fright or horror.[135]

It is realistic to imply that there are no simple relationships between degree of emotion and witnesses' memory for detailed information of violent events. It is rarely, if ever possible to know the complete reality of the trauma victim's experience. This makes assessing the accuracy of reported memories for traumatic experiences intensely difficult. Many variables may alter the accuracy of the recall, including leading questions, information provided after the event has occurred, the status of an individual's neurobiological development and individual differences in basic information processing skills at the time of the occurrence of a traumatic event. Besides, the meaning of the traumatic event to the individual should also be considered. Consequently, trauma is not insignificant in the overall functioning of memory and operates differently under conditions of emotional stress versus ordinary everyday happenings. There are unique effects of trauma on memory where the memory for trauma varies just as memory for negative versus positive occurrences or for unique versus routine events does.[136]

Given the nature of memory and the expected lapses in memory a person can, furthermore, either be *willing or unwilling to remember* things and talk about them. The ability and willingness of the witness to give a trustworthy testimony is determined by

[131] Gottschalk, pp. 150-153.
[132] *Ibid*., p. 153.
[133] A. Baddeley, *Human memory. Theory and practice*, pp. 390-395, 406.
[134] Repressing may be defined as the unconscious blocking of the recall of those experiences and actions which have either immediate or remote potential for causing pain. The essence lies in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of the consciousness. The repression may involve the blocking off of any past experience resulting in loss of memory that may be either slight or extensive. Hunter, pp. 110-111, 114.
[135] Butler, pp. 14, 17; A. Searleman and D. Herrmann, *Memory from a broader perspective*, pp. 192-194; Thompson, pp. 181-183; Parkin, pp. 27-29.
[136] S.L. Toth and D. Cicchetti, "Remembering, forgetting, and the effects of trauma on memory: A developmental psychopathology perspective" in *Development and Psychopathology* 10, 1998, pp. 589-599; S-A. Christianson and B. Hübinette, "Hands up! A study of witnesses' emotional reactions and memories associated with bank robberies" in *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 7, 1993, p. 377.

a number of factors in his/her personality and social situation. This could amount to either a conscious avoidance of distasteful facts or unconscious repression. The interviewer may be hesitant to bring to the surface half-forgotten or blocked painful memories such as harassment, discrimination, humiliation, losses and disappointments. The repressed experiences may involve deeply disturbing anxiety and arouse strong emotional reactions of fear, guilt, shame, disgust, sorrow or feelings of inferiority. Without exception the repressed experience always causes unpleasant emotional reactions. Thus, a person will prefer to remember the positive and good aspects in his/her life but will be less willing to recall the more negative, bad things of life, as these memories are painful and may lead to emotional distress. Consequently - consciously or unconsciously - memories that are positively dangerous or discreditable are most likely to be buried quietly and memories may consciously or subconsciously be rewritten by the individual.[137] As one survivor of a concentration camp explained: "Yes, we always want it to be told, but inside us we are trying to forget; right inside, right in the deepest parts of the mind, of the heart".[138]

The ability to remember an incident may also be considerably harmed by presenting *misleading or interfering information*. This may transform the memory, deleting some elements and replacing them with others. Second-hand information will be more susceptible to outside manipulation and distortion.[139] The opposite must also be taken into account. Witnesses are not always easily misled. Sometimes the memory for the original event resists distortion. When the subject makes a public statement of what may be recalled before exposure to any type of misleading information, the chances are less likely of the recollection being altered. Therefore, memory for evidently important information, which is accurately perceived at the time, is not easily distorted.[140]

However, Frederic Bartlett found that *accuracy of report for more complex events* was the exception rather than the rule. Many times, people reconstruct their material rather than actually remembering it, resulting in distorted memories. Distortion regarding details of the sequence of the events, with the exact time of day at which the events took place, with the relative spatial positions of people or objects in the scene and with definite numbers of objects, are particularly liable to errors of interpretation. The information tends to be recalled in accordance with what would normally be expected, rather than in accordance with what were in fact, the true events. This occurs especially in the recollection of material after very long intervals of time (long distance remembering). All that seems to be remembered of the original material are isolated

[137] Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Thompson, pp. 134, 181-183; Ritchie, *Doing oral history* …, pp. 34-36, 227; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 20; Hunter, p. 113; Baddeley, *Human memory …,* pp. 379-382; Gottschalk, p. 148.
[138] Thompson, p. 168.
[139] Baddeley, "The psychology of …", p. 53; Cohen, pp. 77, 79-80; Ritchie, "Foreword", p. vi.
[140] Cohen, p. 80.

details and even then, the details are remembered only if they fit the subjects' preconceptions.[141]

Fentress and Wickham suggest that if the belief were held that memories are accurate transcriptions of real experiences, more confidence would be displayed in them, as are actually the case.[142] Few human beings have the ability to capture a complex event in such a way that they are able to reproduce it later, in all its complexity – the sounds, sights, smells, etc. Most retrieved information is treated with some uncertainty. This uncertainty may lead people to question the memories of others for purposes of corroboration, refutation, and elaboration. People use others to estimate the quality of their own recall – to verify the accuracy of their memory, to detect any errors that have distorted their memory and to supply details that they have lost.[143]

Hunter warns that the assurance with which testimony is given is found to be no guarantee of accuracy. According to him, less error is found in sworn testimonies than in those unsworn, but inaccuracies remain. This is especially the case when a considerable lapse of time has occurred since the original event took place. He explains that falsifications may be reduced, but not completely eliminated. The ways in which it may be reduced are through sworn testimonies; obtaining the testimony as soon as possible after the event; confining the testimony to that given in a spontaneous report and in answer to questions which are framed as non-suggestively as possible.[144]

Other *variable factors* that are fundamentally unquantifiable may also influence the interviewee's memory. The interviewee's state of mind, i.e., aspects such as personal anxieties, may give rise to different responses. The duration of the interview and the fact that answers may become more superficial after a certain period, may affect the quality of the interview. The timing of the interview may also be problematic, especially for elderly people, whose mental receptivity and vigour are at their best in the morning.

It may happen that, apart from unreliable memory, oral evidence is *consciously falsified* by wilful untruthfulness or distortion to serve some private end. The interviewer must be aware of the 'conscious doctoring' of oral evidence.[145]

Against this background, the historical narrative may be extremely complex since it is derived from human perception, which may be subjective. Memory entails a process of encoding information, storing information and strategically retrieving information with a variety of influences, including social and historical, at each point. Therefore, memories are interpretations of experiences, preserving what is relevant to an individual at the time of particular experiences that are remembered. Since memory is

[141] D.A. Norman, *Memory and attention. An introduction to human information processing*, pp. 136-137. See also Hunter, p. 100.
[142] J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social memory*, p. 23.
[143] Ostrom, p. 216; Butler, p. 14.
[144] Hunter, pp. 101-102.
[145] Seldon and Pappworth, p. 19; Thompson, p. 149.

inevitably and invariably selective, memory is distortion resulting in the fact that memory is incomplete.[146]

Thus, it is clear that memory is a complex phenomenon and not just a biological structure. It cannot be examined by a set of rules or be properly interrogated, thus resulting in an accurate reflection of the past. Even if it could be done, there is reason to question whether the majority of people would be able or willing to describe their experiences fully, in detail. The ability to capture personal experience and individual perception is one of the great strengths of oral narratives. However, it is important to take note that information from these forms of narratives is likely to be within the realms of conviction, belief and opinion, rather than in undisputed evidence.[147] Thus, information gained from the narrator may provide important new factual information, but on the other hand, may be only insights or perspectives into specific experiences.

This does not mean that there are no grounds for arriving at a degree of consensus about the past. Donald Ritchie best sums up the approach that historians should follow when dealing with memory, when he states that “be aware of the peculiarities of memory, adept in their methods of dealing with it, conscious of its limitations, and open to its treasures”.[148]

[146] Conway, p. 150.
[147] Lummis, pp. 128-130; Slim *et al*., (eds), pp. 143-145.
[148] Ritchie, *Doing oral history …,* p. 34.

AUTHENTICITY OF ORAL SOURCES

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. Contrary to what many historians believe, these factors are not insurmountable, and they may be overcome by employing reliable techniques developed by historians, who are involved with oral history, over the years.

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. Oral historians have also highlighted the unique advantages of oral history against the written document, where the latter is definitely not 'problem-free'[149] 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".[150] 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 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 source to tell more.[151]

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.[152] Gottschalk reminds the researcher that what is meant by calling a particular 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".[153]

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.[154] Oral historians agree that oral evidence should not only be convincing,

[149] 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.

[150] Gottschalk, p. 144.

[151] Portelli, pp. 68-69; Grele, p. 141.

[152] J.P. Brits, *"Doing history". A practical guide to improving your study skills*, p. 10.

[153] Gottschalk, p. 139.

[154] "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." A.M. Hoffman and H.S. Hoffman, "Reliability and validity in oral history: The case for memory" in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds), p. 109. See in detail this chapter where the wife-husband team, historian A.M. Hoffman and psychologist H.S. Hoffman, discuss their project on the reliability of memory, in which they compare documented fact with individual long-term memory.

but also verifiable with other sources for corroboration and authentication. The general rules for examining all evidence for reliability and objectivity may be applied to oral sources as well.

It is obvious that 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. Memory is a selective process and the interviewer should, therefore, accept that memory implies both remembering and forgetting. Human memory will never provide the complete record and it therefore depends on other sources for reconstructing the past.[155] 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".[156]

It is worthwhile remembering that documents by themselves may be as misleading as human memory. The *characteristics of selectivity and interpretation* forms 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 own self-consistency and *external tests*, which compare and contrast oral information to written documents and physical evidence, may be applied to oral sources.[157]

Paul Thompson believes that the factual credibility of oral sources should be checked against all the established criteria of historical critique that actually 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. As with all sources, the researcher should be aware of *potential bias*. The conscientious researcher should adopt a sceptical view towards all data and sources should be *checked for internal consistency*, as well as substantiated by *cross-checking* them against all available written and oral evidence. This evidence should be *weighed against a wider context*, where oral evidence may in some cases, be the best or be supplementary or complementary to that of other sources. Methods may also be implemented to *question and assess eyewitnesses* while the evidence is being given. Interpretation becomes a task without end or certainty.[158]

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[155] Ritchie, p. 119; Allen and Montell, pp. 15-22; Parkin, p. 19; T. Butler, "Memory: A mixed blessing" in Butler (ed.), p. 14; Lummis, p. 147.
[156] Thompson, p. 172.
[157] Allen and Montell, p. 71; Vansina, p. 191; Lummis, p. 130.
[158] Thompson, pp. 119, 153, 160-161.

When using any type of source, the researcher should consider the *issue of underlining 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.[159] 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?[160]

Taking into consideration that the purpose of any 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. As already noted, 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.[161]

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.

The first 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. Ritchie believes that oral historians should conduct proper preparatory research, not only to acquaint

[159] Worthington and Denis, p. 21.
[160] *Ibid*., pp. 19-21; Ritchie, "Foreword" in Jeffrey and Edwall (eds), p. viii. See also W. Moss, "Oral history: An appreciation" in Dunaway and Baum (eds), 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.
[161] Worthington and Denis, p. 21; Ritchie, p. 26; Caunce, p. 103.

themselves with the sources already available, but also to assist interviewees by giving some context and structure to the dialogue.[162]

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 they have 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. Considering the cultural background of an interviewee is of great advantage to any oral historian. During the research and preparation phase, the oral historian should acquaint him-/herself with the values and norms of a specific culture and consider them when reconstructing the past.[163] Needless to say, being informed of the available sources will also make the cross-checking of the oral sources more effective.

The second step will be to *cross-check* the source with other sources and 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 each other, the researcher should dig even deeper to determine their accuracy.[164] 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".[165]

While cross-checking, the researcher can accordingly *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*, where in some cases

[162] Ritchie, p. 32. See also Lummis, p. 22.
[163] Vansina, pp. 173-176, 187; Allen and Montell, pp. 26–29; Sideris, p. 46; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 125.
[164] Allen and Montell, p. 85; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Ritchie, p. 119.
[165] Thompson, p. 172.

oral evidence will be the best and in others, will be supplementary or complementary to other sources.[166]

The *interview* itself 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. 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.[167]

Before even starting with the interview, the ultimate purpose of the *questionnaire* or interview guide is to structure the interview and to guide the interviewee carefully through the interview process. In a sense, the questionnaire also helps the interviewee to organise his/her memory. The structure of the questionnaire, as well as the phrasing of the questions, are of crucial importance and may ultimately determine the outcome of an interview. Of particular importance is the fact that the way questions are phrased may alter what people think they saw or experienced.[168]

During the interview, the *interviewer* should 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.[169]

Furthermore, 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. To prevent any distortion of information, the interviewer should be careful not to guide the interviewee's memory too much. The interviewer should therefore control the interview by maintaining a balance between the people involved and by preventing any distortion of information, with the desired outcome being the best possible recollection of memory.[170]

Another strategy for dealing with the aforementioned problems is, of course, *probing* (asking follow-up questions). This should be standard practice among oral historians, but it requires a certain level of skill that is developed only over time. To probe effectively, the interviewer should be a good listener and intervene with appropriate

[166] Allen and Montell, pp. 77, 81; Worthington and Denis, p. 22; Thompson, p. 288; Ritchie, p. 34.
[167] Portelli, "What makes oral history …", pp. 70-71; Thompson, pp. 272-273; Lummis, p. 158; Shopes. 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.
[168] Parkin, p. 136; Ritchie, p. 93.
[169] Sideris, p. 43.
[170] Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-28; Ritchie, p. 34; R.J. Grele, "Movement without aim. Methodological and theoretical problems in oral history" in Perks and Thomson (eds), pp. 43-45.

follow-up questions. This should be done with sensitivity, so that the interviewee will not experience the interview situation as an interrogation.[171]

After the interview, the interviewer and interviewee should mutually address any obvious misstatements and contradictions in the testimony. During the informal discussion after the interview, the interviewer may use the opportunity to clarify any inconsistencies and vague statements.[172]

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.[173]

All details surrounding a specific event in the past may very seldom recalled by only one respondent. An oral historian, therefore, should *interview 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.[174] 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.

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

[171] Ritchie, pp. 94-95.
[172] *Ibid*., p. 32.
[173] Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 127-128; Davis, *et al*., p. 6; Thompson, p. 169.
[174] Allen and Montell, p. 77; Lummis, p. 156; J. Sangster, "Telling our stories. Feminist debates and the use of oral history" in Perks and Thomson (eds), p. 88.

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".[175]

A poem by Antonio Mussapi, called *Remembering,* grasps the idea of remembering the past and telling it to those who will listen:[176]

"I talk,
Talk with people,
The people who speak to me
Of time past
Which falls and does not germinate
If I don't talk.
I listen carefully.
I converse
with people.
I speak
To the little old woman,
to grandpapa, to brothers and sisters,
At dusk
Around the red light,
Bright and hot,
Which encourages us,
The light which brings back
Time past and the time before that,
Which falls without germinating
If, when we talk,
Nobody listens.
I, you and they,
We, all gathered round,
Talking, asking, looking,
I with pencil and paper,
By the tiny lamps of the sky,
The dark sky,
Recording the conversation.
Time past
Which lights up today
And tomorrow,
Making it clear."

[175] Thompson, pp. 156-157.
[176] Witz, p. 15.

SECTION 2

PRACTICAL

PLANNING AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

1. Background

Although some oral history interviews are being conducted on an informal level, e.g., with family members, most interviews form part of a planned oral history project. Before one considers doing oral history it is important to be sure what the purpose of the interview(s) will be. In other words: every oral history project should be started by determining its objectives. This important first step forms part of the planning of a project and - important - poor planning usually results in a disappointing end product.

2. Planning a project

The key steps in planning an oral history project are the following:

- Identify research focus and objectives of project
- Conduct background research
- Determine the scope/parameters of project
- Balance objectives with resources
- Identify candidates/interviewees
- Compile questionnaire(s)

2.1 Identify research focus and objectives of project

It is important to know the objectives you hope to achieve. Just like all other historians, oral historians must first identify a research focus or problem that needs attention. Decide what kind of records you want to create and for what purpose. Oral historians should not be collecting what is already known, but information and opinions that are unavailable in any form of record. Oral history projects are mostly designed to supplement existing evidence, filling in gaps that exist in historical records or provide new perspectives on historical events.

When identifying objectives, the prospective oral historian should ask the following questions:

- Is the research problem a significant one that will contribute to his/her own studies, but also provide answers to other problems?

- Has the research been done before?

- Does there seem to be enough solid evidence, or the prospect of securing it, to allow the research to succeed?

During the course of a project, it may be necessary to change or re-evaluate a project's goals. Oral historians may discover that some of the original objectives are impractical or that new research possibilities open up with the collection of new information. In the end an oral history project will be not only be judged by the substance of the information it collected, but also by the significance of the goals it set.

2.2 Conduct background research

A sensible oral historian will not rush to the field with a voice recorder and immediately begin to record oral interviews. One must first acquire as much background information as possible. The oral historian may have come across his topic in a secondary work or a primary archival source or he/she might be trying to fit it into a larger research project. Whatever the case may be, the oral historian can only begin to understand whether his/her idea is both worthwhile and practical if he/she reads as much relevant literature available.

An oral historian who does not have a firm grasp of the existing sources on his/her chosen topic will not be able to bring his/her own research to successful conclusion. The oral historian may even repeat work that has already been done. A problem that the oral historian should consider is the fact that for many topics little or no direct historical evidence exists, so that the oral historian may find it extremely difficult to test or verify any oral data he/she collects. Constantly balancing, contextualising, and comparing sources (primary or secondary) is the only way an oral historian can hope to achieve a synthesis that will stand the test of time and criticism.

Another important reason for doing background research in advance is to acquaint oneself with foreign customs and norms, especially if the oral historian intends to do field work in a different country. Many cultures have their specific dos and don'ts and as an outsider the oral historian needs to be aware of them. In the African context there are various customs that should be respected, otherwise the interviewer may end up with much less information he/she anticipated to gain from the interview.

2.3 Determine the scope/parameters of the project

When the oral historian identifies the objectives of his/her project as well as the end result, he/she wishes to achieve, the scope of the project must be carefully considered. It is important not to be too ambitious by targeting too many interviewees. If the oral historian plans to interview large numbers of people, he/she may start with a pilot project that targets only a small number of interviewees. After completing the pilot project, the oral historian will be able to determine the scope and parameters of his proposed project more accurately. It will also be possible to refine and adapt the chosen methodology and maybe narrow the original scope of the project down to a specific geographical area or subject.

2.4 Balance objectives with resources

It is important to balance objectives with resources as far as is practically possible. Limited resources can frustrate ambitious objectives and many past projects have ended with little to show for their efforts except boxes of unidentified and unprocessed recordings. It is also possible that well-intentioned projects may be stretched too thin. Trying to interview too many candidates in a too short period of time may produce superficial interviews.

Part of balancing objectives with resources is the correct budgeting for your project. The two main costs that you have to consider are the equipment required and administration of the project. As far as equipment is concerned, adequate voice

recorders, dictaphones and stationary will have to be provided. If you are planning a major project, you will probably need to enrol the services of additional interviewers, transcribers and translators. Also consider the amount of time it takes to produce a recorded and transcribed interview.

2.5 Identify interviewees

For a start, the background research of the subject will identify those who were involved in specific historical events. The next step is to contact relevant family members, veteran organisations, community and political leaders. It is sometimes also useful to consult professional directories, phone books, pension lists and other written references. Possible candidates from particular groups or communities can also be found by advertising in local newspapers, on radio stations, in the newsletters of companies, trade unions, churches and civic organisations. Be aware that mass appeals run the risk of stimulating mass responses, overwhelming the project with possible candidates. This is especially a problem when people are offered monetary compensation for their participation. Instead of disappointing people by not interviewing them, utilise informal networks of local informants before going public through the media.

In the African context it is best to work through interest groups, community leaders and sometimes political leaders to identify possible candidates. In many cases possible candidates belonging to interest groups will not be willing to participate in an oral history project if the relevant leader has not given 'permission' to do so. The leader will in most cases also provide references of other possible candidates that may be approached by the interviewer. Just be aware that prior 'permission' from specific influential leaders might intimidate certain candidates to be less frank during their interviews.

Finally, aim to select interviewees who will be able and willing to provide information you are looking for. Interviewees may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical processes, they have special knowledge, or they occupy a unique position in an historical event, movement or institution.

2.6 Compile questionnaire(s)

It is seldom wise to conduct an interview without a prepared questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire is to structure and guide the interview so that the most meaningful information can be collected from the interviewee. When drafting a questionnaire include questions that are specifically related to your research subject. Apart from focusing your questions on your research subject, it is also important to structure the questionnaire in a logical manner. In this way you will be able to guide your interviewee through the interview and it will also help him or her to organise his or her thoughts.

The following aspects of drafting a questionnaire should be taken into consideration when drafting a questionnaire:

1) Layers of a questionnaire

Layering your questionnaire in a chronological fashion helps both the interviewer and the interviewee to progress through the interview in a logical and orderly fashion. It also assures the interviewee that the interviewer is prepared for the interview and that he or she has done some homework.

A questionnaire usually consists of the following layers: *introduction*, *questions* and *format*.

a) Introduction

Start the interview with a short explanation of the purpose of the interview. By doing this you convince the interviewee that his/her personal opinions are important and that his/her answers will be treated as confidential. The purpose of the introduction is to make the interviewee feel at ease and willing to provide you with honest answers.

b) Questions

There are two types of questions that may be used in a questionnaire, namely *closed* and *open-ended questions*. Closed questions are asked in a specific order to obtain specific facts or information. In other words, closed questions are restricted to limited, mostly short responses. An example of a closed question is: *How many years have you lived in Bloemfontein?* Open-ended questions, on the other hand, may have a variety of answers and the answers may be long or short, depending on the interviewee. It allows the interviewee more freedom to formulate the answer according to his or her liking and also an opportunity to elaborate. An example of an open-ended question is: *How did you feel when you voted for the first time in your life?*

A combination of both closed and open-ended questions are recommended for most questionnaires. A combination of the two types of questions will provide you with facts as well as opinions related to issues surrounding your research subject.

The wording of the questions is also important. All questions should be clear and easily understandable. Avoid words that are ambiguous, words with multiple meaning, words that are culturally defined, words not suitable for the interviewee's social or educational background, words with complex meanings or words that are politically laden. The way in which the questions are structured and worded will determine the kind of response from the interviewee. It is important to view and formulate the questions from the point of view of the interviewee and not the interviewer. In case of doubt ask the opinion of a colleague or pretend that you are the interviewee.

It is difficult to exactly state what a good and what a bad question is, but the following types of questions must be avoided: questions that obscure or distort the communication between the interviewee and the interviewer, questions that cause the answers not to be put across clearly and understandably and also questions that are offensive and insensitive.

c) Format

The structure of the questionnaire will determine the flow of the interview. Most interviews have to be completed in a limited period of time and therefore it is important to structure the questionnaire in such a way as to make sure all the important questions have been asked. For this reason, it is wise to start with the most important and crucial questions or at least ask them during the first half an hour of the interview. During an interview time runs out very quickly and you may end up not having asked some very important questions when you leave them for last.

You have to decide on the structure of the questionnaire by considering the following three types of questionnaires: *structured*, *semi-structured* or *unstructured questionnaires*.

A structured questionnaire is one in which the interviewer expects simple "yes" or "no" answers or very specific answers to direct and specific questions. An example of a structured questionnaire is the type used in census surveys. The following two questions are examples of questions that may be used in a structured questionnaire: *Are you married?* or *Are you a South African citizen?*

A semi-structured questionnaire is one where the interviewer strikes a balance between the research objective and the freedom of thought on the part of the interviewee. This is the recommended type of questionnaire because it provides the interviewee with the desired answers but at the same time allows the interviewee some freedom of expression. An example of a question that may be used in a semi-structured questionnaire is: *How did you experience your prison years?*

An unstructured questionnaire is mainly used in in-depth interviewing or group discussions. This type of questionnaire allows for probing when the interviewer is not sure what type of responses to expect from the interviewee. An unstructured questionnaire also allows the interviewee much freedom to provide opinions on a variety of issues related to the main topic. It is, however, difficult for the interviewee to be in control of the interview when using this type of questionnaire. An example of a question that may be used in an unstructured questionnaire is: *Tell me about your experiences as an anti-apartheid activist.*

It is also important to consider the order of the questions when you compile a questionnaire. It is always advisable to group your questions according to main topics and those topics may also be subdivided. These topics must also relate to the logical sequence of the interviewee's life or specific life experiences. Within any given topic of the questionnaire always start with the relatively easy, mostly closed questions, and then progress towards the more open-ended ones. In this way the interviewee is given time to think about specific experiences and it also builds confidence on the part of the interviewee.

2) Questionnaire checklist

Before starting with the actual interviews, it is advisable to assess and evaluate your proposed questionnaire to make sure the questions are clear and specific. It is important to make sure that your questionnaire will provide you with the information

you want. The following questionnaire checklist, compiled by James Worthington and Philippe Denis of the University of Natal, may be used to determine the effectiveness of your questionnaire:

1) **Does the question ask for one piece of information or many?**

It is possible that the question asks for too much information. Rephrase the question to be more focussed.

2) **Is the question two questions in one?**

The question may be divided into two separate questions.

3) **Does the question's wording imply a desired answer?**

Example: *Mr Johnson is a racist, isn't he?* Rephrase: *How would you describe Mr Johnson's attitude towards other races?*

4) **Are any of the question's words emotionally loaded?**

Example: *How did you experience the racist apartheid regime?* Rephrase: *How did you experience the National Party government?*

5) **Is the question vaguely defined?**

Example: *What happened at the township near Vereeniging in 1960?* Rephrase: *What happened at Sharpeville near Vereeniging in 1960?*

6) **Does any of the question's words have double meaning that may cause misunderstanding?**

Example: *Have you ever been to the town of Middelburg?* Rephrase: *Have you ever been to the town of Middelburg in Mpumalanga?*

7) **Does the question use abbreviations or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to the interviewee?**

Example: *Were you involved in the UDF?* Rephrase: *Were you involved in the United Democratic Front?*

In conclusion it must be stated that a well-prepared questionnaire is an important key to a successful interview. The better the questions are formulated, the better the interviewee's responses to them.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why is it advisable to properly plan an oral history project?
- What does ‘background research’ involve?
- How will you identify possible candidates for interviewing?
- What do you need to consider when you work in an African context?
- What is the difference between a closed and open-ended question?

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THE INTERVIEW

1. Background

After you have finalised your questionnaire and identified possible candidates you would like to interview, the next step is to arrange and plan for the actual interview. This is an important part of the collection process because it will help you to be properly prepared for the interview. At the same time, you must be aware of the fact that no matter how well you prepare yourself, the most outstanding characteristic of oral interviewing is its *unpredictability*. Oral historians need to deal with living sources and with a pertinent past, and this guarantees that they cannot fully anticipate what might happen.

During this lecture we will look at the pre-interview contact with the interviewee, the interview itself, suggested interviewing techniques, the *Gift and Release Agreement*, the *Field Work Report* and, finally, the post-interview contact with the interviewee.

2. Pre-interview contact

Before you conduct the actual interview, always contact the interviewee telephonically or pay him/her a visit in order to prepare the person for the interview and clear important points out with him/her. During your first conversation with the interviewee make sure you provide him/her with the following crucial information:

- Properly introduce yourself and explain clearly the reason why you are making contact with him/her;
- Clarify the exact purpose of the interview;
- Inform the interviewee how you have gotten hold of him/her and why you have selected him/her as a possible interviewee;
- State how much time you will need for the interview;
- Inform the interviewee of the nature of the interview so that he/she knows what to expect, e.g., the voice recorder, camera, etc.
- Ask the interviewee if he/she requires any other person, e.g., a spouse, to be present at the interview;
- Discuss with the interviewee the issue of confidentiality of his/her recorded information. Explain exactly what will be done with the recording and transcription and describe the Gift and Release Agreement that the interviewee will be asked to sign;
- Agree with the interviewee on a suitable venue, date and time for the interview;
- Supply the interviewee with your contact details in case he/she needs to contact you;
- Make sure you have the necessary equipment for the interview: questionnaire, 1 x voice recorder or dictaphone, notebook and pen and a camera with film. Also take some spare batteries for the voice recorder and/or an extension cord.

3. The interview

3.1 Before the interview

Before conducting an interview, it is important to be aware of the basic protocol for conducting interviews. The aim of this protocol is 1) the protection of the interviewee and 2) the protection of the project itself. According to James Worthington and Philippe Denis of the University of Natal, it is in the first place a matter of respecting the memories and information that the interviewee will impart on the interviewer and secondly a matter of maintaining the integrity of the project as such. The following basic points should be noted:

- Before starting with the interview, a *Gift and Release Agreement* should be completed by the interviewee and also signed by the interviewer. Apart from containing the basic personal detail of the interviewee, this agreement also implies that the interviewee transfers to the interviewer his/her title, interest, and copyright to the interview. Should the interviewer use the interview material (recorded interview and transcription) for publication, the interviewee is not entitled to any financial gain from the proceeds of the publication. This arrangement, however, in no way restricts the interviewee from sharing the recorded information with others. In addition, the interviewee may decide whether the interview material should have the status of restricted or unrestricted. **In this regard, please refer to the example of the Gift and Release Agreement.**

- Make sure the interviewee fully understands *the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it*;

- If applicable, inform the interviewee that the recorded version of the interview as well as a transcription will be *made available for research by members of the public*.

As part of your last-minute preparations for the interview, also take note of the following:

- Always arrive on time for the interview;
- Dress properly and appropriately;
- Conduct the interview in a quiet place. When setting up, make sure that background noises, e.g., traffic and barking dogs, will be kept to a minimum. Also ask interviewee to inform other members of the household not to interrupt the interview. Background noises, even a ticking clock, may seriously affect the quality of the recording;
- Ensure comfortable seating for you as well as for the interviewee. Sometimes sitting at a table works best;
- Make sure the voice recorder or dictaphone is placed in such a way that it does not have an intimidating presence for the interviewee. Let it be part of the furniture;
- Make sure there is nothing that the interviewee could fiddle with during the course of the interview. Nervous interviewees sometimes start playing with a pencil or piece of paper during the interview. These actions may cause disturbing noises that could affect the quality of the recording;

- After completing your short informal conversation with the interviewee, start with the interview as soon as possible so as to utilise the available time to the maximum.

3.2 During the interview

The most important point to remember is to conduct the interview in such a way that the interviewee experiences it as *a conversation and not an interrogation*. At the same time, it must be stressed that the interviewee and not the interviewer must do most of the talking. Also take note of the following practical points:

- Start each recording with a statement of who, what, when and where you are interviewing. For example: "This is an interview with Mr Clive Johnson. The interview was conducted by Mr Derek du Bruyn of the National Museum on the third of August 2007 at Mr Johnson's house in Bloemfontein". It is necessary to record this information in case the recording's written information gets lost;
- Start the actual interview on a positive note and be encouraging throughout the interview;
- Use an informal conversation-type interview style;
- Talk slowly and express all words clearly so that you do not have to repeat questions;
- Listen actively and intently;
- Speak one at a time. If the interviewee interrupts you while asking a question allow him/her to finish first;
- Allow silence. Give the interviewee enough time to think;
- Ask one question at a time;
- Make notes of everything you would like to clarify with the interviewee after the interview;
- If necessary, follow up all questions thoroughly before moving to the next;
- Ask more probing questions later during the interview;
- Avoid stereotyped or generalising comments during interview. Instead, react with appropriate gestures, e.g., nodding your head;
- Avoid interrupting the interviewee. Only interrupt where necessary for more clarity or when the interviewee is giving too much irrelevant detail;
- Be sensitive to the interviewee's body language, e.g., tiredness or unease;
- If the interviewee gets emotional, interrupts the interview for a couple of minutes before starting again. Be aware of and sensitive to the psychological forces at work during the interview;
- Limit the interview to about one to two hours in length, depending on the fatigue levels of your interviewee;
- Before closing the interview, ask the interviewee whether he/she would like to add to or clarify anything he/she has said;
- End the interview on a friendly and positive note.

3.3 After the interview

After the interview, wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not rush away as this may appear to be a sign of disrespect to the interviewee. Also avoid any controversial subjects, because it may harm your relationship with the interviewee. If necessary, ask the interviewee whether he/she would be available for a follow-up interview.

Sometimes follow-up interviews may be necessary to clarify certain statements the interviewee has made or to get more detail. Interviewing an interviewee more than once is also a means to verify the information provided by the interviewee.

4. The Field Work Report

After completing the interview, a *Field Work Report* must be completed by the interviewer. The purpose of the Field Work Report is to contextualise the interview. It also helps you to analyse the interview and verify the facts. Aspects that receive attention are the attitudes of the interviewee before, during and after the interview, any movements, or interruptions of other people during the interview, as well as any comments made by the interviewee after the interview. This report should preferably be completed within two days after the interview in order to ensure the accuracy of information. The Field Work Report should be filed together with the Gift and Release Agreement and the transcription. Together these documents constitute the complete body of information gathered during the interview process. **In this regard, please refer to the example of the Field Work Report**.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- What agreement form should be completed by the interviewer and the interviewee before the start of an interview?
- What forms part of your last-minute preparations for an interview?
- What will you do when the interviewee starts to cry?
- What will you do when the interviewee provides you with too much detail?
- What form should be completed by the interviewer after completion of an interview?

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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWING IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

1. Background

Oral history plays a crucial and very unique role in African communities. Not only does it *address those aspects of African history that are not documented*, but it also *carries with it a significant part of the identity of Africans*.[177] For Africans oral history has a different meaning than it has for Europeans, because it goes beyond being a form or version of history. For Africans oral history also provides *a sense of having a voice, a certain position in society, a history and roots*.

Interviewing people from an African background differs from interviewing Westerners. Interviewers, specifically those from a Western[178] background, need to be aware of the fact that the African culture has its own values, norms and customs that to a greater or lesser degree determine and guide behaviour and thinking. The Western interviewer, therefore, needs to be aware of and respect and acknowledge the culture, customs, and norms of the person to be interviewed. A crucial argument that relates to the African concept of 'ubuntu'[179] is the fact that *Africans consider the story of an individual to belong to the community of which the individual is a member and not to the individual alone*. This idea stands in contrast to the Western focus on individuality and the argument that a person's story belongs to the individual.

It is also important for the Western interviewer to distinguish between traditional and so-called 'Westernised' Africans, because in the case of the latter certain customs may have become watered down or even vanished completely. In most cases the more traditional Africans live in rural areas while the 'Westernised' Africans live mostly in urban areas. This is also applicable to South Africa. It should also be considered that a blend of 'Western' and African beliefs and value systems[180] may be a trend, specifically in many South African townships.

An interviewer who intends to conduct oral history interviews in an African community should be aware of the following factors that will not only influence, but in some cases determine the outcome of an interview. The determining factors include: *age, gender, race and ethnicity, language and communication, body language and gestures, sensitive issues, the African concept of time, historical events and chronology, leaders and influential people, traditional beliefs, mythology and folktales, and political attitudes*.[181]

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[177] The term 'African' refers to a person from African origin and in this context specifically a black person.

[178] The term 'Western' refers to a person from European origin and in this context specifically a white person.

[179] Roughly translated the term 'ubuntu' means 'a person is a person through other people'.

[180] Also known as inter-cultural influencing and acculturation. Culture change and adaptation forms part of this process.

[181] Please note that this lecture by no means attempts to be a comprehensive summary of all the factors that may influence interviewing in the African context. It is expected of the student to engage in additional reading on the subject.

2. Factors that may influence interviewing in the African context

a) Age

In traditional African communities the age of a person still determines his/her status in society. In all cases the interviewer should treat elderly interviewees with the *necessary respect and dignity*. Usually, the interviewer will start interviewing elderly people first as they most likely possess the information the interviewer wants. In some traditional African societies, e.g., in West Africa, some elderly are also the *designated or self-appointed historians* of a specific tribe, village or community. The interviewer should be aware of this and at all times approach these court historians, also called *griots*, with respect.

b) Gender

The gender of both the interviewer and the interviewee may determine the outcome of an interview. In the African context *gender attitudes and prejudices are either culturally produced or the result of a specific religion or belief system, e.g., Islam, or the result of both*. Therefore, these attitudes should not be considered as sexist as such.

In most African societies, even those that are so-called 'Westernised', women still occupy a lower status in society than men. In male-dominated societies, e.g., South Africa, women are expected to behave subordinately to men. As a result, many African women, single or married, *will feel inhibited when interviewed by a male person*. Married women, particularly those from strong patriarchal societies, *usually affirm their husbands' opinions about issues*. Therefore, it is not advisable to interview a wife in the presence of her husband unless the husband requests it.

Depending on the topic of research and the nature of the questions to be asked, *it is often better to have interviewees being interviewed by interviewees of the same sex*. Male interviewees will most often be more open to share information about sensitive issues, e.g., initiation rituals, sexuality and polygamy with a male interviewer than they would be with a female interviewer. By the same token, female interviewees will also be more comfortable with female interviewers.

c) Race and ethnicity

As is the case with gender, the issue of race is still a sensitive one in most African societies, particularly those who were the *victims of some or other form of colonialism and institutionalised racism*. This is certainly the case in most Southern African countries including South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. Depending on the nature and focus of the project, white interviewers should be aware of the fact that their skin colour may influence the course and outcome of an interview with an African. There still exists a measure of mistrust among people of different race groups and ignoring it will be unwise.

In some African societies ethnicity may also play a role in the interviewing process. *Ethnic tensions are common throughout Africa* and it is also applicable to South Africa. Historical conscience, ethnic pride and mistrust are all factors that may negatively influence an interview involving persons of different ethnic backgrounds. It is advisable

for the interviewer to be aware of such tensions and how it may determine the outcome of an interview.

d) Language and communication

Language forms one of the corner stones of any culture and this is also true for the African culture. *Africans express themselves through their languages in different ways*. This includes the various modes of transmission of messages, e.g., storytelling, reminiscence, commentaries and verbal art. Verbal art includes poetry, songs, proverbs and tales. In the African context language is much more than a mere means of communication and this emphasises the importance of oral tradition in the African culture. This argument, for example, may be illustrated by the way Africans approach storytelling. Stories are not considered fixed entities and, therefore, *stories may be recreated and adapted each time they are told*. Stories then become more than just stories, because they represent attempts to relate past experience to create meaning in the present context.

Generally, it is *preferable that an interviewee should be interviewed in the language of choice, which is usually the person's mother tongue*. People express themselves better in their first language. An important aspect of African languages is the question of who is speaking: is it the informant or the language? Interviewees who are interviewed in a second language remain mere informants, but when they speak in their first language, they are empowered to clearly express themselves, their opinions and their feelings in their own unique way. Consequently, the quality of information gained from the interview will be much better. For research and accessibility purposes it is advisable to translate interviews conducted in indigenous languages into English.

e) Body language and gestures

Both the interviewer and the interviewee's *body language may influence an interview either positively or negatively*. The issue of eye contact is particularly important because it may cause misunderstanding between the interviewer and interviewee. In many African cultures it is still customary for Africans, especially females and children, to avoid eye contact with foreigners or members of other race groups. In most cases this avoidance of eye contact should be seen as a sign of respect towards the other party.

The *use of mild gestures by the interviewer should be encouraged as a form of non-verbal communication* because it allows the interviewer to effectively communicate with the interviewee by doing the least amount of talking. It should be noted, however, that the use of certain hand gestures may be interpreted by the interviewee as offensive. The pointing of fingers and the use of certain hand signs may negatively influence an interview.

f) Sensitive issues

In some African cultures it is advisable for the interviewer to be *aware of sensitive issues that should either be avoided or approached with sensitivity during an interview*. These issues include pregnancy, circumcision, initiation rituals, death of a spouse and divorce. Other sensitive issues, e.g., personal failure and misfortune, are explained in

relation to the spirit world. When dealing with sensitive issues and more specifically when the interviewee shares his/her opinion about it, the information should be treated as confidential. It is always advisable for the interviewer to ask the interviewee which information should be treated as such. This should be done shortly after completion of the interview and also indicated in the release or contract form.

g) African concept of time

Another factor that may influence an interview is the African concept of time because it differs significantly from the Western concept. *Whereas the Western time concept may be described as linear, the African concept may be described as cyclical*. This means that African time is not so much about minute's ticking off and hours passing, but it is rather measured in terms of sunrise to sunset and structured according to the activities of the day. As a result, the interviewer should be prepared for interviewees arriving late for interview appointments. Interviewees arriving late should not be seen as a sign of disrespect, but rather as the result of a different understanding of time. As a rule the time scheduled for the interview should be regarded as a guide and not something that is cast in stone.

h) Historical events and chronology

An interviewer working in the African context must be aware of local history, because in most African cultures *certain crucial events play a defining role in community members' historical conscience and social memory*. These events have become an integral part of communities' oral tradition and stories about these events are being passed on from one generation to the next. It is important for the interviewer to *understand how especially elderly Africans interpret and remember the past*. While the Western concept of the past is focused on a specific day and date on the historical timeline, Africans focus more on the event itself rather than on the day it happened. In the African context most historical incidents are linked to certain key events in history and are also remembered in relation to that key event.

Prominent historical events like the Second World War (1939-1945), the various colonial and liberation wars fought on the African continent, the decolonisation of Africa (Uhuru), the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the Soweto uprisings of 1976, to name a few, have shaped Africans' historical perspective. Interviewees may, for example, use certain prominent events to indicate when their children were born or when somebody died. They may, for example, refer to one child who was born "before the war" and the other one who was born "after the war". With the necessary historical background an informed interviewer should be able to accurately *interpret such references and determine the period and date*.

i) Leaders and influential people

In the past many oral history projects failed simply because interviewers have ignored or disrespected the leaders and other respected people of a specific community. In the African context leaders and influential people include kings and members of royal families, tribal chiefs, traditional leaders, spiritual leaders, sangomas, praise singers (imbongi), cultural leaders (indunas) and even chairpersons of associations and interest groups, e.g., military veteran's organisations. It is crucial for an interviewer to

approach the relevant leader(s) of a community or tribe first before starting to interview the community members. The relevant leaders should be informed of the purpose and scope of the project, the equipment to be used, as well as how the oral information will be used eventually. It is also important to note that certain traditional leaders expect to be approached and treated according to a specific set of protocols.

j) Traditional beliefs

Religion and the spirit world play an important role in the African culture and greatly define Africans' world view. Therefore, the interviewer should be acquainted with the relevant traditional religions and belief systems. A prominent characteristic of the African spirit world is *a strong belief in the ancestors and ancestral spirits*. Many Africans believe in the continuity of life, i.e., the belief that the ancestors are still present in the present life in the form of spirits. As a result, an interviewee may refer to his/her ancestors as if they are still alive. Furthermore, the belief in ancestral spirits underlies a tendency among some Africans to characterise themselves as part of a story or event even if they have not experienced it themselves. This may confuse the interviewer who is not able to discern whether the interviewee is talking of the living or the dead. By asking probing questions, comparing interviews and by conducting follow-up interviews the interviewer may be able to avoid misunderstanding.

k) Mythology and folktales

In almost all African cultures oral history includes mythology and folktales. According to the well-known African cultural historian, Credo Mutwa, myths, folktales and legends reveal the connections between human beings and the natural world by reminding humans of the spiritual origin of all things. Africans also believe that myths, folktales, and legends provide answers to the fundamental questions of life and death. To grasp this reality, *the interviewer must view myths and folktales as part of the history of the imagination: stories from the past that are based on fact but also include imaginary aspects that give the story a meaning or a lesson*. Therefore, oral testimonies may often include aspects of mythology, folktale, and legend. According to oral historians Philippe Denis and James Worthington the interviewee might use mythology and folktales to give his/her story a plot and also to structure the story. Mythology and folktales also enable the interviewee to link his/her story to the stories of other community members.

l) Politics and political attitudes

Although interviewers working in the African context must be aware of the relevant political systems and structures, it is political attitudes, rather, and not political systems that may influence interviews. Because of Africa's colonial past, racial attitudes have greatly shaped the continent's history, and this is certainly also the case in South Africa. *Most Africans have experienced some or other form of racial prejudice and the Western interviewer must be aware of it*. In the South African context racism caused a degree of mistrust between races that still persists today. Therefore, when interviewing in the African context it is important to remember that skin colour as well as language and culture carry specific political connotations related to class and power that will certainly influence an oral history interview.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Will you consider age an important factor when identifying possible candidates for interviews?
- Would you say it is better to use an interpreter than interviewing a person in his/her second language?
- How would you approach the leader(s) of a community if you want to start an oral history project focused on the members of that community?
- How will you deal with the issue of racial prejudice in an interview?

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THE TRANSCRIPTION

1. Background

Transcribing an interview is the first crucial step in the writing and presentation of recorded history. Due to the absence of a transcription, many oral history recordings are effectively inaccessible to the public. This is not only because of a general lack of facilities for listening to recordings, but also because most people find a written version of the recording more accessible than the recording itself. Very few researchers ask to listen to the recordings if transcriptions are available, because eyes can read easier than ears can hear.

Unfortunately, transcribing an interview is very time-consuming. It takes at least five to six hours, and for a recording with difficult speech up to twice as long, for each hour recorded. Editing the transcriptions also take additional time. But, unless the recording is fully transcribed, anybody but the person who made the recording will be severely hampered in using it effectively.

2. To edit or not

When transcribing an interview, one must be as accurate as possible, taking special note of sentence construction, cultural references, phrases and other aspects of the interview and to try to portray these accurately. *The general aim should be to render the original recording into written text as accurately as possible*. *At the same time the transcription should be accessible, or readable, for the researcher*. The issue of editing a transcription has become quite controversial and today there are diverse opinions on this subject. There are three possibilities:

- The first is a *fully edited*, condensed transcription, cutting out pauses and distracting hesitations in the interest of readability. This type of transcription is usually the most suitable for publication purposes, but less suitable for detailed historical research.

- The second option is to convey the complexity of the spoken word on paper by using intonation, emphasis, pauses and other elaborate forms of punctuation. This approach, which aims for *no editing*, attempts to convey orality into print as accurately as possible. Unfortunately, this approach with its elaborate punctuation and notation systems creates texts that are exceptionally difficult to read.

- The third option, which may be seen as a compromise between the other two possibilities, is a complete transcription that includes everything, but leaves out “ums” and “ahs” and fumbling for words. This option, which aims for *partial editing*, is advocated by most professional oral historians.

3. Partial editing

With partial editing the aim is to render an accurate as possible version of the recorded interview, but at the same time consider the readability of the text. In order to achieve this, the following points should be noted:

- As already mentioned, leave out all “ums” and “ahs” and fumbling of words. Usually, these utterances do not convey meaning, but if they do keep them;

- Preferably include all hesitations and stop-gaps like “you know” or “see”;

- The grammar and sentence construction should be left the way it was spoken. Do not try to correct these mistakes, because you may miss out on important tones or the root of what the person is trying to say. Indicate such mistakes by using [sic];

- If a word or a phrase is inaudible, it should be indicated in the text between square brackets e.g., “Peter said he visited the city of [unclear speech] after he came out of jail”. Unclear speech may also be indicated by a question mark in brackets, e.g. “I finished school in 1975, after which I left for [?]”;

- You may also find the interviewee used phrases or references which may not be exactly understood by the outside reader, because of the specific cultural context in which they were used. In this case the transcriber may explain or clarify these by putting an explanation between brackets after the phrase, e.g. “My comrade was murdered because of the information provided to the police by an *impimpi* [police informant]”. The same should also be done with acronyms or to clarify names of people and places, e.g. “My father knew [Nelson] Mandela personally” or “As a child I lived in Middelburg [Mpumalanga Province]”;

- Use punctuation marks where necessary. Break up unnecessary long sentences and use commas and full stops to make the text readable.

4. To translate or not

The ideal is to interview a person in his/her mother tongue, which in many cases is not English. In a country like South Africa, it is highly likely that a person might prefer to be interviewed in an indigenous language. As far as is practically possible should this wish be respected. In order to make the recorded information as widely accessible as possible it is advisable to have the recording first transcribed into the original language and then translated into English. When deciding whether to translate or not consider the following questions:

- Who is to benefit from the project?
- How is the material to be used?
- What audience is targeted?

The answers to these questions will determine whether a transcription should be translated or not. Unfortunately, apart from it being a time-consuming effort, translation inevitably leads to losing some of the original meaning of the text.

5. The structure of the transcript

The format and lay-out of the transcription will also determine its accessibility. It is important to decide on a specific lay-out and stick to it for all the transcriptions. Take note of the following points:

- Create a *cover page* for the transcription containing the following information: a) name of project, b) name of interviewee, c) name of interviewer, d) venue of the interview, and e) date of the interview. The National Museum uses the prescribed NAROS form as the cover sheet. The NAROS form will be dealt with later on;

- The next step is the lay-out of the transcription itself, starting with an *explanatory note* at the top of the first page. The purpose of this note is to explain editing and clarification methods, e.g. (The interview was conducted by Derek du Bruyn with Ms MI Anderson at the National Museum, Bloemfontein, on 26 April 2007. Please note the following: **Du Bruyn:** interviewer; **Anderson:** interviewee. Unclear/inaudible speech is indicated by a question mark [?]. [Sic] in most cases indicates a grammar mistake made by interviewee. Text in brackets [ ] is added for clarity.)

- Questions and answers need not to be numbered. Start each question and answer with the person's surname, e.g.:

  Du Bruyn: What is your name?

  Anderson: My name is Mollie Anderson.

  Du Bruyn: Where were you born?

  Anderson: I was born in Johannesburg.

6. Other important points to remember

In conclusion, also take note of the following:

- The interviewer is the preferred person to transcribe the interview;
- The interview should be transcribed as soon as possible after the interview was conducted;
- In case of uncertainty regarding the spelling of names, a copy of the transcription may be provided to the interviewee to correct them;
- Remember to proof-read the transcription carefully before making it available for research.

7. NAROS

The National Register of Oral Sources (NAROS) was established in terms of section 3 (f) of the National Archives of South Africa Act (no. 43 of 1996) as a computerised database for all oral sources created by the various state archives services as well as other institutions. All relevant information regarding each oral history recording is filled out in the prescribed NAROS form and also made available on the computerised database. Please refer to the example of the NAROS form for the detailed layout.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- When transcribing an interview what should you aim for?
- What type of editing is preferred?
- How will you indicate in the transcription the grammar and sentence construction mistakes made by the interviewee?
- Who is supposed to transcribe an interview?
- What is the NAROS?

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ORAL HISTORY AND COMMUNITY HISTORY

1. Background

Usually, the lives of society's ordinary citizens, the so-called 'ordinary people', are not the focus of historical research projects. These people, e.g., factory workers and domestic servants, seldom attract attention and therefore they escape the scrutiny of most historians. This situation is changing because a new generation of historians has emerged, and they have made the life histories of ordinary people their study focus. This is also happening in South Africa – a country where the colonial and apartheid governments of the past have mostly ignored the stories of the working classes. This was done not only for political and ideological reasons, but partly also because of general ignorance about the role of the working class in shaping history.

As a direct result of the mentioned development, history has become a more inclusive discipline by exploring new methodologies and sources. One example of this trend is the emphasis on **oral history** as a source for researching and writing **community history**. Community history is considered a sub-discipline of history and it has gained prominence and significance within the context of South Africa's post-apartheid social and political reality. Since South Africa's past is characterized by alienation and dispossession, there is a definite need for local communities to reclaim a sense of history and to take ownership of their past.

2. What is community history?

Community history, sometimes also called 'public history', may be broadly defined as *the combined life histories, stories, traditions, customs and experiences of the members of an identifiable entity*. Oral historian Valerie Yow describes it as "commissioned research in *special communities*".[182] A community history project that involves oral history usually refers to a project defined by space and includes interviews with people who live in a *specific geographic entity*. In this regard Graham Smith refers to the "public histories of the *specific geographic spaces* in which they are located".[183] A typical community history project focuses on the political and/or social and/or cultural history of a chosen community. In communities affected by colonialism and racial discrimination, e.g., communities in South Africa and other former colonies, issues like racial politics, alienation, dispossession and restitution also play an important role and these should be considered in community history projects.

The term 'community' may refer to the population of an entire town or it may refer to a suburb or township of a town. For example, in this regard may be referred to Batho township, which is an identifiable geographically bounded part of the greater Mangaung (Bloemfontein). Or one may even be more specific by focusing only on an area within Batho, e.g., Cape Stands or Four & Six. The so-called 'community' of a community history project will thus be determined by the parameters of the project's focus. It is always advisable to start with a relatively small community and then

[182] V. Yow, *Recording oral history: a guide for the humanities and social sciences* (Walnut Creek, 2005), p. 144.

[183] G. Smith, Toward a public oral history, *in* D.A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of oral history* (Oxford, 2011), p. 431.

gradually broaden the focus to include in larger area. It is also a good idea to first launch a pilot project and, depending on the response, settle on the size of the community on which you will focus.

3. Oral history as a source for community history

Although oral history is a potential source of information for any historical study, its value as a source for researching and writing community history is unequalled. Although oral history is widely considered an independent discipline in its own right, the community historian mostly uses it as a technique. As such oral history can make a unique contribution to our knowledge of a community's past. Because oral history was originally developed in response to the elite and academic history of the 19th and 20th centuries, it has a strong community-based tradition. It may be argued that oral history, because of its very nature and objectives, is positioned to serve ordinary members of society according to their own interests.

Oral history complements community history for a number of reasons. Firstly, oral history is a potentially dynamic tool in the hands of the community historian by *providing access to information that is not usually found in conventional historical sources* like newspapers and books. In this regard may be referred to the unique experiences of black communities during the apartheid era. *How did they experience forced removals? How did they experience the harassment by security police? How did they experience the opportunity to vote for the first time in their lives?* Answers to these and other questions are not normally found in written sources.

Another reason why oral history complements community history is because oral history *provides community historians with fresh perspectives* on the events and forces that have shaped community life and experiences over time. In this regard may be referred to the re-interpreting of certain key events of South African history, e.g., the Sharpeville shootings of 1960 and the Soweto uprisings of 1976. The official government records that contain information on the events provide a mostly subjective and slanted perspective. By interviewing eyewitnesses, however, alternative versions of what really happened may emerge.

Thirdly, the oral history approach also enables the historian to *identify inter-relationships between individuals, households and different communities* in a town or city. For example, the oral historian might want to investigate the relationship between the community of Batho and its neighbour Bochabela. Are there any historical feuds or incidents that affected relationships between communities? To determine this, the oral historian should venture beyond the mere recording and transcribing of oral testimonies. The oral historian should 'read between the lines' and develop an understanding of this type of history as both fact and fiction, both fantasy and reality.

4. Oral history and community history in practice

There are a number of ways for an oral historian to research a community's history and each approach greatly depends not only on the specific research focus and objectives, but also on the available sources. The importance of oral testimonies as the main source of information for community history research in the African context is undisputed. Much of what is considered community history lives in people's

memories. *On the African continent community history is primarily orally communicated history*. Therefore, a crucial aspect of the community history approach is the use of oral history as a research methodology or technique and oral testimonies as a source of information.

Because history is often not *what actually happened*, but rather *what is told about what happened*, oral testimonies are in many cases the primary, if not the only source for community history research. Oral sources are also valued for the unique perspectives and insights they provide on a community's past. While written sources tell what happened, oral sources tell *how people felt* about what happened, *how they reacted* to it and *how it affected* their lives. It is, however, also important to stress the importance of using all available information on a community's past. If written records are available, they should be used as a source. In this case the oral testimonies will either be used as *supplementary or complementary information*.[184]

Collecting oral testimonies is doable for most community historians, but the real challenge lies in interpreting and making sense of them. A community historian who is skilled in the oral history methodology will be able to not only contextualize the testimonies, but also identify certain connections. To contextualize the testimonies means to place the testimonies in the context of the political, economic, religious, and cultural processes and forces at work within a specific community. Therefore, it is important to *conduct proper background research* of the history of a specific community to *prepare* oneself not only for the interviews, but also to properly *interpret* the oral testimonies. Therefore, visits to the municipal and state archives, reference libraries and other information centres will be necessary.

In the end the success of a community history project depends on its practical implementation and therefore it requires a practical hands-on approach. Apart from being an active and creative task, oral history is essentially people-oriented, and the community historian needs the necessary *social skills* to interact and engage with community members. Oral testimonies belong to people and, unlike paper records, *people are unpredictable*. Interviewees are also emotional beings and, in order for the oral historian to be successful, *trusting relationships* between the oral historian and community members should be established. Once relationships are established the community members are more inclined to trust the oral historian with their stories.

5. Community history in South Africa

Although it was not completely ignored in the past, studying and writing community history is a fairly recent trend in South Africa. During the 1970s political forces and events, e.g., the Soweto unrests of 1976, prompted South African historians to re-assess the state of the country's historiography. There was a need to broaden the focus of historical research by including also the marginalized sectors of society. This resulted in a renewed appreciation of the value of oral and community histories. In this regard the pioneering and experimental work of the *History Workshop* at Wits University in Johannesburg must be mentioned. Historians and other social sciences academics, including Phil Bonner, Belinda Bozzoli and Leslie Witz, have explored and experimented with an alternative, bottom-up approach to history during the past three

[184] D. du Bruyn, Oral testimonies as a source of community history, with special reference to the Batho Project, Bloemfontein, *South African Journal of Cultural History* 24(2), November 2010, pp. 16-22.

decades. This stands in contrast to the traditional top-down approach. Oral history and community history have become the foci of research. Various studies on working-class communities were undertaken, resulting in various published community histories.

In more recent years, specifically post-1994, community history has become even more mainstream. This is mainly because of the huge gaps that still exist in South Africa's historical record. In South Africa community history has become mostly the history of the oppressed, disenfranchised and the powerless. Some social historians have also entered the realm of community history and various noteworthy publications have seen the light. In this regard may be referred to Hermann Giliomee's *Nog altyd hier gewees: die storie van 'n Stellenbosse gemeenskap* (Cape Town, 2007), Hilton Biscombe's *In ons bloed* (Stellenbosch, 2006) and Sean Field's *Lost communities, living memories: remembering forced removals in Cape Town* (Claremont, 2001). A number South African museums and archives have also launched a variety of community and oral history projects. An example of such a project is the **Batho Community History Project** launched by the National Museum, Bloemfontein. This project will be discussed as a case study during the next lecture.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Name one reason why oral history complements community history.
- Why are oral testimonies the main source of information for studying community history in Africa?
- Why is it important to conduct proper background research of a community's history before community members are interviewed?

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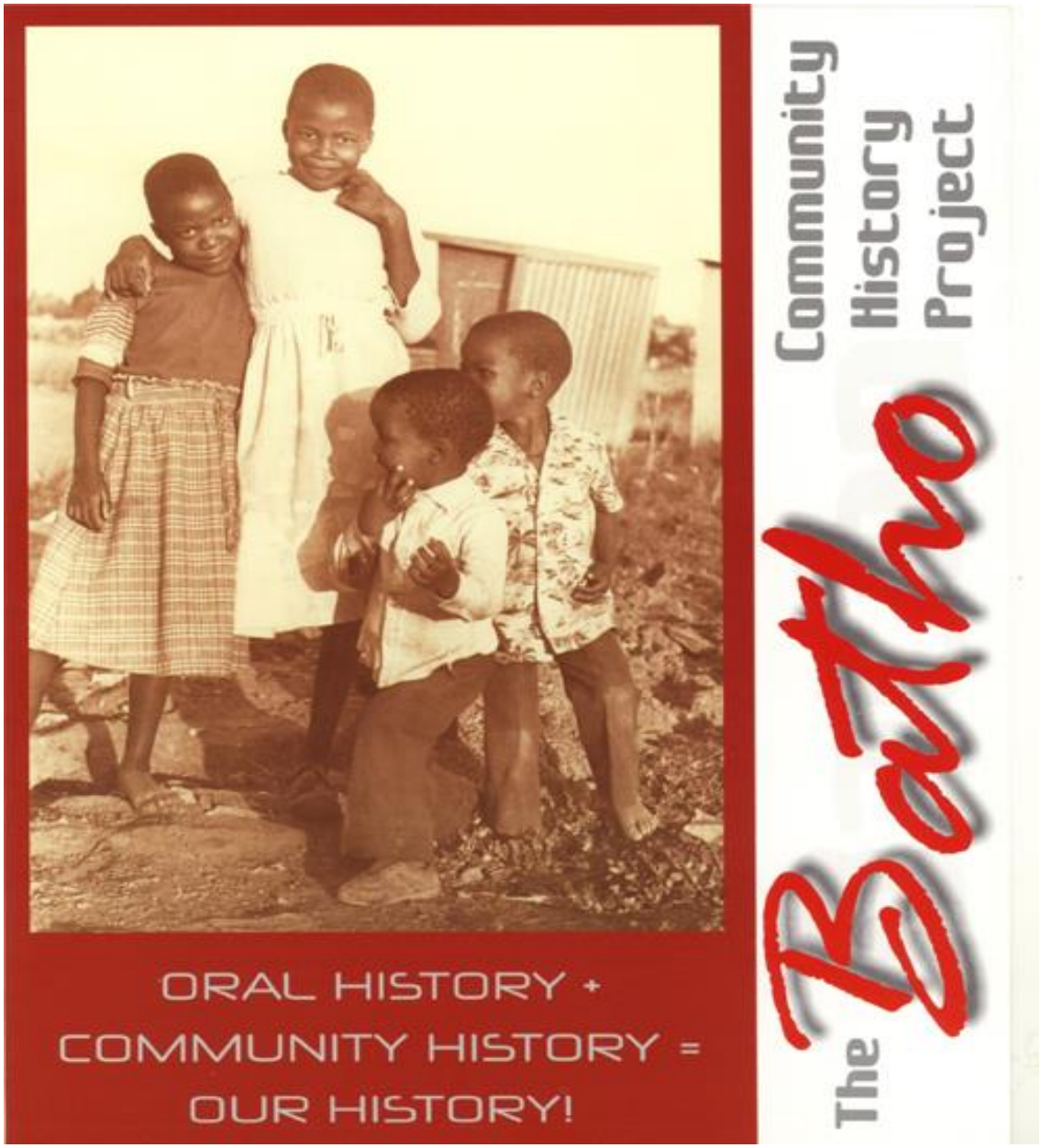
Study note: focus on part VI, chapter 29 of book.

CASE STUDY:

THE BATHO COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT



(Photograph: Free State Provincial Archives)

1. Background

During 2007 the National Museum in Bloemfontein launched the Batho Community History Project (hereafter the Batho Project) as a community-based oral history project. Aimed at collecting and researching the cultural, social, and political history of Bloemfontein's oldest existing township by means of oral testimony, this project has become not only an initiative to collect historical information, but also an effort to contribute to the development and uplifting of the Batho community.

2. Project purpose

The Batho Project was launched with a threefold purpose: 1) to collect information on the cultural, social, and political history of Batho, Mangaung[185] by means of oral history; 2) to record, transcribe and preserve information mainly for research, display and educational purposes; 3) to canvass photographs and artifacts of historical significance for exhibition purposes. The Batho Project focuses on the period 1918-1948, which covers the history of Batho since it was officially established until the year the National Party government came into power.

One of the main objectives of the Batho Project is to create a more complete historical record of Batho that is accessible not only to researchers, but also to members of the public. Another objective is to write about the history of the community, or aspects thereof, from the perspective of its residents. *The idea is to write community history in the true sense of the word, namely a combined effort by those who have testified, those who have told their stories, those who have shared their experiences, and those who have expressed what it means to be a member of the Batho community*.

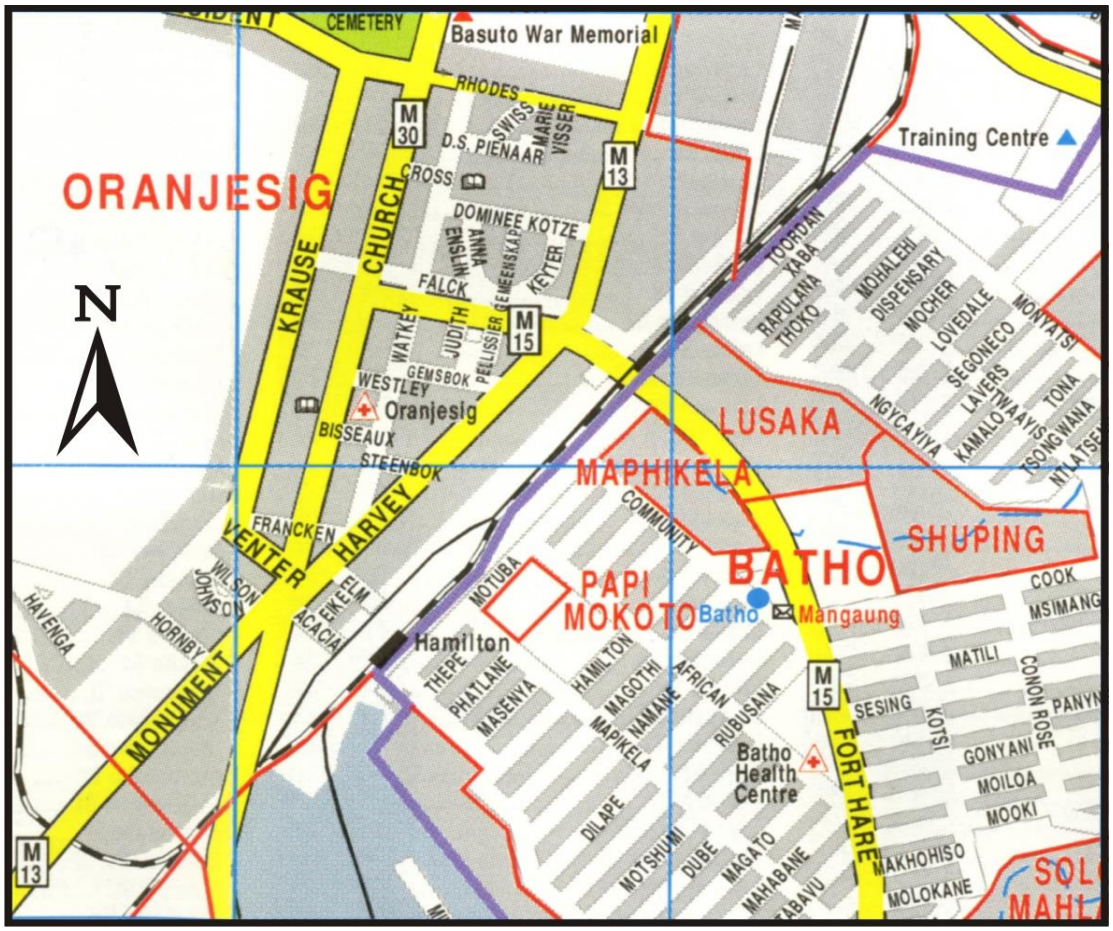
3. Historical background

The community of Batho was chosen as a research focus for various reasons. The first reason is Batho's historical importance as the oldest existing historically black township in Mangaung. Batho or Batho location[186] as it is also known by its residents, was developed between 1918 and 1924 as a new, formally planned but segregated residential area for black and coloured people. This happened after a decision was taken by the Bloemfontein Municipality to demolish the well-known Waaihoek location, because it was considered to be overcrowded and situated too close to white Bloemfontein. Waaihoek was also earmarked for the erection of a new power station and cooling towers. As a result, it was decided that the black and coloured people would be moved to a piece of land south of the Johannesburg-Cape Town railway line. The railway line formed a physical barrier between Batho and white Bloemfontein. After Waaihoek's residents were removed, a new suburb called Oranjesig was established in its place.

[185] The greater Bloemfontein area (Bloemfontein, Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu) is officially named Mangaung, which is a Sesotho name meaning 'place of the cheetah'. Batho forms part of the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.

[186] At the time Batho was established, the term 'location' was generally used to describe a segregated black residential area where Africans were allowed to own property.

See map of area below and note the position of the railway line.



A map of Batho and Oranesig. (Map: National Museum)

In the early years, Batho was widely seen as a model township in terms of its layout, infrastructure, and general orderliness. The new location was not only referred to as "excellent and exemplary"[187] but even regarded as the "best location in Africa".[188] Many of the houses and cottages that were built during the 1920s and 1930s are still standing today, although some are in a poor condition.

The second reason for Batho's significance is the fact that many of the original houses are still occupied by members of the same families. It is not uncommon to find members of three or even four generations living together in the same house. Houses that have been occupied by more than one generation of the same family are potentially fertile soil in which oral traditions can take root and be nurtured. This is still the case in most African communities due to the existence of a strong oral culture and tradition. The presence of grandparents and great-grandparents, particularly women, in a household strengthens this tradition. In Batho most of the households are made up of grandmothers who look after unemployed children and grandchildren. These elderly women are in most cases the storytellers and they keep Batho's oral traditions alive by transferring stories from one generation to the next. It is important to record

[187] W.H. Dawson, *South Africa: People, places and problems* (London, 1925), pp. 250-251.
[188] W.J. Carey, *The Bloemfontein diocese and its problems* (London, 1924), p. 6.

and preserve the rich history and oral traditions of Batho's residents as an example of the unique oral culture of township dwellers.

A typical Batho house, ca. 1920s. (Photograph: National Museum)

Another reason for Batho's importance is the historical significance of Mapikela House, which is situated in the heart of Batho. Mapikela House, also known as Ulundi-Kaya,[189] was built by Thomas Mtobi Mapikela, a founder member and speaker of the African National Congress (ANC). This house, which was built between 1923 and 1926, was the venue for the ANC's Executive Council's meetings during the 1930s and 1940s. Today this double-story house is a declared national monument and a beacon in Batho.

It should also be noted that the founding venue of the ANC, namely the Wesleyan School in Fort Street, Waaihoek, is situated not far from Mapikela House. The political significance of Batho is clear, as is the link between Batho and its predecessor, Waaihoek. From a political perspective, specifically in terms of the ANC's early history, Batho cannot be separated from Waaihoek.

A final reason for Batho's importance is the fact that many of the prominent black community and political leaders of Bloemfontein, among them former Free State premier Winkie Direko, have either lived there or have played a significant role in the Batho community. Today many of Batho's streets and some buildings are named after

[189] Directly translated it means 'horizon house'.

well-known public figures, including Henry Selby Msimang[190] and Caleb Motshabi.[191] Batho also played an important role during the struggle years when some of the houses in the township formed part of Mangaung's extensive 'underground' network for freedom fighters, political activists, banned persons and exiles.

4. Methodology

It is important to follow a systematic approach to researching, collecting, and writing community history. It is best to implement such a project in phases, with each phase focused on a different aspect of the project. Due to the integrated nature of such a project, some of the phases tend to overlap. The Batho Project, which is a typical example of a community history project, was implemented as follows:

Phase 1

The first phase involves a *survey of the available and accessible historical records on Batho*. The community historian must be familiar with published information and archival records relating to the community under study, including documents, photographs, pamphlets, and maps. There are three reasons why a community historian must be familiar with the existing paper-based records: 1) knowledge of existing records creates the necessary historical background and establishes the context within which the community historian will operate; 2) these records must be used for verification purposes – in other words they must serve as corroborative evidence when testing oral information for validity; and 3) knowledge of paper-based records also helps the community historian to follow a more critical, problem-oriented approach to the project. It is important that a community history project also focuses on social problems facing the community, specifically problems with contemporary significance, but rooted in the past, e.g., crime, poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment. Community development forms an important aspect of a community history project. Here the objective is to use the information collected by means of oral interviewing to develop the community. Heritage conservation, township tourism and sustainable gardening are a few examples of what may be done to uplift a community.

Phase 2

The second phase focuses on *identifying all the relevant stakeholders, target groups and potential interviewees*. The Batho Project's stakeholders include the ward councillors as well as the relevant community, political and religious leaders. The target groups include all the elderly of Batho, both current and former residents, as well as the mentioned leaders. It is advisable to inform and involve such individuals from the outset, because failing to do so may result in animosity that will hamper the community historian's efforts.

[190] Henry Selby Msimang was one of the founder members of the ANC (originally SANNC) and also editor of a black newspaper *The Messenger*.

[191] Caleb Motshabi was a veteran ANC activist, a member of the Free State legislature and also the Free State Province's permanent delegate to the National Council of Provinces.

Phase 3

The third phase focuses on *the conducting of oral history interviews with selected candidates*. It is advisable for the oral history interviewer to make sure that the potential participant proves to be a suitable interviewee. Pre-interview visits to potential interviewees are necessary to determine their suitability. Formal questionnaires are used as guidelines for all interviews. Although interviews are largely structured around the life histories of interviewees, there is – in accordance with the already mentioned problem-oriented approach – also a focus on specific problems and challenges faced by the Batho community. This phase of the project also includes the transcribing of the recorded interviews to create paper-based versions for accessibility and research purposes.

The oral history interview sessions are also used as opportunities to canvass for historical photographs and objects that may either be donated to the National Museum or, in the case of photographs, borrowed for duplication purposes. Photographs and objects may be used as additional source material for research and also as part of displays. It is important to also collect information on the providence, history and use of an object, and whenever possible this important information must be recorded.

A typical interview. (Photograph: National Museum)

Candidates interviewed for the Batho Project do not get paid for their information, but they are rewarded with certificates as well as copies of the transcriptions of their interviews.

Phase 4

The fourth phase focuses on *the writing of both academic and popular articles based on archival research, as well as the oral testimonies collected*. It is crucial that a community history project produces tangible and visible end-products for a broad

audience. Therefore, an important objective of the Batho Project is the writing of user-friendly publications and information brochures aimed at the ordinary residents of the community. Accessible publications empower community members to take ownership of their history.

Phase 5

The final phase of the Batho Project involves *the design and mounting of a permanent display on the history of Batho in the National Museum*. Due to the importance of oral testimonies, interview extracts will form an important part of the display. Listening to Batho residents speak for themselves will add to the interactive nature of the display. Apart from the permanent display, traveling displays in the form of banners will also be put up at various community venues in and around Batho.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- How would you define the concept 'community history'?
- How would you make community members aware of a community history project?
- How will you reward candidates who have participated in a community history project?
- Why is it important to publish articles, etc. based on the research and interviews conducted for a community history project?

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