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Oral History Bridges the Gap between Academic and Public History

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the importance of oral history and its role in connecting public history and academic history. Oral history since 1948 has become a popular field of study in history. In this manner, the main question of this research is how oral history is to bring public history into the world of academic history. The purpose of this paper is to give attention to collecting public history by researchers and oral historians through the oral history process to save history in an academic and organised way in the way of perhaps converting the history of the public or non-academic works to academic and providing them into libraries and archives.

Keywords: oral, public history, academic history, interviewee.

Oral History Bridges the Gap between Academic and Public History

1- Introduction

From the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, oral history has become a popular field of historical studies. It is often argued that there should be a linkage between the public and academic history in making history (Blatti, 1990). However, the question is; which part of the historical study or its method can carry out this responsibility. In this perspective, considering several arguments could be crucial to reach the point of the research goal. For example, looking for things such as investigating what the public knows about history or the experiment of the professional historians in history then, interrogating whether these factors influence each other's conception of history through the discussion. If this is somehow complex and is a matter of discussion then oral history might be able to address this problem, in the way of putting the public and academic history together and identifying them to each other by its special methods.

This essay will discuss the role of oral history as a connector in the relationship between academic and public history. In this way, the conception of oral history and its significance are discussed through the historian's discourses. Then the methods of collecting information and writings from the process of interviewees will be demonstrated. After that, the study of oral history in academic places is addressed and its relationship with public history. To be mentioned that as the method of this paper, most of the sources that have been discussed are articles, which are the works of those historians who deeply write about oral and public history such as Thompson, Ritchie, Perks, etc.

The main purpose of this paper is to push researchers, particularly students at universities and institutions to pay attention to oral history as a necessary branch of research and study in the field of history. This is to keep the history from the public in the right way, more clearly saying in an academic way to be more organised and useful in the way of recording and documenting it and saving it in libraries and archives.

2- Oral History: Definition and Importance

Oral history is a kind of spoken history. It has presented a great debate about the relation of people's life by recording their memories (Perks,1995). Then it has also generated the relationship between present and past, history and memory, from collecting sufficient writings via interviews (Perks &Thompson,1998:1). This has become easier, particularly after the introduction of technological devices like sound recording and videotapes that boosts oral history towards its peak (Simon, 2012). The principles and standards of oral history are to improve oral history as an approach of collecting and keeping historical information to show past events and the way of life. This pushes those who use and produce oral history to investigate the rights and principles of creating useful and reliable sources "this includes obligations to the interviewee, to the profession and the public, as well as mutual obligations between sponsoring organisation and interviewers" (Yow,1994:252).

There could have been several methods of preserving historical events and social conditions, and oral history is one of the most popular ways in modern history for keeping historical documents as first-hand knowledge in the way of recording personal speeches and experiences that they remember from the past events by tape or

videotape via interviews. Regarding the definition of oral history 'in the modern era' Grimsley states that oral history is the "primary source material obtained by recording the spoken word generally using planned, tape-recorded interviews of persons deemed to harbour hitherto unavailable information worth preserving" (2009:279). Moreover, Ritchie also thinks, "oral history collects spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews" (1995:1). Oral history makes a direct connection among people and between past and present. It is a test of us and other people, other historians for the ability of their memory and the accuracy of their lifestyle, and the strength of their memories. Hoopes mentioned an important side of oral history of history itself and then for people that "oral history is, therefore, good training for other kinds of history and maybe a path to a greater understanding of ourselves and others" (1994:5). Similarly, Yow expected that "even though oral history is mostly used as a kind of people's life history, lately, it was often used to indicate the recording in-depth" (Yow 1994: 4).

Things that might be important in history are documents, which remained from the past, as many historians prefer to depend on written documents such as letters, books, deeds, diaries, tax records and census, bills of lading, church registers etc. However, other things that were handed down from one generation to another are also other kinds of concrete documents like coins, houses, gravestones, tools, folklore and furniture or legends. These give us much information about the people who generated them. Things that can be seen about oral history in this term is that oral history is based on documents that spoke about folklore and legend are considered the only kind of speech documents and speeches, songs, interviews, and any type of conversation, informal or formal, are oral documents which are beneficial for history (Hoopes,1994).

Generally, there are two types of oral history first, "Biographical or topical oral history" which asserts specific experiences of a person's life or a certain time. Secondly, "Autobiographical oral history" records an entire life story (Carrie & Tribbey, 2002:72).

3- The History of Oral History

Several historians represented the history of oral history. Some of them date it back to different periods. For example, Thompson argued that "in fact oral history is as old as history itself. It was the first kind of history" (1988:25). This implies that, although the history was entirely oral, many other elements had to be kept in memory as well, such as the time and seasons, skills and crafts, the sky, low, territory, speeches, bargains and transactions (Thompson,1988). This shows us a historical boundary of oral history which is accordingly seen very wide and varied. Therefore, throughout this, oral history is a privileged method for maintaining the historical stories, documents, past events and information. According to Richie's explanation, oral history has been revealed since history was recorded for the first time "three thousand years ago, scribes of the Zhou dynasty in China collected the saying of the people for the use of court historians" (1995:1). Robert Perks is another historian who stated that "one of the first examples of oral history appeared in the eighth century" this is when the Venerable Bede described the period of Anglo Saxon as a kind of oral testimony in his book entitled 'history of the England church and people'.(1995:8).

However, the first age of the modern oral history that has been recognised was in 1948, at Colombia University, for keeping primary sources survival in the historical storage and collecting them through interviews (Grimsley & Wynne, 2009). Particularly

in improving the innovations of technology in terms of recording speeches by tapes which have had an important role in increasing the value of oral history practices to move the historical knowledge hand in hand by tape and video recording. This operation of recording oral history had been used during the Second World War for military purposes (Nancy, 2010). Oral history had been growing up slowly through the 1950s and was rapidly developing, in 1967 the Oral History Association (OHA) was established, and the number of its memberships highly increased (Crawford, 1974). The main purpose is to solve the problems that face the collection of oral history and use it in libraries such as indexing, ordering, classifying and specifying documents to be easily gained by researchers or readers (Elizabeth, Dixon, and Etl, 1968). This shows us one of the very clear signs of oral history's necessities first in history itself and then for its study as academic. This practice, likewise, became highly common in several humanities disciplines and social science, including history, sociology, English, studies, journalism, folklore and political sciences (Grimsley & Wynne, 2009). As a result, accordingly, oral history has a long history; however, it has been recognised and developed in the second half of the twentieth century most likely by archivists and librarians (Swain, 2003).

4- The Process of Interviewing in Oral History

Interviewing is the main part of the oral history of collecting documents and making them useful and ready to become a part of history. Therefore, the way of conducting interviews is considerable. There are several styles of making interview, but the important one is its methods, which goes through the process of conversational methods starting from informal speeches to the very formal (Thompson, 1988). As Perks argued, "anyone can pick up a

tape recorder and talk to an older member of the family or a neighbour" (1995:7) this becomes a significant tool for local history. Because individual memories are often forgettable, it is somehow in danger in terms of losing many databanks of the memory. However, it shouldn't be forgotten that the collection of oral history is not usually easy, because sometimes people do not remember their memories and they may confuse the past events or their order (Perks, 1995). Therefore, the best organisation of the process of interviewing, the most accurate of events can be expected, then a successful interviewer must be that one who stands on several vital characteristics to engage the best qualities in interviews. For example, showing regards to individuals and making interest and sympathy in their questions, and clarifying the points that have been undertaken then make the audience more comfortable with providing a quiet place without interrupting during the interview (Thompson, 1988).

In the process of interviewing, the most important part could be the preparing of the questionnaire, because the right answer that the interviewer is supposed to be looking for is achieved from the relevant questions on the subject. A few principles should be applied in the form of questions in an interview. For instance, the questions should always be as simple and straightforward as possible, in familiar language, otherwise, there may be half-answers that might affect the way of getting the perfect information that has been required and the clarity will be lost (Thompson, 1988). It would be better if interviewers give their views before starting the process and it may be more helpful if they stand on the main points during the interview. Yow showed that the "conscious of assumptions, formulating questions, even defining tentative hypotheses, and critically examining, all of these are necessary activities even at the beginning" (1994:229). Furthermore,

throughout his work of collecting the history from the public, Jo Blatti found out, the only thing that reviewed the production of public history was the journal of technology and culture (1990:616). Therefore; technology helps oral history in recording and keeping its production. Although professionals are always afraid of tape recording, it is acceptable by most people, and most surveys have been conducted via utilising tape recording. After recording, historians gathered a massive number of evidence or documents that have been collected from the public people. This, however, is the only first step as the most important one is the way of keeping them in the archives to be useful for history. Nevertheless, keeping tapes is always not easy because they need to be kept in a safe place to avoid any risks. The oral historians are aware of keeping them in the best way in a cupboard boxed or wrapped away from the sun or fire or heating pipes, in a room comfortable to work in, and do not smoke or eat near them (Thompson,1988). This tells us how oral history makes public history survive and keeps it in a very safe way to be used certainly for research or any other academic purposes so that to be available as a source of communication between public history and professional historians. Now the tapes are in the store, but making history from them is quite important because things that interviewees do is the collection of history from people and this is somewhat parallel to Thompson's thought in which he stated, "the individual life is the actual vehicle of historical experience"(1988:269). In consequence, oral history has carried the responsibility of making professional history from the public via interviews. At the same time, Swain ties the success of oral history to the archivist and librarians who create records and interviews or documents that they collect, all must be in the state in which they received them "without adding or taking away physically or

morally anything" (2003:144). In this case, oral history would be more reliable in academic fields otherwise; it loses its scientific value.

5- Oral History and Public History

First, oral history has been explained and defined in the previous section, now it is necessary to define the public history as well, and find out the relations and distinctions between them to figure out how oral history bridges the gap between academic and public history.

In the earlier steps, public history had been defined as a "historians activities in public agencies and as private consultation outside of the university", and later on this definition had been expanded which then included audiences that the historians attempted to reach (Ritchie,1995:18). In addition, Douglass pointed the Robert Kelley's definition of public history, which he had defined in a very simple way, as follows:

"Public History refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice. Public Historians are at work whenever, in their professional capacity, they are part of the public process. An issue needs to be resolved, a policy must be formed, the use of a resource or the direction of an activity must be more effectively planned—and a historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time: this is Public History" (1998:2).

This definition tells us that public history is not academic yet but it is in the process of progressing to be more suitable and organizable than perhaps usable in academic fields as a reliable source. Because, public history before was known as historical information in non-academic framework, for example, in English speaking in the early 1970s public history was used under the term "History from below" and in German also used the term "barefoot historians" for those who work in this field, this means that public history is unorganised history which is far from academic history. However, later on, public history was steadily becoming more common and firstly recognised in the USA then in Canada and slowly in the United Kingdom under the label of "Cultural Heritage", then Australia after that continuously spreading to the other countries (Demantowsky, 2018: 9). Nowadays after organising, it is a popular field of study. To go further Demantowsky gives his definition of public history says that "The term "public history" did not mark out an intra-academic field of competition, but a field of conflict between academic historical research and teaching and non-institutionalized, sometimes non-academic historians, between institutes and a grassroots movement" (2018:9). Even in some countries such as Canada most of the collectors and creators of oral history were non-academic and most likely by community activists, undergraduate students and interviewers usually been radio, television and film producers (Clare, 1973).

Coming to the main discussion that how the public history turned to be used in an academic way for researchers, scholars, and what is the main field of study to bridge the gap between them. Oral history plays this role. As oral history developed from the 1950s could play a great role in bringing public history into an academic atmosphere by organising "history culture", "culture of

remembrance" and "place of remembrance" which are parts of public history. This process is taking its right path in the way of recording, interviewing and putting them in libraries and archives. In that event, they will be available for researchers and academics as academic sources and organised works. This will be explained in the next section of this paper.

In terms of their relationship, both oral history and public history are somehow close to each other in some aspects and their methods of working with slide-tape, videotape. There can be seen some interactions in dramatic performances, museum exhibitions, and other implementations as well (Ritchie, 1995). This relationship between them helps oral history to complete its role as mentioned before. Moreover, another relationship between oral and public history can be determined by how oral history does. For instance, oral history is used as a research technique by public historians in the position of both the private and public sectors. In this regard, Douglass showed that "all this indicates an acceptance of oral history as one of the important tools of the trade for a public historian" (1998:2). However, Liddington and Smith argue that oral and public history is chronologically different. public history "takes a past stretching from yesterday right back to prehistory which is presented by a wide range of audience and readership", in contrast, oral history "broadly concerns remembered personal testimony usually of the recent past recorded by tape interview and composing that past into a spoken narrative"(2005:28). Therefore, oral history frequently helped public historians in making historical concepts or historical information more understandable and organisable for audiences who are supposed to be one of the public historian's targets. Furthermore, Ritchie stated a clear explanation for the partnership of oral and public history that "public history is an organised effort to bring accurate, meaningful history to a public

audience, and an oral history is a natural tool for reaching that goal" (1995:18). Hence, oral and public history works together to make historical information more accurate and survive for their audiences who could be researchers or ordinary people. Yet, oral history is a methodological tool of collecting history from the public and ordinary people this can be accounted as the most prominent difference between them.

6- The Study of Oral History in Developing Public History to Academia

There are several generations of oral history. Scholars and students are part of these generations. Such criteria have taught them the craft and the meaning of oral historiography. This phenomenon appeared particularly after the 1950s, during the social, radical and revealing conservative era (Dunaway & Baum, 1996). Oral history has mostly shown up in the social studies program and history. Hence, it could be used for purpose of studying culture, family, government and community (Ritchie, 1995). However, oral history could be studied in schools not even in higher education but also in elementary schools as a good start for the children. The purpose of this is to teach students how to deal with things around them, such as; collecting information about their neighbourhoods and their families (Ritchie, 1995). They could also learn how to conduct interviews for instance; Ritchie provides us with an example of this, in an elementary school, a project has been organised and students were required to describe the thing they see on their way to schools such as the street, buildings, churches, banks, and other schools or people's activity. This implies that oral history's development from the school is a good training technique for its study and improving children's experiences as well. Ritchie, further, claims, "Young children can focus their interviews on what

their parents did when they were children" (1995:164). Recently the best publication of the oral history, which has been used in the classroom, could be the book entitled (Talking in Class – Oral History and the National Curriculum) by Allan Redfern. In this important publication, sources and techniques of oral history can be a nice and practicable means to a national curriculum. This is with the inclusion of music, oral traditions, the value of testimony, sound, archives and similar sources and storytelling. This technique is considered as a good aid as it guides how to use the tape recorder in the classroom and how to record interviews, thereby the principle is to pay attention to oral history to make it useful in the historical perspectives and then to become a part of the curriculum (Howarth, 1998). Thus, oral history can be seen as a connecting tool between public and academic history through educational centres such as schools and universities, and then by archives and libraries.

Oral history is not only a tool for change but also is a good means, which can be used for transforming the quantity and the aim of history. However, it depends on the way, spirit and purpose of using it. Thompson gave a clear explanation for this perspective saying:

"It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up a new area of inquiry; it can break down the barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history-whether in books, or museums, or radio and film it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place ". (1988:3).

The history that the Oral History collects is kept in archives to be used as a huge piece of primary sources, which is used for research and study purposes. Thus, the main purpose of carrying out oral history is to record and gather historical information from the local people, to make them available and suitable for researchers for academic purposes. (Grimsley & Wynne, 2009). This seemingly completes the trend of the point of view, which is the role of oral history to make a linkage of communication between the public and the professionals. Nevertheless, besides archives, there are also libraries used for the same purpose and having any, a partnership between them can bring an essential academic benefit to historical knowledge. This relationship can be brought about by technological improvements such as the internet. Moreover, Grimsly confirms that "the connection of these libraries to the Internet offered researchers around the world access to basic bibliographic information about oral histories".(2009:278) This implies that not only archivists' and librarians' efforts are important to share such productions, but also the role of oral history can be undertaken in this form. For instance, Perks shows that "archivists and librarians must become more attuned to historical research trends to serve an increasingly diversified clientele with changing needs. Oral history can play an important part in this process" (1998:355). If an oral historian enables us to make a professional relationship between archives and libraries and progress the study of themselves for academic purposes, it can be said that it is a successful instrument to make local history more academic. Furthermore, Oral history also breaks down the barrier between the classroom and community, while building stronger ties across generations by moving students from field research to public presentation (Kuhn, Mclellan, 1997). So the approach of oral

history also introduces both students as academic staff and the public as ordinary people and non-recorded events to each other, therefore, new historical information is produced.

7- Conclusions

There has been a discussion about oral history to find out its role in making a connection, between both public and academic history. Consequently, several aspects have been considered which could probably show this relationship such as the concept of oral history and its significance which has had a very long history, but in particular in the modern era with the appearance of the technological devices in the recording. Another aspect was the way of conducting interviews because it is a vital part of collecting oral history accurately and keeping their survival in the archives for academic purposes. Then, the study of oral history in academic institutions and schools was considered another crucial aspect in determining the relationship between these two types of histories. This aspect is not only important because of the study of oral history, but it is also regarded as a good training technique to teach students how to conduct interviews and gather information from the public. Oral history is going to be made as a part of the curriculum in academic studies. Moreover, there can also be noticed a profound partnership between oral and public history, in translating the historical information to their audiences who could be researchers or others.

As a result, if oral history could make the speech of ordinary people organised and could be used academically for research or make a sense to well-identified past events and people's lives, then, oral history would be considered as a vital tool for that purpose. Moreover, the most straightforward outcomes of this paper are that;

Oral history has become a popular field of study world widely and oral history makes the history from public and provides to academic fields by recording historical events. Oral history also keeps the public history in libraries and archives. For these reasons as a suggestion from the results of this paper, oral history necessarily needs to be studied and taught in academic institutions and centres.

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پوخته

ئەم لىكۆلىنەۋەيە تىشك دەخاتە سەر گرنگى مېژوۋى زارەكى و رۆلى لە بەستەنەۋەيە بۆشايى نىۋان مېژوۋى گشتى و ئەكادىمى. ئەۋەي روۋنە مېژوۋى زارەكى لە سالى (۱۹۴۸) ەۋە بوەتە لايەنكى گرنگ و بەربلاۋى بوارى لىكۆلىنەۋەيە مېژوۋى. لەم چوارچىۋەدا، پرسىارى سەرەكى ئەم توۋىژىنەۋەيە ئەۋەيە كە چۆن مېژوۋى زارەكى بوۋەتە پردىك بۆ گەياندنى مېژوۋى گشتى بۆ ناو جىھانى مېژوۋى ئەكادىمى. مەبەست لەم لىكۆلىنەۋەيە ئەۋەيە كە گرنگى بدرىت بە كۆكردنەۋەيە مېژوۋى گشتى لە لايەن لىكۆلەران و مېژوۋىنوسە پسپۆرەكانى بوارى مېژوۋى زارەكى لە رىگەي پرۆسەي مېژوۋى زارەكى بۆ پاراستنى مېژوۋى بەشئەۋەيەكى زانستى و رىكخراۋ بەۋ شئەۋەيەكى كە لەۋانەيە بتوانى بۆ بەرەۋپىش بردنى مېژوۋى گشتى و گۆرپىنى بەرھەمى نائەكادىمى بۆ ئەكادىمى و ئامادەكردن و پاراستنىان و دابىن كردنىان بۆ توۋىژەران لە پەرتوۋوكخانەكان و ئەرشىفەكان.

ملخص البحث

هذا البحث يسلط الضوء على أهمية التأريخ الشفوي و دروه في ربط الفراغ بين التاريخ العام و الاكاديمي. من الواضح ان التأريخ الشفوي منذ عام ١٩٤٨ اصبح جانب مهم و شائع في مجال البحوث التاريخية. في هذا الاطار السؤال الرئيسي في هذا البحث هو ان كيف التاريخ الشفوي اصبح جسراً في توصيل التاريخ العام الى عالم التاريخ الاكاديمي. غاية هذا البحث هو اعطاء الاهمية في جمع التاريخ العام من قبل الباحثون والمؤرخون الشفويين عن طريق عملية التاريخ الشفوي لحماية التاريخ بطريقة سليمة و منظمة و بهذه الطريقة من الممكن تغير التاريخ العام بين الناس والانتاج الغير الاكاديمي الى الاكاديمي و حفظه في المكتبات والارشيفات لكي يكون في متناول الباحثون و المؤرخون كمصدر لكتابة و تدوين التأريخ المحلي او العالمي.