# A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MEMORY AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF EVIDENCE FOR ORAL HISTORY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral history is as old as history itself, and constitutes an early branch of historical research. It is a dynamic and creative field, which involves collecting memories and personal commentaries of historical significance by means of recorded interviews. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, indexed and then placed in an archive or library. What is captured by oral history is a segment of human experience in the context of a remembered past, a dynamic present and an unknown, open-ended future. In the process, oral history becomes a link between the immediate present and the immediate past. Oral history involves using an easily understandable and very natural method to gather information through relaxed conversations based on well-planned questions, in order to determine why, how and through what things came to pass. As such, oral history as a source thus becomes a challenge and an adventure in searching for historical evidence, with both opportunities and limitations.[1]

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 experience of ordinary people. The shift in focus is thus from a political to a more social history, with an active, community-oriented approach. The well-known British oral historian, Paul Thompson, sees this shift in focus as "setting in motion

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1 WK Baum, **Oral history for the local historical society** (American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1977), pp. 7-8; DA Ritchie, **Doing oral history. A practical guide,** Second edition (New York, 2003), p. 19; WW Moss, **Oral history program manual** (New York, 1974), p. 9; C Davis, et al., **Oral history. From tape to type** (American Library Association, Chicago, 1983), pp. 1-4.

a cumulative process of transformation. History becomes … more democratic."[2] Oral history is consequently capable of complementing and contributing to the many branches of formal academic history.[3]

The status of oral history has increased tremendously over the past decades, and the discipline has gained considerable ground. Prominent oral historians are pointing to the "globalization of oral history", stating that there is "not a place on the globe where people are not doing oral history now". The digital information revolution, together with political and social changes, has accelerated the need, and even demand, for oral history. In South Africa, the government of the day values oral history and has funded and mandated specific projects.[4]

Although many practitioners of oral history feel it is "time to hand the mike to the people"[5] and there are large numbers of ordinary people who still need to share their significant stories and memories to add to the richness of history, and although it is impossible to exclude oral history from serious consideration, since all sources can be queried and no one has an exclusive understanding of the past, 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.[6]

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 wherein its weakness as a source of knowledge of the past lies. Scepticism of oral testimonies relying on memory dates back to the very first

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2 P Thompson, **The voice of the past** (New York, 2000), pp. 7, 9, 82, 117; See also **Democracy in Action**, 1 June 1995, p. 32.

3 For more information on the particular role and value of oral history in a changing socio-political environment, specifically in South Africa, see M Oelofse and D du Bruyn, "The importance of oral history in a transforming South Africa", **Journal for Contemporary History**, 29(1), June 2004, pp. 151-69.

4 Ritchie, p. 13; T Sideris, "Recording living memory in South Africa. The need for oral history in South Africa", **Critical Arts** 4(2), 1986, p. 50; **The Leader**, 5 August 1988, p. 6; See also P Denis (ed.), **Orality, memory and the past. Listening to the voices of black clergy under colonialism and apartheid** (Pietermaritzburg, 2000), pp. 1-3 for the development and status of oral history in specifically South Africa.

5 Ritchie, p. 13.

6 Sideris, p. 42; S Caunce, **Oral history and the local historian** (New York, 1994), pp. 214-9; RJ Shafer, **A guide to historical method**, third edition (Chicago, 1980), p. 117.

recording of history, when the complaint was made that "different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories".[7]

Tim Keegan points out that "individual memory is usually an indispensable source of evidence at the historian's disposal … but human memory is given to error, misconception, elision, distortion, elaboration and downright fabrication".[8] Although some oral historians may argue that memory is 'an intimate function of the mind' and can therefore not be an historical source per se, the authors of this paper has a different viewpoint. We rather support Keegan's line of argument that memory may be regarded as a potential "source of evidence at the disposal of the oral historian".

Although oral history can be as unreliable or reliable as any other research sources, the expressed scepticism on the accuracy of human memory, and interrelated with it the reliability of oral sources, need to be investigated. Such an investigation should seek the answers to questions such as "What is memory?" "How do people remember?", "What influences memory?" and "Why do people forget?". Oral historians cannot treat memory as 'a set of documents in a person's head'. What is needed is an awareness of the special nature of memory as a source of information.

The oral historian has an obligation to truth, and must be a critical analyst of historical evidence. To maintain oral history as a valuable and valid source of historical information the focus will be placed on a deeper understanding of memory, while judging and examining the problematic nature, limitations and usefulness thereof. Taking into account the fallibility of memory and the criticism levelled against it, the potential of memory as a source of evidence will be highlighted, with a view to endeavouring to ensure the authenticity of oral evidence.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT AND PROCESS OF MEMORY

The use of a single term for memory may create the impression that it is a single entity, whereas it is certainly not one system, but many. These systems vary in storage duration and capacity from fractions of a second to a long-term memory system that exceeds the capacity of any computer by far. Memory is therefore not a unitary system with static entities. Rather, the capacity for storing information

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7 Ritchie, p. 20; See also T Butler (ed.), **Memory. History, culture and the mind** (Oxford, 1989), p. 97.

8 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** (Cape Town, 1998), p. 91.

consists of a range of different systems and a vast number of interrelated activities or processes, making memory quite complex but also flexible.[9]

Memory is always at work in our minds and pervades every aspect of our mental lives, from the most physical to the cognitive and from the most abstract to the unconscious. Memory is varying, and works in ways of which people are scarcely aware. It is what we personally experience, refine and retain and also what we inherit from preceding generations, and pass on to the next. It is integrated and engaged with the present - with constantly changing perspectives, perceptions and attitudes - working and reworking the information and data of experience into new opinions, formulas and even new creations. In this way memory represents the present and the past as connected to and consistent with each other, so that our experience of the present is embedded in past experience.[10]

Memories are systems for storing information and must basically do three things, namely to take in the essential information, store it and to retrieve it at a given time. As such, it is an active, selective process that stores away only some aspects of our life experiences, and discards other records. These aspects are selected according to various hierarchies of the senses, in which the person's values also play a role. Hence, the memories that preserve what is relevant to the individual at the time when particular experiences take place are actually interpretations of experiences, and not an all-embracing passive record of our lives.[11] The characteristics of selectivity and interpretation are tied to all messages. Every person who speaks chooses information and topics, organises them and colours them. This will result in loss of certain information and the creation of a sketch of past events, which is the historical consciousness of the present.[12]

Against this background, it is virtually impossible to provide an all-encompassing scientific definition or description of memory. In an article in **Scientific American**, entitled "The anatomy of memory", M Mishkin and T Appenzeller describe the complexity of memory: "Within the small volume of the human brain there is a system of memory, powerful enough to capture the image of a face in a single encounter, ample enough to store the experiences of a lifetime, and so versatile that the memory of a scene can summon associated recollections of sights, sounds,

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9 A Baddeley, **Human memory. Theory and practice** (London, 1991), pp. 4, 8; IML Hunter, **Memory. Facts and fallacies** (Baltimore, 1957), p. 14.

10 J Fentress and C Wickham, **Social memory** (Oxford, 1992), pp. 5, 24-5; Butler (ed.), pp. 13-4; Moss, p. 9.

11 Butler (ed.), p. 51; A Parkin, **Memory. A guide for professionals** (New York, 1999) p. 19; MA Conway (ed.), **Recovered memories and false memories** (Oxford, 1997), p. 150.

12 J Vansina, **Oral tradition as history** (London, 1985), pp. 147, 160, 190-1.

smells, tastes, tactile sensations and emotion … How does this memory system work? Even defining memory is a struggle; introspection suggests a difference between knowing a face or a poem, and knowing a skill such as typing. Moreover the physical substrate of memory, the 100 billion or so nerve cells in the brain and their matted interconnections, is fantastically intricate."[13]

On a more religious level, Saint Augustine is in great awe of the power of memory in his **Confessions**: "Great is the force of Memory, excessive great, O my God; a large and boundless chamber! Who ever sounded the depths thereof? A wonderful admiration surprises me, amazement seizes me upon this. And men go abroad to admire the heights of mountains, the mighty billows of the sea, the broad tides of rivers, the expanse of the ocean, and the circuits of the stars, and pass themselves by."[14]

Although extensive scientific research has been conducted on memory in recent years, there is a notion that research work on memory as a whole is still in its infancy. According to Stuart Sutherland, memory "consists of many disparate facts in search of a theory … the relation between short-term and long-term memory remains obscure. Nor do we know with any certainty what causes forgetting … Above all, we do not understand how memories are indexed."[15]

However, what is known is that the basic memory processes consist of learning, remembering, forgetting and retaining. Learning is the process of acquiring some knowledge or activity, whereas remembering is the process whereby the effects of past learning manifest themselves in the present. The fact that people can remember anything at all through our memory is attributable to memory remaining connected. To some extent, both the learning itself and the act of remembering are directly observable. The inability to remember or the non-retrieval of information that is processed in a lifetime, namely forgetting, cannot be observed. However, there is no doubt that forgetting occurs on a massive scale, and it is consequently important to understand that forgetting seems to be an integral part of a normal intelligence, and not part of an imperfect system. Retaining, one of the more intriguing aspects of memory, is the process in the brain by which the effects of learning persist through time.[16]

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13 Butler, p. 12.

14 **Ibid**.

15 A Seldon and J Pappworth, **By word of mouth. 'Élite' oral history** (University Press, London, 1983), p. 18.

16 Hunter, pp. 14-5; NE Spear and DC Riccio, **Memory. Phenomena and principles** (Boston, 1994), pp. 11, 26; Butler (ed.), p. 16; Parkin, pp. 33-8.

Perception plays a crucial role. Something must first be comprehended before one can learn it. By seeing how information fits together, people learn in categories that enable them to reconstruct the information at a future occurrence. Immediately after an event, for a matter of minutes, one can remember a great deal more than later on. Then the selection process organises the memory and establishes long-lasting traces. Unfortunately, scientific research has little to convey about the processes by which memory is recalled. Research has shown that, on all counts, the loss of memory during the first nine months of life is as great as the loss of memory during the next thirty-four years. So memory will include both remembering and forgetting, which implies a choice - a distinction between what will be preserved and what will be suppressed. Therefore, the process of discarding information (the counterpart of selection) continues over time, and poses a real problem for the oral historian.[17]

Thompson asks in **The voice of the past** how far is memory affected by increasing age? From birth up to the age of four young children have very little long-term memory at all. Up to the age of 11 a transitional stage follows. More than half of the children retain a great capacity for rote learning of a kind, which is very unusual later in life. After the age of 11, and especially after the age of 30, there is a progressive decline in the memory. On the other hand, the total memory store is increasing. The decline in memory is never drastic before either terminal illness or senility is reached.[18]

Emotions play an important role in both the retention and retrieval of personal memories. Emotions can cause distortion of what is stored in the memory, and can also influence certain marginally painful memories to such an extent that they are repressed or the memories become so dim that they can be lost entirely. This is especially true in extreme cases of fright or horror.[19]

It is obvious that memory will be the strongest in the present continuum, where it can be constantly tested and exercised. Furthermore, our knowledge of both the present and the past is made up of recollections and ideas in the present mind, which can be no more accurate than the recollections and ideas upon which they are built. The possibility that we can contradict our memories by new experiences or better ideas limits our confidence in our memories.[20]

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17 Thompson, pp. 129-31; Butler, p. 78.

18 Thompson, p. 136; Parkin, pp. 43-57; A Searleman and D Herrmann, **Memory from a broader perspective** (New York, 1994), pp. 291-4.

19 Butler (ed.), pp. 14, 17; A Searleman and D Herrmann, pp. 192-4; Thompson, pp. 181-3.

20 Fentress and Wickham, p. 24.

More in tune with the special character of memory, there is a general view that historians must approach the subjective, yet social, character of memory as a historical source in a sensitive way from the outset. Fentress and Wickham elaborate on this, explaining that "when we remember, we represent ourselves to ourselves and to those around us. To the extent that our 'nature' - that which we truly are - can be revealed in articulation, we are what we remember … the way we present ourselves in our memories, the way we define our personal and collective identities through our memories, the way we order and structure our ideas in our memories, and the way we transmit these memories to others …"[21]

How then can memory play its part in bringing truth to light? What makes memory usable as a source at all is the fact that we can articulate and communicate it. Although certain memories are indeed more personal and private, this rather constitutes the 'social' aspect of memory. The aspect of our memory most easily accessible to others is the fact that we can convey information. Memory is further structured by language, observing and teaching, by experiences shared with others and by collectively held ideas.[22] This ability of the individual makes it possible for the oral historian to conduct the research from the narratives provided through memory.

Memory touches on different interdisciplinary levels, and is a broad and complex concept and process. For this reason, it is impossible to do an in-depth investigation of all the aspects of memory within the limited space and framework of this article. The given discussion will have to suffice to highlight memory for the specific purpose of this article, taking into account that memory entails many more features and processes.

## 3. THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF MEMORY AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF EVIDENCE

A key aspect of oral history is the retrieving of memories of the people being interviewed. Undoubtedly, the major criticism of oral history is the unreliability of the interviewee's memory with regard to hard and specific facts and the chronological order thereof. This particular problem area of oral history concerning memory was 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

21 **Ibid**., p. 7
22 **Ibid**., pp. 6-7.

that memory can play …".[23] This view is emphasised by Allan Nevins, a veteran oral historian: "Any man's recollection of past events is untrustworthy."[24]

Notwithstanding memory's special benefits and attributes, conducting oral history 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.[25] Attention will be given to some of the factors contributing to a person's recollection of his/her memory.

Chronology is essential to history. The weakness in chronology and lack of precision is one of the greatest limitations of oral history. People normally place events in time by relating them to other occurrences and/or by association with other episodes in the person's life. In the human perception of history, persons, events and places are normally more important than time as such. It is also noteworthy 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.[26]

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. 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 the normal daily routine, which can be rather boring. The result is that the reliability of the

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23 Seldon and Pappworth, p. 16.

24 Thompson, p. 159.

25 J Worthington and P Denis, **Working draft. Training manual. Oral history project** (School of Theology, University of Natal, Durban, s.a.), p. 3.

26 Vansina, pp. 173-4; 186-90; B Allen and L Montell, **From memory to history. Using oral sources in local historical research** (American Association for State and Local History, Nashville, 1982), pp. 26-31; Worthington and Denis, p. 18; Thompson, pp. 158, 167.

interviewee's memory depends partly on whether the question asked interests the person.[27]

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 it. 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. In other words, 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. Thus - consciously or unconsciously - memories that are positively dangerous or discreditable are most likely to be buried quietly, and memories can consciously or subconsciously be rewritten by the individual.[28] A Tanzanian in the Nango royal capital at Vagha exclaimed: "Forget that story; if we tell it, our lineage will be destroyed."[29] Or, as a 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."[30]

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. Furthermore, not every perceived event is preserved in memory. It seems that lasting memories are produced by more dramatic, direct and emotional situations.[31]

'Just where it is heard', in other words the environment in which the interview is conducted, can 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 emphasize 'dare-devilry' and fun. Connected with the environment will be the changes in language. An interview in a pub will often be tainted with swear-words, compared to a recording inside a church.[32]

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27 Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Ritchie, p. 32; Thompson, p. 131.

28 Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Thompson, pp. 134, 181-3; Ritchie, pp. 34-6; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 20.

29 Thompson, pp. 167-8.

30. **Ibid**.

31 Ritchie, p. 33.

32 Thompson, pp. 142-3; Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Allen and Montell, pp. 40-5.

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 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 can have an effect on the outcome of the interview. In a quiet place there can 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.[33]

The interviewee's political and religious ideas can 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.[34]

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".[35] Sometimes a husband and wife together can give a more accurate review of past events, by stimulating each other's memories or correcting inaccurate recollections. But the opposite can 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.[36]

The interviewee's perception of the interviewer as an 'insider' or 'outsider' can also to a large extent influence the respondent's ability to convey information. Whether the interviewer is part of his/her race group, community, gender and church are aspects that 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 insider knows his/her way around, understands the nuances, can 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

33 Worthington and Denis, p. 4; Thompson, p. 133.
34 Worthington and Denis, p. 4.
35 Thompson, p. 140.
36 Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Thompson, p. 140.

the community. However, for the outsider the advantage of being outside the local social network lies in the fact that he/she can more easily remain neutral and objective, and can ask more questions for the explanation of aspects that seem obvious to an insider.[37]

Especially in the African context, the information received from the interviewee can 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 could hurt the community in some way, and/or could cause trouble for the interviewee if it were overheard by members of the community.[38]

The way questions are phrased and posed can affect the way the interviewee recalls evidence. "Finding the right questions to ask - because you do not always know the nature of the peculiar things the interviewee may know, is important."[39] Questioning must not reflect the interviewer's personal bias. The interviewee may also mould answers according to what he/she thinks the interviewer wants to hear. This will have a direct influence on the information collected. Both the interviewer and interviewee must check their own credibility. To prevent any misrepresentation, the interviewer must be careful not to guide the interviewee's memory too much. The interviewer must 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.[40]

One can observe a general tendency for recurrent processes to be better remembered than single incidents. 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."[41] Thus, interviewees may be unable to distinguish pure recollection of past events as they experienced them from what they saw or heard afterwards. Memory is much less reliable when it concerns events that neither recurred nor were recalled time and again.[42]

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37 **Ibid**., pp. 140-1; Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 34.
38 Worthington and Denis, p. 5; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 20; Thompson, p. 140.
39 Seldon and Pappworth, p. 34.
40 Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-28; Ritchie, p. 34.
41 Thompson, p. 158.
42 **Ibid**., pp. 158-9; Seldon and Pappworth, p. 26.

Interviewees can 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 can 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.[43]

The opposite can also happen. In this case, interviewees might genuinely believe that their role was indispensable. 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".[44] Thompson explains how the historian must treat this so-called 'subjectivity': "What the informant believes is indeed a *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened."[45]

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 the historical event may be displaced. The events that occurred become of primary significance, and the persons involved secondary.[46]

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, while the duration of the interview and the fact that answers can become more superficial after a certain period, can affect the quality of the interview. The timing of the interview can also be problematic, especially for elderly people, whose mental receptivity and vigour are at their best in the morning. Conducting interviews years after an event had occurred may lead to memories that have grown vague. People's memories may take on an additional mature, developed or disillusioned cast with the passage of time. However, the opposite can also be true - the passing of time can enable

43 **Ibid**., pp. 20-22.
44 **Ibid**., p. 22.
45 Thompson, p. 160.
46 Allen and Montell, pp. 35-7; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 21-2; Thompson, p. 159; Vansina, pp. 174-6.

people to make further sense out of earlier events in their lives, since these events can now be weighed and can take on new meaning.[47]

Memory is subject to alteration, since it changes over time. Just as history can be rewritten to include new evidence, individuals can 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 must coexist with older material and necessitate its reassessment and restructuring and, in the case of recurring events, its disappearance. Interviewers must take this restructuring process, during which data can be discarded and/or meaning added to other data, into account.[48]

Gender can 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 put 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.[49]

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 of the event. Hence, it is vital for the interviewer to be aware and suspicious of the (un)reliability of an eyewitness. The interviewer must take into account that, even if 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 eye-witness evidence. Many variables can have an influence on the accuracy of an eyewitness. The way questions are phrased can change what people think they saw. It also seems that eyewitnesses tend to overestimate the duration of events and their recollection of an event does not always correspond with the truth, but with what they think should have happened in a given situation. If misleading information is subsequently presented, people frequently have difficulty in remembering details.[50]

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47 Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 31-2; Ritchie, pp. 26-7, 34, 39; Vansina, pp. 174-6; MM Gruneberg and PE Morris (eds), **Applied problems in memory** (London, 1979), pp. 203-5.

48 Ritchie, p. 33; Thompson, p. 129; Vansina, p. 161.

49 Thompson, p. 179.

50 Parkin, pp. 136-42. 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"; Gruneberg and Morris, pp. 172-6.

It can 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. Unfortunately, current and retired politicians and public figures are singled out as a group particularly liable to telling half-truths or lies.[51]

Against this background, the historical narrative can be extremely complex since it is derived from human perception, which can be very subjective. The interviewer must be alert so that the layers of memory can be unravelled through well-planned questions and memories can be sifted in an effort to reach the truth. According to Paul Thompson, this process has potential when memory is approached with neither blind faith nor arrogant scepticism, but with understanding and a sensitive spirit: "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 a 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."[52]

## 4. THE POTENTIAL OF MEMORY AS A SOURCE OF EVIDENCE

In the earlier discussion of the concept and process of memory, its complex and dynamic nature was explained. Considering the variables of perception, age, time, emotion, etc., which influence and shape memory, one can obviously not ignore the problematic nature of memory as a reliable historical source. At the same time, however, the potential and usefulness of memory as a source of evidence cannot be ignored either. In this part of the article the focus now shifts to the potential of memory as a source of evidence, as well as ways to overcome the aforementioned weaknesses.

### 4.1 The (unique) nature of memory

When focusing on the potential of memory as a historical source, it is crucial to be aware of the unique nature of memory as a source of evidence per se. Memory should not be treated as a source in the same way as written documents. Just as oral history is different from written history, memory, as the main source of oral history, is different from written records as the main source of written history. The

51 Seldon and Pappworth, p. 19; Thompson, p. 149.

52 **Ibid**., pp. 156, 161, 172-3; See also Ritchie, pp. 13, 34.

difference is not so much in the integrity and reliability of the sources as in their format.

James Fentress and Chris Wickham describe memory and written text as two different types of vehicles that both contain information about the past.[53] The challenge, especially in the case of memory, is not so much the nature of the container, but how to retrieve the information from the container. This brings us to the second requirement for tapping into the potential of memory as a source, namely an appropriate methodology. Despite the accusation of being obsessed with methodology, most oral historians claim that the unique nature of memory and its related processes require a methodology that is suitable for effectively accessing information stored in people's memories. The oral history interview in all its forms is, of course, the most suitable methodology. Therefore, we agree with Fentress and Wickham when they argue that "what defines oral history and sets it apart from other branches of history, is, after all, its reliance on memory rather than texts".[54] This statement not only sums up the uniqueness of memory and the oral history method, but it also supports the premise of this article. Memory is, after all, the core of oral history.[55]

Nowhere is the unique nature of memory as a historical source more evident than in those societies that have always had a very strong oral culture and tradition. This is particularly the case in Africa, whose cultures may - for various reasons - be described as essentially oral cultures. Studies done on the continent by Vansina and others have indicated that orally communicated history thrives best in non-literate cultures due to the presence of certain favourable social and cultural conditions. It is also in these societies where the uniqueness of memory as a source is most evident. Jan Vansina argues that these sources are unique (and therefore irreplaceable) since they are - as he describes it - "sources from the inside".[56] These sources provide us with insights of a "different kind of past that no written source uncovers, even if it remains itself a limited and biased view".[57]

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53 Fentress and Wickham, p. 2.
54 **Ibid**. See also Vansina, pp. 147-8, for a similar argument.
55 Ritchie, p. 19.
56 Vansina, p. 197.
57 **Ibid**., p.198; See also Gruneberg and Morris, pp. 11-14.

### 4.2 How reliable is memory?

The question whether oral testimonies are a reliable source was a burning issue during the hearings held by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)[58] throughout South Africa since 1996. One of the commissioners of the TRC, Bongani Finca, addresses this issue in a paper he delivered on the issue of memory. One of the main criticisms of the TRC was the issue of memory and whether it should be trusted as a reliable source of information. Finca argues that the claim that oral history is exaggerated storytelling should be disputed. He bases his argument on his own experience of the TRC hearings. The TRC gave the victims the opportunity to tell their stories first, after which the perpetrators gave their account of what had happened. The experience was that, in most cases, the accounts given by the victims from their own perspectives were confirmed by the perpetrators in their amnesty applications. Finca is convinced that, in the TRC experience, oral history (and by implication, memory) has proved to be reliable and accurate.[59]

The main issue underlying the reliability and integrity of memory is the presumed subjectivity and inaccuracy of oral sources. The standard argument among some historians - as was indicated previously - is that the human memory is incapable of retaining a firm grip on historical facts, and that historical truth becomes distorted and diluted through repeated retellings. This is a problem that cannot be ignored, but there are ways of dealing with it.[60]

Jan Vansina maintains an interesting viewpoint on the subjectivity issue. As one of the most prominent advocates of oral tradition and the virtues of the oral history method, he is of the opinion that oral sources can sometimes be more objective than written sources. Oral sources, and specifically oral traditions, are subject to a sequence of interpretations as the messages are being passed on from one generation to the next. Most written sources, however, only go through a single interpretation. As a result, there is a natural inclination to regard written sources as more objective than oral sources. Vansina believes that there is a safeguard that often makes the apparently more subjective oral sources more objective than the apparently less subjective written sources. According to him, the first interpretation limits the scope for the second, whereas nothing limits the interpretation of direct evidence,

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58 **The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act**, No. 34 of 1995, mandated the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and came into effect on 15 December 1995 with the appointment of the commissioners. The objectives included establishing as "complete [a] picture as possible" of the "nature, causes and extent" of gross violations of human rights that occurred during the period 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994.

59 Denis (ed.), p.16.

60 Ritchie, pp. 20-1, 27.

i.e. written sources. Therefore, Vansina argues that oral traditions should be seen not only as a historical source, but rather as an account of how people have interpreted the past.[61]

Although the above viewpoint of Vansina is controversial and is - in fact - disputed by many historians, there is an element of truth in it. The fact is that not all oral sources are unreliable by implication, even though all have limitations. The well-known American oral historian, Donald Ritchie, states that oral history is as reliable or unreliable as any other research source.[62] Therefore, Vansina and others argue that all oral sources should be assessed with a critical approach, but tempered by a realisation of what these sources can contribute. Because of the capacity of human memory as a storage mechanism, the spectrum of oral sources and genres of oral traditions in oral societies are as diverse as those of written documents in literate societies. In most African societies the spectrum of oral information is so broad that it includes information on almost all aspects of human activity.[63]

It seems, though, that one's approach to the subjectivity issue and whether or not you regard memory as a reliable historical source depend greatly on how you define a "reliable historical source" and "what you value in a source". Despite the examples proving the fallibility of memory as a historical source, there are also enough examples of cases where memory did prove to be reliable. The already mentioned testimonies of the TRC hearings are a case in point - the reliability of memory was confirmed by most of the testimonies of both sides, namely the victims and the perpetrators.[64]

### 4.3 Overcoming the problematic nature of memory

In the discussion focusing on the problematic nature of memory as a potential source of evidence, numerous factors that negatively affect and dilute its reliability are identified and discussed. Contrary to what many historians believe, these factors are not insurmountable and they may be overcome by employing reliable techniques developed by oral historians over the years. The purpose and scope of this final part of the article does not allow for a detailed discussion of all the ways and means to overcome all the potential obstacles that may undermine the accuracy and reliability of a person's memory. Therefore, the following crucial aspects will be focused on: understanding human memory; background research; the age of the interviewee; the perception and emotions of the interviewee; the questionnaire and

61 Vansina, pp. 194-6.
62 Ritchie, p. 26.
63 Vansina, p. 197.
64 Denis, p. 16.

interview; and, finally, testing the validity of the information retrieved from memory.

a) Understanding human memory

Without repeating what has already been said about memory in sections 2 and 3, it is adequate to keep to the essentials. 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. Especially important is the fact that memory is a selective process through which aspects of peoples' experience are being stored away and other aspects are being discarded. The interviewer must therefore accept that memory implies both remembering and forgetting, and that the interviewee will discriminate between items that will be preserved and those that will be suppressed. It is for this reason that oral history should not stand alone as a single source, but should be used alongside written evidence. Human memory will never provide the complete record, and it therefore depends on other sources for reconstructing the past.[65]

b) Background research

For any oral historian, background research on the life history of the interviewee, as well as the chosen subject, is absolutely essential before conducting an interview. Donald Ritchie believes that oral historians should conduct proper preparatory research, not only to acquaint themselves with the sources already available, but also to assist interviewees by giving some context and structure to the dialogue.[66] If an interviewee is informed about the existing oral and written sources, it will be considerably easier to assess the integrity and objectivity of the oral sources gained from an interview. Needless to say, being informed of the available sources will also make the cross-checking of the oral sources more effective.[67]

c) The age of the interviewee

It seems that age and its effect on remembering past events is another variable that should be considered by the oral historian. As indicated in section 2, it is crucial for the oral historian to be aware of the correlation between the age of a person and his/her memory power. It is generally accepted that, after the age of 30, there is a progressive decline in the memory of a person. The fact that the overwhelming

65 Parkin, p. 19; Butler, pp. 14, 78; Ritchie, p. 119.
66 Ritchie, p. 32.
67 Sideris, p. 46.

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 oral historians from interviewing the elderly, since the total memory store of people older than 30 is considerable. Of course, the mental health of a person should also be taken into account. 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.[68]

d) The cultural background of the interviewee

Considering the cultural background of an interviewee is definitely to the advantage of any oral historian. This is especially important for oral historians working in oral cultures, like most African cultures. As was indicated in section 3, there is a profound difference in the standard chronology between Westerners and Africans. This factor, as well as other cultural variables related to time and the chronological order of events, should be considered by the oral historian before and after an interview. 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. The use of reliable written sources will, of course, be crucial when cross-checking the oral data.[69]

e) The perceptions and emotions of the interviewee

Since memory is greatly affected by the perceptions and emotions of an interviewee, the oral historian should be sensitive to this and be aware of how it will play a role in the interview process. This was extensively discussed in section 3. The fact is that perception and emotion may cause subjectivity on the part of the interviewee and his/her account of past events. Perception causes an interviewee to remember an event that was of interest more easily than an event that was considered insignificant. Emotions influence memory to the extent that memories consistent with an interviewee's moods are easier to remember than those that are not. To overcome the relative subjectivity caused by these, an oral historian 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. There is also an argument that perception and emotion may benefit a person's memory: since emotion seems to be

68 Thompson, p. 136; Parkin, pp. 52-6.
69 Vansina, pp. 173-6, 187; Allen and Montell, pp. 26-9.

a bonding agent for personal memories, an affective component can actually aid the retrieval of information.[70]

f) The questionnaire and interview

The ultimate purpose of the questionnaire or interview guide is to structure the interview and to carefully guide the interviewee 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, is of crucial importance and may ultimately determine the outcome of an interview. In his insightful book on memory, Alan Parkin refers to the findings of various studies done on this issue. Of particular importance is the fact that the way questions are phrased can alter what people think they saw or experienced.[71] For this reason, the interviewer must take special care when compiling a questionnaire. Attention should be given to the following:

- Structure the questionnaire chronologically and thematically;
- use a combination of closed and open-ended questions;
- formulate questions from the interviewee's point of view;
- do not ask leading questions;
- do not ask questions of which the wording presupposes a certain state of affairs;
- do not ask questions of which the wording implies a desired answer;
- do not ask questions that are emotionally loaded, vaguely defined or unspecific; and finally
- ask questions that are simple and straightforward.[72]

The interview itself is, of course, also crucial and this is where the interviewer should be alert to biases, contradictions and inconsistencies in the interviewee's answers. To begin with, however, 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.[73] To deal with the problem of bias and subjectivity on the part of the interviewee, Parkin, Baddeley and others suggest the use of the so-called cognitive interview. The purpose of this type of interview, originally developed for eyewitnesses, is to reinstate the context of certain events. The cognitive interview and variations thereof may be used successfully for oral

70 Parkin, pp. 27-9; Butler (ed.), pp. 14-8; Sideris, p. 46.
71 Parkin, p. 136; Ritchie, p. 93.
72 Worthington and Denis, pp. 27-30.
73 Sideris, p. 43.

history purposes as well. This type of interview involves a set of retrieval strategies, including the following: 1) mentally reinstating the environmental and personal contact that occurred at the time of the event; 2) encouraging the recounting of every detail, regardless of how peripheral it is; 3) attempting to recount the event both forwards and backwards; and 4) attempting to report the event from a range of different perspectives, including that of other prominent characters within the event. The first two strategies are based on the premise that the greater the correspondence between the reinstated and the initial event, the better the recall. The other two strategies are based on the premise that the observed information may be retrieved by means of more than one route.[74]

Furthermore, to prevent any distortion of information, the interviewer must be careful not to guide the interviewee's memory too much. The interviewer must 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.[75] The other 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 only developed over time. To probe effectively, the interviewer should be a good listener and intervene with appropriate follow-up questions. This should be done with sensitivity, so that the interviewee will not experience the interview situation as an interrogation.[76] Then, finally, Ritchie offers yet another possible approach: he is of the opinion that, 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.[77]

g) Testing the validity of information retrieved from memory

As is the case with all historical sources, oral evidence should also be subjected to validity tests. Most oral historians agree that oral evidence should not only be convincing, but also verifiable. The popular opinion is that the general rules for examining all evidence for reliability and objectivity can be applied to oral sources as well. Peter Burke agrees with this stance when he argues that historians need to study memory as a historical source, and this implies that they must produce a critique of the reliability of reminiscence similar to the traditional critique of

74 Parkin, p. 140; Baddeley, p. 289.
75 Worthington and Denis, pp. 5-6; Seldon and Pappworth, pp. 27-8; Ritchie, p. 34.
76 **Ibid**., pp. 94-5.
77 **Ibid**., p. 32.

historical documents.[78] Thompson also 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.[79] What, then, are the most effective ways of testing the validity of memory? Almost all oral historians agree that information retrieved from memory, i.e. oral sources, should be substantiated by cross-checking it against all available written and oral evidence. Oral evidence should never stand alone as a single source, whether it is seen as primary, complementary or supplementary evidence or not.[80]

Finally, with regard to the necessity of the above-mentioned validity tests, one may also argue that oral historians should never be so obsessed by this that the uniqueness of memory as a potential source of evidence is compromised. In this regard, the final word belongs to the Italian oral historian, Sandro Portelli, as quoted by Paul Thompson "There are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of historical philological criticism that apply to every document, the diversity of oral history lies in the fact that 'untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that these previous errors sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts … the credibility of oral sources is a different credibility."[81]

## 5. CONCLUSION

Oral history allows ordinary people to express their views and hence take part in the process of creating historical awareness. For this reason, it has an important role to play in the reconstruction of South Africa's past. To make the most of oral sources, historians need to be aware of the challenges and recognise the characteristics of these sources. Researching oral sources thoroughly and managing and using oral resources efficiently increase the chances of controlling the process to minimise problems and inaccuracies.

Given the complex nature of memory and its related processes, it is evident that any oral historian should be aware of its weaknesses and limitations when dealing with memory as a potential source of evidence. At the same time, however, it is also indisputable that memory per se is not subjective in all cases, as some historians believe. Memory should be regarded as a totally unique source of evidence gained through oral testimonies that can and should be used to complement written documents. Because there is also no such thing as a 'truth' about the past, oral

78 Butler (ed.), p. 99; See also Sideris, p. 42.
79 Thompson, pp. 160-1.
80 Ritchie, p.119; Allen and Montell, pp. 15-22.
81 Thompson, p. 161.

evidence should always be cross-checked against other sources. Since the value of memory as a potential source of evidence is particularly relevant in the oral cultures of Africa, oral historians working in the African context should be aware of the value of this source of information. Donald Ritchie best sums up the approach that oral historians should follow when dealing with memory when he states that "interviewers must be aware of the peculiarities of memory, adept in their methods of dealing with it, conscious of its limitations, and open to its treasures".[82]

[82] Ritchie, p. 34.