

Questioning the Disappearance of Disciplinary Boundaries

Proposed Title – 'Oral History: A Chorus of Disciplines'

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History was originally oral. Yet for a long time, oral history was regarded with suspicion by academics. Despite this, it appears today as a key tool for scholars of the twentieth century seeking to tell the story of the masses and of marginalised groups within them. As a historical method, oral history has a certain uniqueness, revelling in its subjectivity and pushing historians into the role of creator – as well as analyst – of their sources. In this paper, I will present oral history as an interdisciplinary approach *par excellence*, a methodology which necessarily goes beyond the boundaries of “official” sources. In doing so, I will question critiques of oral sources' unreliability, many of which are applicable to the written sources – often oral in origin themselves – to which many scholars give primacy. I will draw on examples from my own oral history project on the working classes' experiences and memories of de-industrialisation and the persistence of the label 'working class'.

Oral history produces both oral/aural and textual material, from which can be investigated not just *what* was said, but *how* it was said and *why* it was said in a particular way. The 'what' is historical: events, people, dates. The 'how' is literary: rhythm, velocity, tone, standard language versus dialect or slang. The 'why' is psychoanalytical: memories, emotions, feelings, the self, the subconscious. The typical approach of semi-structured interviews can be combined, as in my work, with other participatory activities such as qualitative and quantitative questionnaires, 'imagined futures' essays, and 'trigger' exercises involving images, maps, or visits to particular locations. Elements of not just historical, but also sociological, anthropological, psychological, and literary, analysis combine to reveal the lived experience – the 'living memory' – of individuals and groups within society. Additionally, by involving individual people and local communities, oral history touches on public and urban history. Oral history, then, is far more than just history and has much to offer to both scholars and their subjects alike.