

MEMORY AND FACTORS AFFECTING MEMORY IN ORAL HISTORY STUDIES

SÖZLÜ TARİH ÇALIŞMALARINDA HAFIZA VE HAFIZAYI ETKİLEYEN UNSURLAR

DOI: 10.33404/anasay.1155599

Çalışma Türü: Derleme Makalesi / Review Paper¹

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ABSTRACT

Oral history constitutes one of the most important aspects of history, not as a theory but as a method. From the middle of the twentieth century, historians began to develop a range of theories about subjectivity, memory, and narratives from memories of the past. Oral history therefore plays an important role in ensuring that the wartime horrors committed against humans in the twentieth century are not forgotten. However, there are many factors that affect the narratives of oral sources while conducting oral history research in this important role. It is important for historians studying oral history to evaluate these factors very well and to compare these factors with different aspects, which affect the truthfulness of the narratives, in order to carry out an impartial study.

1- Makale Geliş Tarihi: 04. 08. 2022 Makale Kabul Tarihi: 17. 11. 2022

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In the study, it was emphasized what kind of issues researchers working on oral history should pay attention to. In addition, it was mentioned what should be paid attention to in order to fully comprehend the reality of the subjects told by the people interviewed and whose memories were compiled within the scope of oral history. In addition, it was tried to explain the situations that the people whose memories were consulted could be affected by the events they told. For this, the main sources written on the subject in the literature and the works of the authors who made oral history studies were used. As a result, it has been seen that at the beginning of the issues to be considered in oral history research, attention should be paid to the physical and mental states of the oral history narrator that affect his memory. This is because they cause events to be misremembered or misrepresented. Therefore, all these situations should be evaluated thoroughly and the information given by the oral history narrator should be evaluated in the light of these

Keywords: Events, Memory, Mind. Oral History, conditions, memory and gender

ÖZ

Sözlü tarih bir teori olarak değil, bir yöntem olarak tarihin en önemli yönlerinden birisini oluşturmaktadır. XX. yüzyılın ortalarından itibaren tarihçiler geçmişle ilgili anılardan öznellik, hafıza ve anlatılar ile ilgili bir dizi teori geliştirmeye başlamışlardır. Bu yüzden sözlü tarih, yirminci yüzyılda insanlara karşı işlenen savaş zamanı dehşetlerin unutulmamasını sağlamada önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Fakat bu önemli rol içerisinde sözlü tarih araştırması yapılırken sözlü kaynakların anlatılarını etkileyen bir çok unsur vardır. Sözlü tarih çalışan tarihçilerin bu unsurları göz önünde bulundurarak çok iyi değerlendirmeleri ve anlatılanların gerçeklik payını etkileyen bu unsurları farklı yönleri ile kıyaslamaları tarafsız bir çalışma yapılabilmesi açısından önemlidir.

Çalışmada sözlü tarih çalışan araştırmacıların ne gibi konulara dikkat etmesi gerektiği üzerinde durulmuştur. Ayrıca sözlü tarih kapsamında görüşme yapılan ve anıları derlenen kişilerin anlattıkları konuların gerçekliğinin tam

olarak kavranabilmesi için göz önünde bulundurulması gereken hususlardan bahsedilmiştir. Ayrıca anılarına başvuru yapan kişilerin anlattıkları olaylarda etkilenebileceği durumlar açıklanmaya çalışılmıştır. Bunun için literatürde konu hakkında yazılmış temel kaynaklardan ve sözlü tarih çalışması yapan yazarların eserlerinden yararlanılmıştır. Sonuç olarak görülmüştür ki sözlü tarih araştırmalarında dikkat edilmesi gereken hususların başında sözlü tarih anlatıcısının hafızasını etkileyen fiziki ve ruhsal durumlarına dikkat edilmelidir. Çünkü bunlar olayların yanlış hatırlanmasına veya yanlış aktarılmasına neden olmaktadır. Bu yüzden tüm bu durumların iyice değerlendirilmesi ve sözlü tarih anlatıcısının vermiş olduğu bilgilerin bunlar ışığında değerlendirilmesi gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anı, Sözlü Tarih, Olaylar, Hafıza, Şartlar, Hafıza ve Cinsiyet

INTRODUCTION

Oral history is the one of the most significant parts of history, not as a theory but as a method. According to Green and Troup, for ten years oral historians have been building up a number of interpretive theories concerning the subjectivity, memory and narrative structures that provide the background for oral stories about past. Oral history has most certainly played a substantial role in making sure that the war-time horrors committed against humankind in the twentieth century are not forgotten (Green & Troup, 1999, s. 231).

It is problematic to define oral history. Peniston-Bird has stated that the difficulty of oral history is that it does not have an exact definition because it has multiple meanings. Singularly, it is defined as the speech of people who have spoken of their past experiences, thus oral history illustrates a historical period and methodology, but, as Alesseandro Portelli in Peniston-Bird puts it, the term refers both to the nature of what the oral historians had heard and to what they have written about (Barber & Peniston, 2009, s. 105). With the development of recording devices in the 1940s (Barber & Peniston, 2009, s. 106), however, oral history gained a movement. That development gave historians, or even merely interested people, the opportunity to make recordings not only regarding

important historical events, but also to record daily life; this has been the most significant movement for allowing oral historians to attain the information they require. Until the 1970s, historians approached oral testimonies as documentaries and sources of real evidence; this period is described by Michael Roper as a rebuild mode of oral history. Paul Thompson's study of Edwardian Britain contained "five hundred interviews were recorded with a cross-section of British society, exploring the dimension of inequality and social structure" and is the largest oral history project thus far (Green & Troup, 1999, s. 231). This shows how important oral history is and how it has been developed by historians.

The Conditions that Affect Memory

This essay will discuss how memory works, how it is related to oral history in individuals and what kind of problems it presents during interview with a historian. Abrams stated that oral history includes memory and the process of remembering; he said that the important question oral historians should consider is why people remember or do not remember a particular thing. "Does what we remember alter with age and with gender and how do we order and relate our memories to ourselves and to others? And how reliable is memory as a historical source?" (Abrams, 2010, s.78). When historians interview a person, they should pay attention to what the narrator tells them, as, according to Yow, they must ask further questions, such as: Is this memory is accurate or inaccurate, and can I use it for my project as evidence? (Yow, 2005, s. 36). Barber and Peniston-Bird highlighted that the memory is subjective and inaccurate (Barber& Peniston, 2009, s. 107). Many conditions can affect the memory; for example, Yow provided some research concerning memory for the consideration of historians "(1) consistency of factual content, (2) memory of habitual events versus single events, (3) consistency of feeling in memory, (4) consistency of meaning over time, (5) effect of mood and emotional needs or recall, (6) memories of traumatic events, (7) vivid images, purpose and false memory, (8) memory of chronological time, (9) gender differences in remembering, and (10) effects of the environment on remembering" (Yow, 2005, s. 40).

"Consistency of factual content" is an important element that historians to

consider and attain the right information for in their studies, due to the fact that many narrators can experience difficulties in remembering events or remembering them incorrectly. When an interviewer talks to the narrator on two separate occasions, the narrator might provide different information about the same event. Therefore, if the interviewer wants to achieve the correct information, they should have an awareness of what the narrator has said before. One of the constant challenges reported by scholars in relation to oral history is the consideration of validity and reliability. Reliability can be defined as the consistency with which a person tells the same story on a number of occasions, while validity is the degree of consistency between the story and the associated facts found in primary resource materials, such as documents, diaries, photographs and letters recording same event. Without such evidence, an isolated explanation of an event is “a bit esoterica whose worth cannot be properly evaluate” (Hoffman, 1996, s. 89). Yow has given some examples in order to explain this situation; one being that the Australian researcher R. Finlay-Jones found that, when the subject matter was narrated to an interviewer once, then again eight months later with a different interviewer, the answers’ consistency was 91% and the inconsistency 9% (Yow, 2005, s. 41).

The inconsistency occurred due to a number of effects, and could be viewed as of little importance. However, it could also be a crucial point for historians and a focus of projects. At the time of an interview, a narrator could be affected by his or her emotions, the time of the interview itself or the experiencing of a temporary loss of memory. Hoffman therefore highlights that the results of comparison can improve reliability and validity, however oral historians must measure this against other testimonies and documents (Hoffman, 1966, s. 89) in order to make sure they have information that is as correct as possible.

Remembering habitual events is easier to do than with singular events. Yow provided a thorough explanation and example for this situation, in that, despite the fact that memories of particularly cruel events are probably more likely be remembered than daily events and that some important events that happened once at an exact time and place can be easier to recall and are stronger

than habitual ones (Yow, 2005, s. 42), sometimes people cannot remember what happened at a particular time or the detail of event, but they *can* remember what they were doing when that event took place. According to Peniston-Bird, the memories are relevant to general experiences and the repeating process in daily life, rather than to specific facts such as daily routine, work and some regular activities; “these memories also appear resistant to mutation” (Barber & Peniston, 2009, s.109). Abrams stated that it is seen to be case that, when people are interviewed about their habits or routines in daily life, even if concerning a few decades previously, a great many can remember in close detail the things they routine did, such as walking to school or a process they engaged with at the workplace (Abrams, 2010, s.79). Oral historians might find that the whole of a narrator’s account is accurate but some detail is missing or erroneous, though it cannot be said that a small number of inaccuracies negate the value of an entire testimony (Yow, 2005, s. 43).

Feeling plays an important role in the process of remembering during an interview. If the interviewee is relaxed and composed, it is easy for him or her to recall the details of their life. When people feel themselves to be under pressure, there is a possibility they will forget what they want to say. In in-depth interviews the interpretation of the facts and remembering of feelings in relation to them are recommended to be regulated within an individual’s testimony (Yow, 2005, s. 43).

Oral history is a primary source required in order to reach meaning and understanding of events, however “how consistent over time are meanings we attribute to events?” (Yow, 2005, s. 43). In some cases, events can be replaced in a memory at a different time. Yow’s example explained it succinctly, as she researched the subject using Alexandro Portelli’s study: an Italian steel worker, Luigi Trastulli, died and, with his death, he became a symbol to working-class people. Their desire to avenge his death led them to place it in their memories as a distinct struggle at a distinct time, thus giving the event a meaning that suited it to their needs (Yow, 2005, s. 43). It can be shown that some of the meaning of events can develop and change over time.

An emotional object can be a trigger for remembering something from the past. This emotional object might be a picture or a belonging that carries meaning for the interviewee or the narrator. If the narrator's mood is suitable for interviewing, it will be easier for them to be able to concentrate on the events under discussion (Quilan & Sommer, 2002). However, according to Abrams, some emotional experiences are more difficult to remember and the memory system might not be able to deal well with specific emotions; the facts or experiences that led to the emotion are easier to recall (Abrams, 2010, s. 80).

Historical and traumatic experiences have a negative effect on the ability to remember. Historical trauma can be defined as “humanitiated, catastrophic events, which, when witnessed, usually evoke a specific set of experiential dynamics” (Simon, 2005). According to Thompson, the majority of people retain some memories, which, when remembered, cause strong feelings; for example talking about a lost parent might led to sadness or anger (Thompson, 2000). Oral historians can meet narrators who remember traumatic events, but must consider how they are able to remember them. Yow said that, in order to reduce more recent fears, people often try to remember themselves in safer place than they were in fact at during the time of the traumatic event (Yow, 2005, s. 46). It is not the same for everyone, however, as, in some cases, people never want to remember. Though that kind of event can take up a more important place in the memory, people sometimes accept it as never having happened because they do not wish to talk about it.

Some people have a photographic memory. This means that when they witness an event or see something, it is immediately saved in their memory and then, whenever they are asked to recall it, they can relate exactly what saw. This is an important point, as Yow highlighted the issue of whether oral historians should automatically trust the memory of their narrators or not, and gave the answer that some of the time what is related it is true but that, for example, the date might be wrong. In relation to this, it does not matter “how vivid the memory check on it something does not seem quite right” (Yow, 2005, s.49).

Memory can also work differently according to gender, as a male has a

different type of memory to a female. Memory of events is revealed in distinctly different ways by each gender, in that their means their memory is liable to focus on different elements. For instance, men in particular are more likely to talk about work, while women are more likely to talk about life. It can also be easier for women to talk about their feelings than men, using a variety of different words, and women often give more details than men when talking about a specific event (Thompson, 2000). According to Yow, women are better than men at remembering particular information about the past, such as names, dates and faces (Yow, 2005, s. 49). It can be clearly seen that, if oral historians want to attain information about different things like daily life or work, they will have to talk to different genders for more well-rounded and correct information.

Environment can also be a useful factor in order to reconstruct the memory. According to Abrams, oral historians should try to create an environment in which the respondent feels comfortable enough to remember, and they should have some questions prepared that might help to unlock memories of the interviewee's past (Abrams, 2010. s. 80). The place in which the interview is being held must be relaxed for both the narrator and the oral historian (Yow, 2005, s. 49).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, oral history is now an important part of history and for the oral historian, and memory is the most important factor in order to gain information about past. However, if an oral historian wants to achieve reliable and valid information they must understand how memory works as it is the key to the information. There are some principles regarding how memory works that can have a significant effect. When conducting an interview, oral historians should consider these effects: consistency of factual content, memory of habitual events, consistency of feeling in memory, changing meaning over time, effect of mood and emotion, traumatic events, vivid images, purpose, false memory, gender differences and environment.

Etik Beyan

“Memory and Factors Affecting Memory in Oral History Studies” başlıklı çalışmanın yazım sürecinde bilimsel kurallara, etik ve alıntı kurallarına uyulmuş; toplanan veriler üzerinde herhangi bir tahrifat yapılmamış ve bu çalışma herhangi başka bir akademik yayın ortamına değerlendirme için gönderilmemiştir. Bu araştırma etik kurul kararı zorunluluğu taşımamaktadır. Makale, Etik Kuralları Yayın Etiği Komitesinin (Committee on Publication Ethics - COPE) yazar, hakem ve editörler için belirtilen kurallardan yararlanılarak oluşturulmuş olan Anasay dergisi etik kuralları çerçevesinde yazılmıştır.

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