

Vendredi 14 février 2020

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Interpreting Memories: Oral History and Composure

The historical meanings of the memories we record in oral history may be hidden deep beneath the surface of an interview and require careful interpretation. My own research with Australian war veterans in the 1980s developed the notion of memory 'composure', first coined by members of the British Popular Memory Group, as one model for understanding the psychological and social processes of remembering. In English, the metaphor of composure has two, linked meanings. On the one hand we create or 'compose' an account of our past experience, highlighting the elements of the past that matter to us and drawing upon the language and meanings of our culture in order to create a coherent narrative. At the same time, remembering often involves a psychic struggle to 'compose' a past that you can live with. That struggle is a social as well as psychological process, in which we seek social 'recognition' and affirmation of our memory stories from family, peers, community or nation, and in which recognition and composure is not always achieved. Given that oral history narrators are often recalling a distant past, the process of remembering in an interview is also an interaction between the time of the event and the time of the telling, with the time of our listening adding a third temporal layer to the complex interpretation of oral history. In this paper I will draw upon interviews I have conducted about war, migration and family life to illuminate approaches to the interpretation of oral history interviews.