

Oral History and its social representations: interview with professor Gisafran Nazareno Mota Jucá

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This paper is about the results of a dialogue around social and conceptual representations that constitute Oral History. We aimed to broaden the debate around Oral History, as well as to deal with the theoretical and methodological aspects encompassed by this research methodology. Thus, we interviewed Dr. Gisafran Jucá, combining interview methods with autobiographical narratives, based on the contributions of Clandinin and Connelly (2015). This study concluded that Oral History is an ingenious transdisciplinary research methodology, not exclusive to historians, which teaches us to give voice to those overlooked by traditional history and the ruling class. Everyday life is a key element of Oral History: it turns the ordinary into singular memories and extraordinary experiences.

Keywords: Oral History. Memory. Everyday Life. Subjectivity.

A História Oral e suas representações sociais: entrevista com o professor Gisafran Nazareno Mota Jucá

Resumo

Este texto trata-se de um diálogo acerca das representações sociais e conceituais que compõem a História Oral. O objetivo foi aprofundar o debate em torno da História Oral, bem como das questões teórico-metodológicas circundantes a essa metodologia de pesquisa. Sendo assim, entrevistamos o Professor Doutor Gisafran Jucá e adotamos como método a entrevista associada à narrativa autobiográfica, a partir das contribuições de Clandinin e Connelly (2015). O estudo concluiu que a História Oral é uma metodologia de pesquisa transdisciplinar, inovadora, não exclusiva de historiadores, que nos ensina a dar voz e vez àqueles silenciados pela história oficial e pela elite dominante, tendo o cotidiano como um conceito fundamental na História Oral, pois é ele que transforma o ordinário em memória, em experiências extraordinárias e reveladoras.

Palavras-chave: História Oral. Memória. Cotidiano. Subjetividade.

1 Introduction

In recent years, Oral History has been increasingly used as a research methodology in the social sciences, especially in education. Notably, in these cases, orality is linked to narrative, interviews and so-called primary sources. Fialho *et al.* (2020, p. 4) state that “[...] oral sources are not only important, but necessary for historiographical understanding”. Based on this, it can also be seen that orality brings with it various social representations and is intertwined with the subjectivity of the subjects, with everyday life, the individual and, above all, the collective. From this perspective, we question: what in fact is Oral History?

Research in various fields of knowledge has dealt with Oral History, essentially when dealing with undocumented facts, i.e. what is not validated by official documents. In this sense, “[...] there are aspects of the life of institutions and organizations that are not documented in archives and can only be obtained through interviews” (Casellato, 2023, p. 162). This highlights the value and meaning of Oral History for scientific research. According to Ferreira and Amado (2006, p. 275), “[...] in Oral History, we use the simplest and most naive methods and theories to ask the most significant questions about human and class relations in the past”, since history is intertwined with the memory of the past in the present.

Thus, the aim of the interview with Prof. Dr. Gisafran Nazareno Mota Jucá was to deepen the dialogue around Oral History, as well as the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding this research method. In addition, the professor is a reference in Oral History in the state of Ceará; he has a post-doctorate in Urban History, a doctorate in Social History, a bachelor's and master's degree in History and is a full member of the Instituto Histórico, Geográfico e Antropológico do Ceará (Historical, Geographical and Anthropological Institute of Ceará). It is important to emphasize that in his research, the city of Fortaleza and the state of Ceará are always present; the culture, architecture and people form the social memory of the place, setting the scene for the narratives and shaping the subjects' subjectivities.

His writings include the book *A Oralidade dos Velhos na Polifonia Urbana (The Orality of Old People in Urban Polyphony)* (2003), which sets out to understand the “old”

as someone full of individual and collective memories, bringing everyday life as a space for social construction and orality as a means of revealing aspects of life that are not said or read in other media. Another book of historiographical relevance is *Seminário da Prainha: indícios da memória individual e da memória coletiva (Seminário da Prainha: evidence of individual and collective memory)* (2014), in which the compilation of chapters is rich in details about the social and cultural history of the city of Fortaleza, as well as the urban landscape, whose aesthetics are marked by the architecture of the Seminário da Prainha, founded in 1864.

Thus, the social relevance of this text lies in the possibility of understanding what Oral History actually is, how and when it arrived in Brazil; and understanding the relationship between this research method and subjectivity and everyday life practices mobilized by social memory. All this is discussed with the teacher interviewed in the light of historicity, considering that “[...] Oral History is a history built around people. It throws life into history itself and this broadens its field of action” (Thompson, 1992, p. 44). Oral History is therefore a continuum, remaking itself through new and different social actors.

2 Methodology

The method adopted was the interview associated with the autobiographical narrative, since the questions and answers are in line with the scientific-academic experiences of the teacher interviewed. Thus, Clandinin and Connelly (2015, p. 165) state the following: “Narrative researchers are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests stem from our own stories and shape our narrative research storyline.” Therefore, our object of research – Oral History – is a founding part of this narrative storyline, which was constituted in the course of the dialog. That’s why “[...] the narrative is symbolic and polyvalent, because it reveals individual observation, which reveals the experiences of the community” (Jucá, 2014, p. 57).

In this study, the interview is linked to the autobiographical narrative because, as an investigative method, it has allowed us to broaden our understanding of the

phenomenon, making it possible to discuss the topic with the theorists set out in this text. Thus, Marques and Satriano (2017, p. 377) explain: “Narrative research provides an opportunity to bring together the individual and the collective, since the narrator bears the mark of the singular in his narrative, while at the same time bearing the mark of culture, history and context.” In view of this, the bibliographical survey also helped us to understand some of the concepts discussed in the text, essentially with regard to Oral History.

A questionnaire was therefore drawn up containing ten questions, all related to the aforementioned methodology and its nuances. Although the questions were designed to specify the content required in the research proposal, the interviewee felt free to develop the dialog, as well as to narrate his experiences with orality.

In this way, the professor taking part in this study was also the author of the text, as we understand that his contribution was not limited to the role of subject, but mainly as author, since the books and other texts by Professor Gisafran Jucá served as a basis for thinking about Oral History and its social representations. For him, “[...] in addition to trying to overcome the narrow limits of an Oral History, more focused on the application of dynamic techniques, it is necessary to recognize and spread the discovery of orality” (Jucá, 2006, p. 134). Based on this, in the next section, we present the results of this dialogue with Prof. Dr. Gisafran Jucá, which revolve around Oral History and its social representations, highlighting that the questions bring with them the vision of a social historian and researcher of the theme in focus.

3 Results and Discussion

In this section, we evoke central questions, which refer to the title of this article, as well as our contributions to the field of educational research using Oral History as an investigative method. Therefore, we present the interview given to us by Prof. Dr. Gisafran Jucá on June 8, 2024.

It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire containing 10 questions was sent to the teacher via e-mail, which was answered and returned on the same day – also via

e-mail. As for the content of the questionnaire, it was discussed in advance and drawn up in agreement between the authors of the research because, in the exploratory process on the subject, we realized that there are few spaces for debate involving Oral History and its social representations.

We then went on to give our thoughts on the topics covered by our interviewee, promoting a debate on some of the issues.

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3.1 What is Oral History?

According to the analysis presented by Professors Marieta de Moraes Ferreira and Janaína Amado, in the introduction to the book *Usos e Abusos da História Oral (Uses and Abuses of Oral History)* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Getúlio Vargas, 1998), Oral History is defined by different conceptions that are still projected today, even with the recognition obtained by researchers who use it in their academic analysis. The name “Oral History” is still considered ambiguous today, even with the advance in the use of new research methods.

When it was created in academic circles in the 1950s, there was a strong barrier against its recognition, since the term “historical sources” was restricted to written documents and, above all, those from recognized official institutions. In fact, in certain academic spaces there was still a limited classification, stemming from the positivist legacy, according to which “historical truths” were concentrated in the political and social leaders of a social elite and, among the more radical, the old version that “documents speak for themselves” was still alive. The historian would be more of a collector of information than a questioning agent of officially released information.

This happened mainly in the post-war period, when the tape recorder became a widespread way of collecting information not only about major events, but also about everyday life in different social spaces. The new field of study began to be disseminated by practitioners of this methodology, despite the barriers imposed by the academic elite, when the opinion that Oral History was a simple technique remained alive, denying it any

methodological or theoretical pretensions. Others considered it to be an autonomous discipline, since it constituted its own distinct theoretical body, capable of generating its own concepts.

The third version, with which we agree, sees it as a methodological option, not restricted to historians, but to different fields of academic knowledge. It is a transdisciplinary methodology that allows for the strengthening of theoretical and methodological support.

3.2 How and when did Oral History arrive in Brazil?

The starting point of Oral History in Brazil was recorded through the Centro de Pesquisas Documentais (Documentary Research Center – CEPEDOC), of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, when it was developing a research project on the 1930 Revolution, which allowed for the collection of interviews with participants in this significant political event. Interestingly, at first there was some resistance in academic circles in the Southeast, since the researchers invited to teach courses on the new methodological option were American, which displeased the growing number of historians who defended Marxian theory.

As research continued, Oral History gained recognition not only among historians, but also in other areas of the social sciences. It was introduced in the 1970s, but it wasn't until the early 1990s that the expansion of this methodology became more significant, especially with the seminars and projects developed in the field of postgraduate studies.

In 1994, the Associação Brasileira de História Oral (Brazilian Oral History Association – ABHO) was created and began publishing its Bulletin, a means of publicizing existing programs and working groups. Even so, for some, Oral History still consists of recording interviews and disseminating testimonies, without proper theoretical and methodological exploration.

3.3 What is the place of Oral History in research methodologies?

As I've already mentioned, Oral History is an innovative methodology, not exclusive to history professionals, because it leads the researcher to break with the limits set by academic tradition. It is not only interdisciplinary, with a complementary function, but the use of the concept of transdisciplinarity reveals a more open field of research, going beyond the traditional barriers of academic knowledge.

3.4 What is the relationship between Oral History and subjectivity?

I consider it fundamental. In fact, it's not just in the field of Oral History, but the real value of each academic production to be recognized is based on the manifestation of subjectivity, which is a basic concept applied by researchers from different areas of academic knowledge. This concept brings us back to the questioning analysis of Foucault, whose general concern was the problem of the subject, in other words, the historical approach to the question of subjectivity. For him, the subject is not a substance, but a peculiar way of recognizing and revealing the observed reality and/or theme.

From this perspective, when we turn to Oral History, we are not dealing with a mute source, but we have before us a source that speaks and dialogues with the interviewer, which allows us to expand on the issues raised and the deponent does not reveal himself as a passive witness.

3.5 How does Oral History approach social memory?

Oral History is not limited to a simple individualized analysis, but is associated with a much more significant scope, the “I” is not dissociated from a “he”, a “we” or a “they”. In my opinion, without belittling Maurice Halbwachs' well-established definition, according to which “individual memory” is involved with “collective memory”, the latter structured in group identities, but the concept of Social Memory is much more representative of today's globalized world, in which there is no continuous consensus in analyses and everyday life

practices, but a continuous clash of opinions and ways of proceeding – after all, the individual is not a passive element, always obedient to a collective will.

For a better understanding of the meaning of this concept, I recommend consulting a significant academic production. I'm referring to the book *Social Memory*, by James Fentress and Chris Wickham, for whom in addition to a collective sense, plural memory, that is, social memory, can be conflicting, divergent, as we can observe in our everyday lives. Without denying the manifestation of the collective, the social is more revealing of the confluences and incongruities of subjectivities in the age of globalization.

3.6 In the book *A Oralidade dos Velhos na Polifonia Urbana (The Orality of Old People in Urban Polyphony)* (2003, p. 43), we read the following passage: “Oral History sought to give space to those excluded from society”. Why?

One of the great revelations of Oral History is that it gives a voice to those previously silenced by the social conditions and practices imposed by the dominant elites in different social spaces. Traditional barriers are broken down by giving the less fortunate the opportunity to share their experiences. This is what the new historians say: “History from below”. For a real urban polyphony, the testimonies of the elderly, especially those who are less favored, are valuable and revealing, as they show the other side of history beyond the official story.

3.7 What is the greatest contribution of the *Oralidade dos Velhos (Orality of Old People)* to the development of Oral History?

My aim was to give a voice to old people from underprivileged social backgrounds. My doctoral thesis, *Verso e Reverso do Perfil Urbano do Recife e de Fortaleza: 1945-1969 (The Reverse of the Urban Profile of Recife and Fortaleza: 1945-1969)*, had as its basic sources the newspapers of the two capitals and official documentation, but the testimonies collected allowed us to better understand the social conditions of the period studied, after

all the less favored neighborhoods were social spaces that revealed the social reality of the time. If a newspaper like the PCB's *O Democrata* in Ceará reveals the precariousness of Fortaleza's social periphery, the interviews conducted allowed us to better understand the real social meaning of the experiences lived and shared.

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3.8 How does the individual become social?

The deponent... however introspective he or she may be... his or her everyday practices do not take place in isolation; there is always someone else in everyday social relations. And the social dynamic is projected in the exchange of opinions and experiences, in the contacts and conflicts waged during the course of the activities carried out. Even the ways of thinking and acting of certain people, who tend to live somewhat isolated from the everyday practices of their social environment, cannot escape a social reality that surrounds them, in the temporality that is always shared.

3.9 What is the importance of everyday life for Oral History?

Everyday life is a concept that used to be undervalued, but which, in recent decades, has come to be recognized as revealing the other side of the coin, beyond that which is lived and shared by the so-called “owners of power”. At first glance, everyday life may seem trivial, insignificant, but the totality of history is constituted by time, which associates yesterday with today, revealing the peculiarities and contradictions of different social spaces, whatever the period in question. In everyday life, we find the essence of lived history, manifested in the social conditions of the aforementioned historical agents.

3.10 What is the social function of Oral History in contemporary society?

I repeat what has already been said in previous answers: it is a transdisciplinary methodology that allows us to delve deeply into the topics listed, giving a voice to those who are not always recognized as historical agents in different social spaces. Not only in academic productions does it become revealing, but in any research or study that allows the manifestation of agents previously unrecognized by institutions and social impositions. It is a democratic way of broadening the horizons of the issues to be analyzed, when new social agents are recognized and validated.

3.11 Our reflections on the interviewee's ideas

The reflections raised during the interview, as well as the theoretical framework we surveyed, allowed us to understand that Oral History cannot be seen only as an auxiliary research technique or method, nor as a synonym for interview and/or narrative, since we understand that it is a research methodology that comes from historiography, but not exclusively from historians, since it is permeated by diverse concepts.

However, Oral History is too complex to be subject to a single definition, as the teacher interviewed said, “even today it is considered ambiguous”, so it must be interpreted from the context of the social, daily life and cultural relationships from which it emerges. However, the problem of this research sought to discuss what Oral History actually is in the light of the concepts and the interview given by the aforementioned teacher participating in the study.

Prof. Gisafran Jucá, when asked what Oral History is, explained to us that there are at least three versions, one of which he agrees with, namely the third, because in this interpretation, Oral History is described as a methodology and theoretical support, and is not restricted to historians, but belongs to various fields of knowledge.

Another conceptual finding refers to the fact that the aforementioned teacher considers it a transdisciplinary methodology. For Japiassu (2016, p. 3), “[...] transdisciplinarity refers to what is between disciplines, through them and beyond each

one”. In this way, Oral History breaks with the disciplinary tradition, since it is not possible to name it only as a discipline, much less fit it into positivist or technical-scientific models. In this sense, this research points out that Oral History is a transdisciplinary, innovative methodology that is not exclusive to historiography, even though it belongs to it.

It should be noted that the introduction of Oral History in Brazil is part of our recent history. As Prof. Gisafran explained, it arrived around the 70s of the last century, and only expanded in the academic world in the early 90s, through activities developed in postgraduate courses, as well as through the Associação Brasileira de História Oral (Brazilian Association of Oral History – ABHO).

However, the professor draws attention to the fact that, for some people, Oral History boils down to recording interviews and disseminating them without any concern for exploring the testimonies in a theoretical and methodological way. However, Alberti (2013, p. 30) contributes to this debate by stating that “[...] the Oral History interview also allows us to recover what we do not find in documents of another nature: events that are not very clear or are never evoked”.

Thus, research using oral sources must pay attention to the need for a theoretical study of the testimonies, in order to situate them in their social and cultural contexts, since the testimonies bring individual and collective experiences and therefore require a theoretical foundation so that the content can be analyzed and validated as scientific knowledge.

In short, in orality, memory is present at all times, so that “[...] History is fed by Memory which, in turn, is a valuable source for reconstructing the past” (Jucá, 2003, p. 36).

4 Conclusions

This study led us to achieve our objective, which was to deepen the dialog around Oral History and the theoretical-methodological issues surrounding this research method. Thus, based on the interview with professor and historian Gisafran Jucá, as well as the

previous study of the theoretical-conceptual context, it was possible to achieve the proposed aim. In this way, we present some findings:

Oral History is closely related to the concept of subjectivity. We can't talk about orality without considering the subjectivation processes of the deponents. In other words, the interviewee reaffirms, through their own voice, the concept of subjectivity, of becoming a subject, thus negating passive testimony.

Oral History teaches us to give a voice to those silenced by official history and the dominant elite, because the bourgeoisie has become accustomed to telling its “historical truths”, making the less favored subjects invisible, in an attempt to deny these people the right to memory, to narrate their social and cultural practices, as well as to occupy public and private spaces.

However, when these individuals break down these barriers through orality, through the right to tell their experiences of life and work, what the professor and other historians call “history from below” happens. In this sense, Prof. Dr. Gisafan values the testimonies of the old and the disadvantaged. For him, these testimonies are valuable and, above all, revealing, as they show what he calls “the other side of history, beyond the official story”.

In Oral History, the individual and the social are in constant symbiosis. This is due to the experiences built up within everyday life practices, which do not occur in isolation, but in an interaction that goes from the particular to the universal, from the micro to the macro, from the individual to the social and vice versa. In this way, our interviewee explained that people “can't escape the social reality that surrounds them”. For this reason, we understand that the individual becomes social in the course of everyday life experiences.

Everyday life is a fundamental concept in Oral History, because it transforms the ordinary, the banal, the commonplace into memory, into extraordinary experiences that reveal the being that inhabits the space-time in history. However, for a long time, this concept was devalued by the researchers themselves, seen as something trivial, with no apparent value. In the book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau presents the social and cultural value of everyday life, demonstrating that it is through the ordinary lives of individuals that social pluralities are revealed (Certeau, 2012).

Therefore, our contribution to future research comes from the understanding that there is still a lot to be said about Oral History, as well as the need to explore the conceptual tripod: everyday life, culture and memory, as this tripod helps us to understand the subjective meaning of Oral History, which requires further study. In this way, we hope that this article will be a starting point for future research.

Finally, we conclude that one of the main social functions of Oral History is to echo the voices of socially invisible subjects, those historically neglected by the “so-called intellectual elites”.

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