

## Theoretical reflections on the use of oral history as a research methodology



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### ABSTRACT

The present text points out theoretical reflections about the basic concepts that surround our theme, such as the gender category, power relations throughout history and the silencing of women in historiography, so that it is evidenced how the history of women has been consolidated in the scientific field. In this perspective, oral history is

configured as a collection procedure often used in historical research of education. In this case, we emphasize that this resource allows the researcher to use, in addition to written documents, oral documents as significant elements in the rescue of a story. Thus, the work was based on a bibliographic and conceptual analysis, employing authors such as Ricoeur (2007), Alberti (2004), Portelli (2006) and Salvatici (2005), who address this theme in their descriptions. Henceforth this collection and analysis of the information based on the aforementioned authors were decisive and pertinent to the construction of this article and, as a result, it is verified that the genesis of women's history follows in the 1960s, concomitantly with the consolidation of oral history.

**Keywords:** Gender, Memory, Place, Oral History.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The research using oral history as a methodology, is, so to speak, a process of knowledge construction from the specific relationship between two actors: researcher and subject researcher as a method that presupposes the existence of bond; by the subject, a participant in the research that narrates his story, at a given moment in his life. As it is a research in which it mobilizes the memory of the subjects involved and the adopted conception understands this type of research as formative, the investigation is woven of questions and understandings about the contribution of experience, enhancing the activation of memory for the process of elaboration of oral history.

The historian Silvia Salvatici (2005) elucidates that oral history emanates with the purpose of "[...] insert the missing voices, those of the disadvantaged, in order to create a new "history from below", while feminists wished to demonstrate the vital role played by women, in the past and in the present, through a reconstruction of the past (SALVATICI, 2005, p. 29).

There will be the challenge of walking on the memories of the teachers participating in this research, seeking to understand the path, the land they bring in their shoes, to know the calluses and landscapes that make up the professionals they are, in addition to conceptualizing the gender category



and its social implications; to show the effectiveness of the silencing of women in historiography; to identify the importance of oral history and female memory for the construction of women's history.

It is sought, in this sense, to perceive, from the biographical approach having as reference the thematization of oral history as a research methodology, enabling the (re)construction of the educational historical past of these teachers.

## **2 SPACE, MEMORIES AND RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES: CONTEXTUALIZING THE LOCUS**

The Anil region, located in the city of São Luís, state of Maranhão gained this name due to the characteristics of its main river, which had its waters of bluish color, due to the large amount of indigo plants on its banks. The density of these plants encouraged the industrial project to settle on its banks. The process consisted of extracting the leaves and then putting them in the water to hurt and get a bluish extract, which gave rise to the name of the place. It was from the installation of the factory that the Anil neighborhood began its transformation process.

With the installation of a factory in the neighborhood, the process of demographic growth and disorganized urbanization began. However, the progress so desired by society has dire consequences for the region. Once a place recognized for its splendid nature, with human intervention, gradually its forests and rivers were disappearing in the name of "progress". So the Anil is changing for the worse, its houses and land began to lose value and the Anil River began to die with pollution and siltation.

In 1893 the Rio Anil Fabric Factory was installed. It had the objective of implanting a textile industry, its purpose would be the spinning, weaving and bleaching of cotton fabrics. This organization was called Companhia de Fiação e Tecidos Rio Anil, its constitution occurred on September 25, 1890, it was the seventh fabric factory to operate in Maranhão.

The construction of the Rio Anil Factory was made from lime, brick and masonry, with its cement pavement on crushed stone, the raising of the ceiling with iron structures, set in cyclopean concrete blocks, covered with ceramic tiles manufactured in Marseille, France. For the motor machines it was necessary to have a "factory floor" that supported well, the water table, so walls were built two and a half meters thick with cement mortars, thus avoiding water infiltrations in the factory.

In the basement of the entire building were installed pipes to drain sewage from stormwater. There was the raising of a chimney with bricks, average pottery of 45 meters high. For water storage, a tank with a capacity of 8,000 liters was built next to the building, which was used in the boilers and returned to the tank to be reused. The process of surveying the factory originated a very high cost for its owners, and the recovery of this investment would be difficult because the State did not offer a large consumer market and would be dependent on the international and national market with much more developed manufacturing units. (ITAPARY, 1995).



Among the best known places, due to its architectural structure and structural amplitude, stands out the Company of Spinning and Fabrics of the Anil River, inaugurated in 1883. When it comes to economic and social issues, this Factory was the driving force for the development of the region, since it promoted the entry of employees. It also fostered employment and the creation of a nearby workers' village, contributing to the expansion of establishments and, therefore, the installation of various services and economic-social movements.

This factory production had its apogee in the 1930s, strengthening the services of the Anilense community, fostering the local economy, as well as the development and creation of other public structures, such as the railway network of the city, which had as its purpose the detachment of workers to the said Factory. As a result of the numerous economic crises and also the delays in textile modalities at the time, the Companhia de Fiação e Tecidos do Rio Anil declared bankruptcy in 1961, as well as other factories in the country. This bankruptcy not only meant the rupture of a local development process, but also led to the invisibility of the Factory for many years, revealing in its social bulge, the cultural, historical and social abandonment of its structure.

With the need to use this environment, which despite the glory times and some time later, by abandonment, still showed itself with good structures, as well as a healthy occupational space, the old factory gave way to the Rio Anil Integrated Center (CINTRA) in 1993, becoming one of the largest public schools in Latin America. In 2019, CINTRA began to act as the State Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Maranhão – IEMA, which materializes and further enhances the knowledge and importance of education.

The historical and cultural passage from the Factory to a Teaching Center proved relevant in the construction of historical specificities and cultures in the Anilense society and in the entire metropolitan region of São Luís, considering that this restructuring transmits the importance of resignifying historical spaces, without losing their architectural essences and their cultural dimensions.

Once it was a space where the looms sounded relentlessly, in which the workers signaled the new industrial perspective of the time, now, the space sounds the alarm of the student routine, giving voice and time to knowledge and the teaching-learning process. This conjuncture opens a new space for discussion, especially in the public spheres of education, that is, there may still be other abandoned buildings and buildings that can serve as a space for the construction of knowledge and also in the promotion and rescue of the historical and cultural thought of the region.

### **3 ORAL HISTORY AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

It is understood that the work with oral history consists of the recording of historical and documentary interviews with actors and/or witnesses of events, conjunctures, movements, institutions and ways of life of contemporary history. One of its main foundations is narrative. An event or situation



experienced by the interviewee cannot be transmitted to others without being narrated. This means that it is constituted at the very moment of the interview. By telling their experiences, the interviewee transforms what was experienced into language, selecting and organizing the events according to a certain meaning.

The historian Silvia Salvatici elucidates that oral history emanates with the purpose of [...] inserting the missing voices, those of the disadvantaged, in order to create a new "history from below", while feminists wished to demonstrate the vital role played by women, in the past and in the present, through a reconstruction of the past (SALVATICI, 2005)

The narrative is part of the history of humanity and, therefore, must be studied within its social, economic, political, historical, educational contexts. It is common to hear through diverse narratives that human beings are, by nature, tellers, storytellers, and that generations and generations repeat this act almost involuntarily to each other.

In this sense, taking as an example, a national production, in the field of audiovisual languages, we can cite the film, *Narradores de Javé*, as an example that applies to this context of discussion, being, therefore, a Brazilian film of 2003, of the drama genre, directed by Eliane Caffé, which narrates the story of the inhabitants of a small village of the Vale de Javé and the fear of these residents in relation to a dam that needs to be built, representing the flooding of the village by the waters. In which, the use of the methodology of oral history, becomes a way to preserve the place of experience of these residents, preventing, that the residents have not to be homeless is proving that this place has a history, an identity of its own to be preserved.

Undoubtedly, *Narrators of Yahweh and Ararat* are films about this characteristic of ours. And not only that: they are films about the need to preserve different narrative levels; It is impossible to choose only one, it is necessary to maintain the plurality of narrative voices. (ALBERTI, 2005, p.16)

It is this flexible character of memory, woven in the relationship with the other, that allows the subjects to remake their stories, in their memories, resisting what bothers them, adding facts from their desire that it had been different, as new possibilities for their experiences.

The idea that oral history was more democratic guided the view of those who internationally propelled modern oral history (THOMPSON, 1987). But soon such a conception was criticized (PORTELLI, 1981). With the refinement of the debates we can say, then, that oral history contributes to the democratization of memory, in a way that is certainly very important and differentiated from history based on written documents, but, like any other, oral history is not essentially democratic.

However, the initial enthusiasm of oral historians for contributing to more nuanced versions of history, for bringing to the scene the account of those who experienced the events and processes, gave way to a reflection that arose with the progress of methodological discussions: the view of the



interviewees is not only different from other constructed memories, it is also usually different from the interpretation of the historian, the same one that depends on the goodwill of the interviewee. It is also emphasized that the oral historian, when claiming to be scientific, will deconstruct not only systematized memories, produced at some distance, but memories that he demanded and that he obtained by methods from which a certain dose of seduction is not absent, as is the case of the theme under analysis.

For Le Goff (1992, p. 476)

memory is an essential element of what is usually called identity, individual or collective, whose search is one of the fundamental activities of individuals and societies today, in fever and anguish, given that written Memories will always be an important document, even if its author has not been someone important or has not lived with historical characters.

It is understood that the narratives are fundamental for the historical and patrimonial contextualization and that the lives of these teachers who worked in the old Cintra, today Iema Rio Anil are intertwined with the history of society itself, as well as with the locus of investigation. Thus, the culture of the school, as an educational institution, makes it possible to understand the singular and complex dimension of teaching practice, signifying and re-signifying the educational processes.

The option on the use of life stories as a research methodology is based on what we want to investigate, on the desire for discovery, to trace a dialogue between memory, its life narrative, to know how the events of the present of the teaching profession evidence the displacements of the past based on experience, considering that Oral History is a way of recording the life experiences of people (or groups) to In order to fill existing gaps in view of the fact that the formalization and documentation of facts and events are mostly carried out by people who have the same point of view or who always represent the same group of people.

Thus, Oral History corresponds to oral or written reports, gathered through interviews in oral or written narratives that seek to understand a life or part of it, recognizing in the process of narrative of life of these teachers of Rio Anil.

#### **4 MEMORY AND ORAL HISTORY**

The comprehension about the theme that we discuss has as a prism of horizon, the conceptions of the writings of Maurice Halbwachs (1968), especially when, he points out that memory is a basically social phenomenon. From this point of view, the author states that psychic and psychological work is necessary for its existence, but the social predominates over the individual, which does not mean its rejection.

In this case, everything that is stored in the memory, which will be remembered and narrated by individuals, is the product of the relations engendered with a pre-existing world, with the social



system. For the author, memory should be approached through the "social frameworks of memory" and not in itself. According to the author: "each individual memory is a point of view about the collective memory, that this point of view changes according to the place I occupy there and that the same place changes according to the relations I maintain with other environments" (HALBWACHS, 2006, p.16).

Because of this bias, Halbwachs (1968) believes that memory has a direct relationship between repetition and remembrance, where individual memory is presented from collective memory, since all memories are constituted within a group. Being that, the origin of various ideas, reflections, feelings, passions that we attribute to us, are actually inspired by the group.

This collective memory – facts and aspects deemed relevant and which are kept as the official memory of the wider society – depends on the social power of the group that holds it. Since, in remembrance, we do not remember the images of the past as they happened, but according to the social forces of the present that are acting on us, within the vision and the place occupied by the subject within the group and the relations maintained with other social media.

In the view of Pierre Bourdieu (2001) social forces are taken as symbolic power, and these can be expressed from the difference of social classes, cultures, ideological productions, as well as manifest within the field of production of it.

According to Halbwachs (1968) the difference between history and memory is the fact that history is attached to calendars and facts. Thus, the time of history is homogeneous, it is not the time of the multiple groups that make up the social, which makes it external to individuals. For him, this history is the so-called written history differently from the lived history, which relates to the collective memory. Therefore, it is in the lived history that memory is built.

Individual memory, as Michael Pollack (1989) puts it, is intertwined with collective memory. To the extent that the subject exposes his account of a given fact, impressions about his individual experience are mixed with the collective experiences. The memory is, for, an element that contributes to social cohesion and to the construction of individual identity in a collective universe.

Oral history is a field that was originally proposed as interdisciplinary, because it articulates analyses of orality supported by the theoretical frameworks of history, literature, anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis. From the interview technique, oral history was configured as a methodology proposing a new understanding about memory as a historical source, showed the various temporalities that destroy the political timeline, highlighted subjective time.

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Given this, oral history allowed a greater historical visibility to the subjects whose testimonies are absent in the records in other types of sources, such as writing, weighted for a long time, as the most reliable and sometimes incontestable by researchers, and in this research it is observed the need for this rescue in order to attribute the deserved importance and appreciation of the identities of these teachers, as well as the place in which they were inserted.

With the advent of the 1980s, the history of women embraced new proportions, considering that it was detached only from the world of work and became a category of analysis between power relations in society, which resulted in the elucidation of the invisibility of these subjects in historiography. Thus arose a collective awareness, where the questions previously uttered only by feminist movements, spread throughout society.

Thus, certain values historically disseminated by patriarchy, a system that concealed and sometimes dissipated the presence and importance of women in historiography, were deconstructed.

Memory, although it is conceived with some imperfections, is the result of an acquisition, both cognitive and social, being constantly updated by memory. For Ecléa Bosi (1994), personal memory should be considered a social, family and group memory. The author corroborates the idea that remembrance is directed by contemporary life, the social environment and the imagination of the person who is remembering. In this conception, it is considered that everything that is remembered, ignored or forgotten, refers to an indigence in the present occasion of the subjects, which induces them to remember.

Another relevant issue for Oral History is time, because memory in its processing involves a multiplicity of times. In the act of remembering, memory seeks a time that has already passed with the interests of the present time, that is, the past time is brought in the chariot of the present time.

Such is the complexity that involves memory and, consequently, the work with Oral History, when it proposes to reconstruct the fragments of the past. Lucilia Delgado (2003) tells us that "the time of memory goes beyond the time of individual life and meets with the time of history, since it is nourished by family memories, songs and films of the past, traditions, stories heard and recorded" (DELGADO, 2003, p.17).

This methodology for recording the past also involves other problems. In this task historians induce memory with the questions and interests of their time and the answers or fragments of the past are conditioned to the present time. Time acts by modifying the meaning of experiences and is a product of culture. Therefore, each culture understands it differently.

Oral History also allows historical subjects to be treated as active subjects, to the extent that their memories provide information about themselves and their world. In this sense, Lucilia Delgado (2003) states that "there is a "recognition of the importance of each individual/deponent in himself and



in his relationship with the society in which he is or was integrated. Each person is a specific component of a larger mosaic that is the collectivity."

## 5 HISTORICITY AND THE RESIGNIFICATION OF MEMORY

Revisiting memories means searching within each one of the various events, situations and remarkable experiences throughout their life journey, and in this aspect taking into account that we are dealing with teachers, this memory is of paramount importance to identify possible factors that influenced the choice of profession.

In fact, the memories that stand out in the foreground in the memory of a group are those that have been experienced by a greater number of its members. On the other hand, those related to a smaller number would be in the background, to the extent that they are evoked by the group only in specific conditions.

In fact, what we conceive today as memory is its vast constitution of material stock of that which is impossible for us to remember, but which we might one day have the need to remember. For Maurice Halbwachs (2006), our ability to retain events Past is not unlimited, that is, it is as if the collective memory has the need to unload itself.

In this case, the biographical narrative presents a certain measure of fiction and creation, resulting from the interpretative processes and the memory that is necessarily reconfigured, thus not characterizing that this type of research is fragile scientifically, because, according to its epistemological aspect, the truth itself does not matter, what matters is the truth of the subject and for the subject.

Individual memory and collective memory interpenetrate, however, they are different, because each one travels its path, although they can cross at certain points of the trajectory. In this sense, according to the author, Halbwachs (2006) the individual memory, "to confirm some of its memories, to make them more accurate, and even to fill some of its gaps, can rely on the collective memory, in it to move and be confused with it in some moments". Although the individual memory is of the subject, in its action of remembering it needs to resort to some points of reference that are determined by society.

According to Alberti (2005), oral history "[...] sometimes it constitutes a method of scientific investigation, sometimes a source of research, sometimes a technique of production and treatment of recorded testimonies". Even according to the study of this author, Oral History is considered mainly as a methodology

The work with Oral History and memory demands from the researcher scientific responsibility. He may not superimpose his point of view on that of the interviewee, nor treat the interviewee's account as the bearer of truth. It should, with respect to the opinions of the interviewee, be able to (de)construct





knowledge, producing new contextualized documents. This is because "the work with oral history demands from the researcher a high respect for the other, for their opinions, attitudes and positions, for their worldview in short" (ALBERTI, 2006, p?).

It can be seen that today's societies live under the fear of forgetting something of the past and that nevertheless they are compelled to seek in history their own understanding, a history that, in turn, cannot disregard individual or collective memories, repositories of a population that attributes to the simplest of traces, the potentiality of being remembered. The places where memory is anchored, whether topographical, monumental, symbolic, or functional, are thus constituted because the imagination invests them with a symbolic aura and in this way, through the narratives of teachers' lives, one can understand the historical relevance that these subjects had, starting from the principle that our greatest wealth is people and their historical-cultural trajectories.

## **6 MEMORY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCUS OF INVESTIGATION**

It is intended to observe the need for the ritualization of a memory and how this process needs a physical space as an anchor in the formation of a type of memory required in contemporary society: the collective, although not universal, but which allows the individual to have access to a process of identification. We will also highlight the use that society makes of the so-called places of memory in a context in which the past is always evoked.

The idea that Pierre Nora (1993) develops in his already classic text *Between memory and history – the problematic of places: the affirmation that there is no more memory, that it is only revived and ritualized in an attempt of identification on the part of individuals and that society today uses history to give it places where it can think that we are not made of forgetfulness, but, of memories, "The places of memory are, first of all, remains. The extreme form where a commemorative consciousness subsists in a story that calls it, because it ignores it."* (NORA, 1993, p. 12)

Thus, Nora presents her category of "Places of Memory" as a response to this need to identify the contemporary individual, given that it is in the "regional" groups, that is, ethnic, behavioral, generations, genders, among others, that one seeks to have access to a living memory present in everyday life. The author will conceptualize the places of memory as, first of all, a mixture of history and memory, hybrid moments, because there is no longer any way to have only memory, there is the need to identify an origin, a birth, something that relegates the memory to the past, fossilizing it again "the past is given to us as radically other, it is this world from which we are disconnected forever. It is by highlighting the full extent that separates us from it that our memory confesses its truth as an operation that at one stroke suppresses it." (NORA, Pierre, 1993, p. 19).



"Places of memory are born and live from the feeling that there is no spontaneous memory, that it is necessary to create archives, organize celebrations, maintain birthdays, pronounce funeral eulogies, notary minutes, because these operations are not natural." (NORA, Pierre, 1993, p. 13).

For Nora, the places of memory are spaces created by the contemporary individual in the face of the crisis of modern paradigms, and that with these spaces are identified, unified and recognized as agents of their time, that is, the much desired return of the subjects:

"The atomization of a general memory into private memory gives the law of remembrance an intense power of inner coercion. It forces each one to remember and rediscover the belonging, principle and secret of identity. That belonging, in turn, engages you entirely." (NORA, Pierre, 1993, p. 17)

It is interesting to perceive a notion of social and cultural identity with what surrounds us. In this case, places can provoke feelings of belonging. Certain places indicate intentions of specificity and social identity. Places of memory also condition and reflect a social sense of group, therefore, it is understood that places arising from knowledge, knowledge and perspectives, constructed in the light of human experiences are configured in places of memory, because they are overloaded with symbolisms, and implicit cosmologies that permeate such spaces. In addition, the building of places of memory arises from an objective need of social groups.

Social memory accompanies the changes, so to think about the past of a place is to relive the historical reality of that space, analyzing its transformations and its contributions, whether for particular interests, or for the benefit of the development of society in general.

It is important to understand how the place of memory emerged as a historiographical problem and to what extent it is currently related to the growing epistemology of heritage, which today occupies one of the main nuclei of public forms of history in the globalized world.

But collective memory is not only an achievement, it is also an instrument and an object of power. It is, in fact, up to the scientific professionals of memory, anthropologists, historians, journalists, sociologists, to make the struggle for the democratization of social memory one of the priority imperatives of their scientific objectivity. Memory, where history grows, which in turn nourishes it, seeks to save the past in order to serve the present and the future.

## **7 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It seeks to emphasize specifically about the history of teachers, to show throughout the research that such history is directly associated with the process of oral history, as well as the understanding of places of memory with all its links, considering that it was through this methodology and female memory that women were heard and dialogued with interviewers about their experiences.



Finally, when working with the writing of history being manifested by orality, with variations of methodological stages to be addressed, it is necessary to keep in mind that the sources within the research will present limitations, therefore, no source is completely legitimate or false, one or the other will always offer failure, and in this case it is the role of the Researcher, with his attentive eye, his subtlety in dealing with the sources that is peculiar to him, seek, through others, the filling of the observed gap.

The writing made of memories and affections reveals to us the importance of the other in the production of subjective experience and, contrary to what might seem the triumph of individualism, the life stories reposition the human being, in its concrete dimension, that is, that of the experience in the center of the scene, which means to place it before its own specular unfolding, which is everyone's report, since the field of subjectivity with its individual, singular, uniqueness character, concretely constructed in the experiences of the collective, is manifested through the report and is reconstructed in it. We also consider the three ties that dialogue in the telling of life: the objective conditions, the experiences lived, the way they are narrated.

The importance of events and the production of their meanings have a direct relationship with their origin, that is, with the unpredictable movement of life, because the richness of this is in the meanings that we attribute to the lived and that is deposited in us, that goes on meaning us, in an inconstant way and these meanings of the experiences change and , we change with them, After all, there is a plastic characteristic of the impressions of the experience of time in us, impossible to adjust to measures and anticipations, therefore even attainable a posteriori, in the narrative processes of each person's history.

Thus, we understand that the method of life narratives is a tool that enables researchers and subjects a relationship in which ethics and the dimension of otherness are fundamental, since the memories in this process are not simply to repeat a past, but work, reconstruction and displacement in a process of recollection of these narratives established at the time of the encounter.

Researcher and subject when accepting this challenge of sharing a new experience, emphasizing that the former must constantly rethink the established places, understand that the life story emphasizes the openness to the subject who narrates and for this this encounter will need interaction and affection.

And finally, it is emphasized that perhaps it is not yet the time to speak at the end of memory, but in a new possibility of beginning, where it seeks to save the past of the groups to serve both the present and the future, where research with life narratives, as an investigative practice in Education, should not try to describe, explain or understand a reality; on the contrary, they point out the need to unveil, to raise educational issues that help us to decipher the meaning of the educational processes lived by the teachers who narrate their experiences. It is not intended, in this way, to offer certainties



that do not exist, but to raise reflections on how things happened and how it could have been different, providing us with mechanisms that guide us to rethink Education.



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