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Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History

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Abstract

This paper reviews critical developments in the international history of oral history and outlines four paradigmatic revolutions in theory and practice:

the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for 'people's history'; the development, from the late 1970s, of 'postpositivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Threaded through discussion of these paradigm shifts are reflections upon four factors that have impacted oral history and, in turn, been significantly influenced by oral historians: the growing significance of political and legal practices in which personal testimony is a central resource; the increasing interdisciplinarity of approaches to interviewing and the interpretation of memory; the proliferation from the 1980s of studies concerned with the relationship between history and memory; and the evolving internationalism of oral history.

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