

INTRODUCTION

The title of this book, *Memory and History*, reflects the binary nature of its contents: the viewpoints of scholars from two fields, cognitive psychology and oral history, looking at the ways in which human experience is recalled and interpreted. The two fields carry with them certain approaches to research that have not always been perceived as compatible. Oral history was born out of fieldwork, and its nature is experiential, contextual, and expressive. Cognitive psychology has traditionally operated in the laboratory and is therefore experimental, narrower in scope, and more highly defined in structure. The goal of this collection of papers is to use this interplay between natural setting and experimental investigation to deepen our understanding of human memory and its processes.

The papers collected in this volume were first presented in 1988 at a conference sponsored by the Baylor University Institute for Oral History. As far as we know, that gathering of oral historians and cognitive psychologists to exchange ideas on memory was the first of its kind. It seemed highly desirable to bring all of the papers together in one volume for, if each were published only in its own discipline, as most articles are, the results would be scattered to disparate scholarly audiences. The conference was an exercise in interdisciplinary thinking, and so it is with this book of proceedings.

In the first paper, historian Paul Thompson sets the theme of dualism by noting the tension between the two ideas, memory and history. As an advocate of the kind of open-ended research that forges connections between studies, he demonstrates its use by bridging the gap between individual and collective memory, and between historical fact and cultural myth. Psychologist Elizabeth F. Loftus provides the scientific undergirding for assessing the reliability of memory by explaining her research on short-term individual memory. Historian Michael H. Frisch then examines collective memory in United States culture and how, contrary to popular thought, it is molded according to very consistent traditional norms. Oral historians and others seeking advice on how best to tap into individual memory will be particularly interested in psychologist Marigold Linton's presentation on long-term memory. Historian Karen E. Fields provides another bridge to connect individual with collective memory as she

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intertwines individual, family, and group memory. The wife-husband team, historian Alice M. Hoffman and psychologist Howard S. Hoffman, conclude the main body of the volume discussing their project on the reliability of memory in which they compared documented fact with individual long-term memory.

In order to extend the scope of the papers and place them into broader contexts, each major paper is followed by a brief commentary from a scholar in another field—history, psychology, speech communication, or cultural geography. The two dialogue sections deserve special attention. Each presents an edited transcription of a panel discussion among the scholars, a truly interdisciplinary, collaborative effort. Finally, in an effort to balance the “tension” between psychology and history, we asked historian Donald A. Ritchie and psychologist Lewis M. Barker to introduce and conclude the book, respectively. And, like two very solid bookends, they buttress the presentations between them, extending and supporting the contents.

While both oral historians and cognitive psychologists have focused their attention primarily upon individual memory, in this volume their explorations occasionally lead to examining *collective* memory as well. Individual memory as it is discussed here refers for the most part to studies conducted with the English or with “mainstream” Americans. This limitation clearly restricts the application of much of what is presented here, even within our own country, but at the same time it suggests a fertile area for future memory research. For example, we know that people in Western cultures tend to perceive experiences in linear ways, as a series of causes and effects, which surely shapes memory in specific ways. How then is memory shaped in societies where individuals perceive events more synchronically? How do theories of memory hold up across generations, across regions, or across cultures? Many more collaborations are needed here, and many are currently in progress. It is interesting to see how collective memory imposed itself upon this volume of what was originally intended to be a study of individual memory alone. Perhaps it reflects a growing realization in American scholarship that even in memory the individual and the community are more closely intertwined than traditionally perceived. If our cultural heritage is the mold that we are given to pour our memories into, then memory studies must necessarily include cultural studies.

Recent research on the human brain suggests that interdisciplinary research is more critical and relevant than ever before. For example, current studies in Japan and in the United States suggest that language and sexual orientation not only order our world view for us but may actually affect the ways in which brain cells develop. If culture or experience is found to help determine brain physiology, then the need for interdisciplinary studies

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among the humanities, the social sciences, and the biological sciences will be not merely beneficial but *necessary* to the continued expansion of our knowledge base. One of the goals of this collection is to foster interest in an interdisciplinary approach to the study of memory and history. We hope that it is the beginning of many more such efforts as we all go about our studies of human experience in its multitude of forms.

Special appreciation is extended to Baylor University for its generous support for this project. At the Institute for Oral History, Thomas L. Charlton, David Stricklin, Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless provided collegial support and encouragement, while Janice O'Bryant, Peggy Kinard, Norfleete Day, and Cindy Wranowsky lent their skills and expertise to aid in its production. Other individuals in the Baylor community contributed to the Memory and History symposium, and hence to this publication, and so we extend our gratitude to President Herbert H. Reynolds for his longtime interest in and encouragement of oral history research; the Department of Psychology and its chair, Helen E. Benedict; John S. Belew, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs; Bruce C. Cresson, Dean of the University School; and Rufus B. Spain, Professor of History.