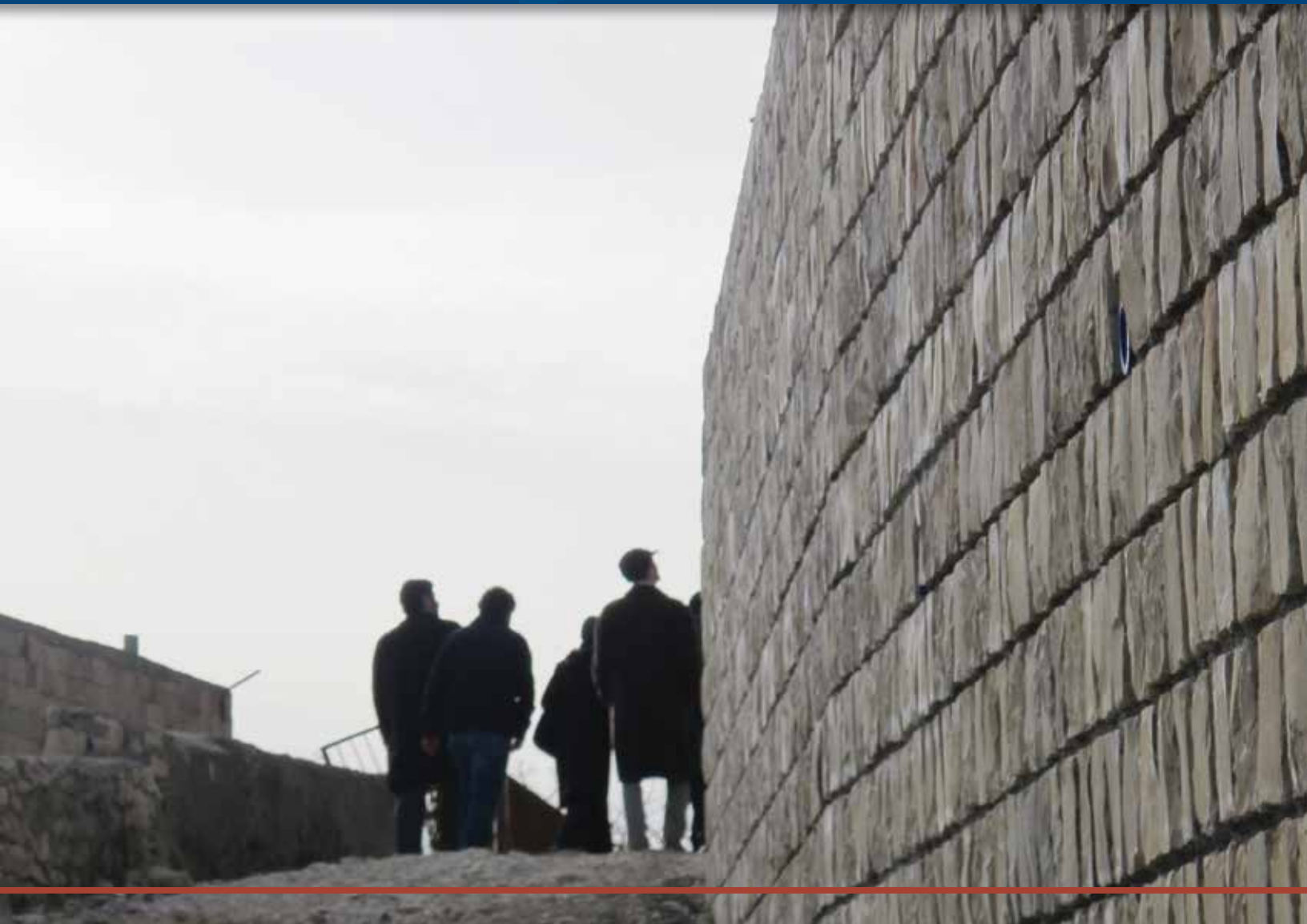




Documenting and Interpreting Conflict through Oral History

A WORKING GUIDE





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Documenting and Interpreting Conflict through Oral History: A Working Guide

In summer 2012, Mary Marshall Clark of the Columbia University Center for Oral History (CCOH) and Lucine Taminian of The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII) received a small grant from the Hollings Center for International Dialogue to produce guidelines for the ethics and methodologies of collecting life histories in conflict and post-conflict situations. TAARII administered the grant. These small grants were follow-up support from a Hollings Center for International Dialogue led by Dr. George Gavrilis, the director of the Hollings Center, with nearly 30 oral historians from the United States, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The goal of the conference, and of the grants that followed, was to use oral history to explore new conversations and methodologies over borders not usually crossed.

The Hollings Center grant to Lucine Taminian and Mary Marshall Clark coincided with the CCOH summer institute (June 4–15) in New York City on “What Is Remembered? Life Story Approaches in Human Rights Contexts.” Ramazan Aras, Mohammad Mohaqqueq, and Lucine Taminian were invited to be faculty in the institute. Other members of the Istanbul group at the summer institute included Doug Boyd and Mary Marshall Clark of the United States. Mehmet Kurt, a Turkish graduate student studying in the United States, and Claudia P. González Perez, a fellow of the institute from Colombia, were also invited into the working group. Beth Kangas, the executive director of TAARII, and Terrell Frazier, director of CCOH’s outreach programs, agreed to join the working group as editors. Danielle Duffy of the Hollings Center flew to New York to be with us in the last days of thinking and writing, for which we are very grateful.

The working group of nine individuals from five countries met at Columbia University in New York City on June 11–18, 2012, to begin crafting the Guide. The group members have extensive experience in oral history and/or have collected oral histories in conflict and post-conflict situations. Douglas Boyd, the director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries, is an expert on curating and archiving oral histories. Mary Marshall Clark, director of the CCOH and the co-director of the Master of Arts in Oral History at Columbia University, uses oral history to understand trauma and torture. Lucine Taminian, an oral historian and anthropologist, is the senior researcher in TAARII’s oral history project, which collects oral histories of Iraqis living outside their country. Ramazan Aras, a professor at Artuklu University at Mardin, collected oral histories of Armenians and Kurds in Diyarbakır, Turkey. Mohammad Mohaqqueq of Kabul University in Afghanistan is a professor of literature

who has used oral history to compare hope and hopelessness. Claudia P. González Perez, a human rights activist, participated in a project that documented the historical memory of female victims of violence in Colombia. Mehmet Kurt, a graduate student at Yale, used oral history in his PhD research to conduct oral histories with Kurds in Turkey. Beth Kangas, the executive director of TAARII, conducted oral history research in Yemen. Terrell Frazier led a working group of New York City activists to apply oral history to their community organizing.

The institute’s program included discussions on oral history in diverse conflict and post-conflict situations. Faculty and fellows presented on the Rwandan genocide, racially based incarceration in the United States, and state violence against ethnic groups in Indonesia among other situations. The passion and thinking of the summer institute fellows, combined with the diversity of faculty experience internationally, was of great inspiration to the authors and editors of this Guide.

Our goal as writers, editor, and participants in our two-week-long conversation was to share our collective findings about how oral history can play a transformative role in bringing to light “difficult dialogues” and conversations that would otherwise be lost in situations of ongoing conflict.

The working group is deeply grateful to the Hollings Center, and especially for the vision and leadership of Dr. George Gavrilis, in understanding the importance of strengthening oral history as a global field of scholars and practitioners engaged in documenting and interpreting conflict and its impact on people, communities, and societies around the world. We are similarly indebted to Sanem Güner and Daniel Duffy, who organized the Istanbul dialogue that inspired us to continue our conversations on how to link oral historians doing human rights work around the world.

Introduction to Oral History

FIELD AND MOVEMENT

Oral history is the practice of collecting, preserving, interpreting, and curating individual, social, and collective experiences in story form. The practice of telling, recording, and writing drawn from oral stories, performances, and other narrative forms dates back at least to Herodotus and is probably an activity as old as language itself. The modern evolution of oral history as practice can be traced back to the 1930s and '40s and the invention of the portable recorder. The subsequent development of the field of oral history, beginning in the 1970s, was characterized by a rich international collaboration of scholars from anthropology, folklore, sociology, history, psychology, linguistics, and literature, who turned to the creation and investigation of oral sources to deepen their work. Because of the rapid expansion of oral history across the world, and the interest of oral historians in social and political change and advocacy, oral history has often been written about as a movement as well as an academic field of practice. Indeed, the number of large oral history archives created around the world and the increasing use and teaching of oral history as a scholarly practice are visible legacies of the 20th century oral history movement and its burgeoning field.

ROLE OF ORAL HISTORY IN CONFLICT AND IN PRESENT TIMES

As the memory of a turbulent 20th century was punctuated by increasing violence, conflict, and rapid social and economic change, 21st century leaders in the field of oral history have become increasingly aware of the potential role oral history must play in documenting change and conflict in our times. One focus of this orientation ensures that people (and communities) whose voices are suppressed, and who have little access to media and other forums, are treated as full historical subjects. A second focus of using oral history to understand the nature of conflict and change is the very valuable use of oral history for analyzing patterns of conflict as they emerge in narrative form, as well probing the silences that fragment narratives and prevent the transmission of oral stories, rituals, and performances into popular as well a historical memory.

Across the disciplines, and throughout communities around the world, there is recognition that language itself—in its aural, visual, performative, and written form—is the purest source of meaning and transmission of meaning over generations. Oral history, a linguistic and dialogic event, is one of the most

acutely sensitive instruments we have to understand the complex causes, as well as the consequences, of human conflicts. As oral history is attuned to the creation and transmission of meaning and memory, it evokes new ways of hearing and provides us with the potential to reimagine the future based on new understandings of the past.

GENRES OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is a complex and multi-vocal genre (Portelli) in which multiple perspectives, ideologies, and narratives create a mosaic of memory that reveals the tensions within the remembered past as well as the enduring conflicts of our times. The interview, based on knowledge and earned trust, takes different forms in different cultural settings but is characterized by several core characteristics:

1. The quality of the relationship between the interviewer and narrator, which is characterized by openness, equality, and a joint interest in the creation of stories. Oral history is an encounter, an exchange of ideas, values, and meaning, made richer by the length and quality of the relationship over time.
2. The movement of stories through time, resulting in the creation of rich historical narratives that reveal the transformations of the past into the present and the present into the future.
3. The crystallization of memories into narratives with distinctive forms—whether told, written, or performed—that transmits meaning, or reveals the loss of meaning, over time.
4. The creation and re-creation of narratives, rich in explanatory power, that stimulate new historical consciousness and understanding across lines of social and cultural difference, locally as well as globally. These narratives require analysis and interpretation, and writing about them reminds us that oral history is a writing genre as well as an oral performance.¹

Stories come in many different forms: oral performances, plays, jokes, life narratives, dreams, testimonies, community narratives, and oral traditions passed down over generations. The function of all these genres of telling is to transform experience into knowledge that can then be shared in a wider community.

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But there are at least three forms of oral history that have been used by the creators of this Guide:

1. life narratives: where the life story can illustrate the complex ways in which myth, ideology, culture, and memory meet;
2. community narratives: where identity is invested in the stories that are told, and those that must not be told, and where the identity of the community is more primary than the life story; and
3. cultural memories: in which the form of the telling, whether as song, poetry, jokes, performances, or ritual, is critical to understanding the multiple ways that people remember the past.

In the field of oral history as it has developed over the last half-century, we have seen the multiple uses of these forms, often in conjunction with each other, to develop a multilayered understanding of conflict and change.

“Oral history methodology gives voice to marginal groups in Turkey, who had been forced to assimilate, the means to preserve their history, culture, identity, and memory for future generations, thereby breaking the hegemony of state historiography.”

—Ramazan Aras



The Possibilities of Oral History in Situations of Conflict

By S. Mohammad Mohaqqueq

Oral history is a process that enables people normally ignored in written histories to speak their minds and share their experiences. In other words, it's a different way of understanding the "past" while encouraging all people to take their part in shaping the future. What follows is an outline of oral history's possibilities in situations of conflict:

- There are many untold stories in situations of conflict that are ignored by the mainstream media and traditional research approaches. Oral history has the power to reveal the nuances of stories that will otherwise go unheard.
- Oral history builds trust. Trust encourages those who suffer most in situations of conflict to tell their stories. Victims' narratives can have a tremendous impact on the conscience of the public, worldwide.
- Despite the risks and sensitivities to interviewing people in complex contexts—where age, gender, ethnicity, and other identities require deep understanding—oral history has a clear role to play in integrating multiple voices and reconstructing the history of a country in conflict.
- Oral history methodology can reconstruct an individual's attitude and identity where that identity has been suppressed. Afghan women were forgotten in the country's history for many years, or depicted in cowardly ways, and thus internalized the belief that "women have no agency." This notion has been reified through official education without many alternative or competing narratives. Through oral history, women can create their own narratives and fill this gap.
- Oral history also has the power to reconstruct social beliefs. The dominant culture of patriarchy in a country like Afghanistan (made worse by war and civil unrest) has limited women's participation in the public sphere. Through reclaiming their voices, women will take greater leadership roles in society.
- In situations of war and violence, parties to conflict have a narrative and counter-narrative that reflects their politics and ideologies; oral history provides an alternative for those who are impacted by violence to create their own narratives. Experiences in Afghanistan show that many perpetrators of violence who have had the chance of hearing from the victims have changed their attitudes or regretted their actions.
- In Islamic culture there is a concept called "Hadith-e-Nafs" (the story of the soul), which is when a person thinks deeply about him/herself. Oral history can make this silence speak and help both the narrator and the audience rethink their own, and others', identities.
- Oral history is a form of literature and provides a unique source of stories that can be rewritten and offered as pieces of literature for future generations. Situations of conflict are full of stories worth rewriting and offering as pieces of literature.
- Oral history's multidisciplinary nature as a method, and its uses beyond archiving, provides a unique source for stories. Policy makers in post-conflict countries can use the literature for integration, peace building, and identity construction.

THE USES OF ORAL HISTORY IN SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT, AND BEYOND

The group of us that gathered to meet in Istanbul, and later in New York, began by acknowledging and defining the complications of using oral history in situations of ongoing conflict, and beyond. Types of conflict we considered included: situations of humanitarian emergency, intra-ethnic conflict, state-sponsored violence, armed conflicts, conflicts over land and territory, intimate personal violence that is related to state control and hierarchies of power, ethno-religious and sectarian violence, repression of free speech and access to the rule of law, and of course, nationalism, and more.

We feel that it is important to emphasize that all situations of conflict require extraordinary vigilance on the part of the oral historian, the ethnographer, the journalist, and the human rights worker as they seek to learn from people who have already been deeply traumatized. Philip Sandick, a graduate of Columbia's master's program in oral history and a student of human rights law at Northwestern University in the United States, is working with The Hague to develop a Public Interviewing Guide that acknowledges the damage that is often done by well-meaning human rights workers who do not know how to work with traumatized people. He argues that oral history methodology should be at the center of that effort.²

Writing this Guide we have discovered that oral history and ethnography are comparable disciplines in situations of conflict and are ideally used in close relation to each other. Literature

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is essential for understanding the patterns of meaning conveyed in unique linguistic ways, in dialectical forms, and in poetry and performance. Human rights work that builds upon indigenous rituals and communal forms of meaning making in traditional ways is essential to build upon. Oral history does not stand alone as a discipline. In fact, its success is dependent on the many different contexts and practices in which we use it. This Guide is an effort to illuminate some of those and to invite a more global consideration of its potential uses.

We believe that through applying oral history principles to situations of ongoing conflict, and to post-conflict societies, oral history can help:

1. document roots and patterns of conflict in local and regional geographies invisible on a national or global scale;
2. reveal lost or suppressed narratives that, taken together, complicate the idea of a single historical narrative; and
3. use these new understandings and create historical dialogues that address the past and enable new visions of the future.

CASE STUDY

The Iraqi Oral History Project

The “Iraqi Oral History Project,” sponsored through TAARII and led by Lucine Taminian, is one of the best examples we have of an oral history project that has succeeded despite many obstacles and complications. For that reason we use it as a model of how to engage with questions about language, the insider/outsider question, and confidentiality and protection considered in this Guide. What follows is a description of the historical context and background of the Iraqi Oral History Project, along with some lessons learned.

By Lucine Taminian:

Since its formation as a modern state in 1921, Iraq has experienced major political, economic, social, and cultural transformations. These transformations range from periods of prosperity and tranquility to ethnic strife, large-scale revolution, and foreign interventions. Key events include the 1948 mass protests, the 1958 revolution that ended the Hashemite monarchy, the rise to power of the Ba’ath Party in the 1960s, and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1973. More recent events include the rise of Saddam Hussein, a decade-long war with Iran in the 1980s, the Gulf War of 1990–1991, the economic sanctions throughout the 1990s, the 2003 invasion and occupation, and the withdrawal of American troops at the end of 2011.

The Iraqi Oral History Project of The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII), a consortium of American universities, was inspired initially by the input from audience members during a 2005 conference that TAARII cosponsored in Amman, Jordan, on Iraqi identity. In response to the formal historical presentations of the conferees, audience members—senior Iraqi men and women who had been ministers and administrators, ambassadors, and educators from the days of the kingdom until the last days of Saddam Hussein—inserted comments and corrections. Their remarks demonstrated that the personal accounts of people who took part in the events that shaped the country were essential to the telling of the history of modern Iraq. After a pilot project, TAARII received National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding in 2007 to expand its oral history project. To date, we have collected 180 interviews with Iraqis living in six different countries (Canada, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, the United States, and Yemen). We interviewed Iraqis who migrated to Jordan and other places after decades of political unrest, and who had chosen to silence their own memories of the coups, oppression, torture, wars, sanctions, invasion, and sectarian conflict. They were afraid to talk about such “events” for fear that their narratives might endanger the lives of their family members who remained in

Iraq, expose their own political stands and the role they played in these events, or jeopardize their applications for resettlement in a third country. In this situation of post-conflict and diaspora, where traumatic experience is a closely held story, *telling* a life or community story is fraught by constraints. When asked about their own memories of these events, they would present the “official” narrative. However, when we asked about the *impact* of these events on their own lives, their families, and their communities, the narrators talked much more freely.

Cultural sensitivity and an understanding of the conflict setting were crucial in deciding which questions could be covered and which could not. For instance, asking direct questions about sectarian relations during the sectarian conflict that followed the invasion of Iraq could have led to mistrust.

As the project design suggests, specific terms used to describe or refer to the conflict were crucial.

Even naming the conflict was deeply sensitive.

Some narrators might refer to the March 2003 events in Iraq as an “invasion”; others might call it “liberation.” The term that we choose to use can affect the interview.

Another difficult problem in the Iraqi Oral History Project was that any interviewer, insider or outsider, might be distrusted. Insiders might be biased and might represent political positions and identities of certain sides of the conflict. Narrators might find it easier and “safer” to talk to outsiders in order to avoid potential betrayals or use of information for personal purposes. On the other hand, outsiders might lack the necessary cultural sensitivity and language skills. Outsiders need to establish shared ground, which can be brought in via training if they have the language skills. If not, it might be easier to train an insider.

Oral History Project

The Jordanian interviewers involved in documenting the life stories of Iraqis could be regarded as half insiders and half outsiders. They are insiders with regard to their language skills, as Iraqi Arabic and Jordanian Arabic are similar, but outsiders with regard to their cultural sensitivity. Their training program included training not only in techniques of conducting interviews and methods of transcribing and documenting interviews, but also in Iraqi culture and history.

Because safety and confidentiality were serious issues in the Iraqi Oral History Project, it was decided that the interviewers themselves should transcribe their interviews in order to minimize the number of people who had access to the narratives. In preparing the interviews for archiving and use by “foreign” scholars, the texts were edited at times from the Iraqi dialect terms to the more familiar classical Arabic forms. Lastly, a decision had to be made about how to “archive” the stories. For two main reasons, we decided to make the life stories collected in the Iraqi Oral History Project public by archiving them in a library in the United States and opening them to scholars interested in the sociocultural and political history of Iraq: (1) the limited understanding of the perceptions and lived experiences of Iraqis during the past five decades; and (2) the lack of written documentation on what has transpired in Iraq due to the looting of the National Library and Archives in 2003.

However, our measures to ensure the safety of the narrators have contradicted the legal conditions for archiving life stories. For example, we did not collect consent forms in order to avoid having participants attach their names to their narratives.



Setting Research Goals and Building a Project Design



Interviewing can be a profound and transformative experience for both the oral historian and the narrator. It is also a complex and detail-oriented process. Preparation and keen awareness of context, in every area, is key to the success of work in conflict settings. In this section, we present essential components for each phase of the oral history project, from preparation to dissemination.

PROJECT DESIGN

In general, planning a project to collect life histories and community stories in conflict settings involves establishing general and specific research goals and objectives, taking into account the explicit context of conflict.

The project design answers at least three questions:

What is it that you want to cover?

The purpose of a project design is to identify the key historical periods where there are gaps in historical knowledge and to prioritize the subjects you want to learn about on a general level.

What does the history you record mean to those who lived through it?

Oral history is devoted to the mission of understanding the "meaning" of historical experience: personal, social, and cultural. In this sense we are interested in *why* events and experiences are remembered and the meaning they have been assigned, as well as the silences and absences in narratives where memory has been repressed, distorted, or destroyed.

What is the long-term purpose of your research?

Knowing what you want to accomplish, and how you want to use the stories and memories you gather, defines your work from the beginning and will guarantee greater success.

Research Goals and

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
<i>Define clear research goals</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you “not yet know” about the situation of conflict or post-conflict situation that oral history will allow you to discover? • What are the central historical and cultural questions that will help open up new understandings? • What questions cannot be asked, and why?
<i>Define the nature of the conflict or post-conflict situation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the nature of the conflict, or post-conflict situation, you will be working in? • How will that situation affect your ability to apply your research goals in the short and long term? • How will the situation affect the ability of the people you interview to speak freely?
<i>Establish the timeframe for your project and for the temporal span of your work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is the ideal time to conduct interviews, during active conflict or when the conflict is over? • Plan for how long you think your work will realistically take. • Consider developing a longitudinal approach so that you can demonstrate the ways that the conflict and the memory of the conflict are reshaped over time. • Plan how many interview sessions you will need to conduct with different individuals within a project to achieve depth as well as diversity.
<i>Establish the themes and topics of your work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral history narratives are organized around themes and topics. • The more clearly you identify the themes that you are most interested in, the better the interview will flow. • Keep track of the themes that the narrators bring up naturally and incorporate these into your project design.
<i>Select project personnel</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the traits of the ideal interviewer/ethnographer. • When is it important to select an insider and when is it essential to select an outsider? • Will the people you select need explicit training? • Plan to develop a team approach to evaluating interviewers and sharing positive and negative experiences throughout your project work.
<i>What about language?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the language and dialects you will encounter. • Oral history gives precedence to the original language of the narrator whenever possible. • If possible, select interviewers who speak the original languages and dialects. • If you plan to transcribe the interviews, will you translate them for a public audience? • How will you work with your narrators to respect their choices about the final products?

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
<p><i>Define the research community; develop criteria for inclusion and exclusion of communities</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you planning to include both sides of the conflict? • Are you planning to interview “perpetrators” as well as “victims? In human rights work there is often heated discussion about this issue. • What historical, cultural criteria will you use to include/exclude communities and individuals? • How will you make selections, and how will you explain your selections to others?
<p><i>Determine the transcription, translation process</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What transcription policy will be followed? Complete, or partial? • Transcription is a translation of the oral into a written text. Punctuation marks are often used in transcriptions to make the text more readable and to try to capture the pauses, silences, intonations, and tones. Transcription is a representation and interpretation of the oral text. To keep the flow of the interview, any notes or annotations should be included as footnotes rather than in the text itself. Transcriptions should include the questions that were asked during the interviews in order to contextualize the responses. • Consider the risks of having an outsider perform the transcription. • If you are using a translator, how will you train him or her to work closely with you to understand not only the words said, but the meaning of the stories and the way in which they are told? • Who has control over the editing decisions?
<p><i>Choose your recorder</i> <i>Choose your technology</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose your recording technology. • Choose the best equipment you can afford. Recording quality matters. • Quality recording technologies are now very affordable. See Endnote 3 (Doug Boyd, “Ask Doug”) for assistance choosing a digital audio recorder. • Whatever recorder or camera you choose, learn to use it well. Read the manual and practice. • Audio or video? Audio will be more portable and affordable to preserve and will require fewer logistical considerations. Video will create more logistical considerations, making you less portable and mobile, but it adds the visual dimension, which can be very powerful. Carefully consider your intended outcomes and your budget when choosing between audio and video. (See “Audio or Video for Recording Oral History” in Technology Resources.) • Consider whether you will be recording in controlled environments or if you will you need a mobile, portable solution. In certain circumstances, portability, battery life, and durability may be necessary. • Microphones: Choose suitable microphones for the recording environment and for your recorder. There is no perfect recorder for all situations. Consider a variety of microphone types for a variety of situations. Dynamic microphones are generally more durable. Condenser microphones are more sensitive, but they are also more fragile. (See “Understanding Microphones” in Technology Resources.) • See Bibliography/Resources page for additional resources.

PROJECT DESIGN ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
<p><i>What are the ethics that will guide your work?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral history is an ethical process, respecting the rights and dignity of all persons. • The key issue in interviewing vulnerable people is to gain their consent. This means explaining to them all the risks that are involved so that they can make a clear decision about whether to be interviewed. • A clear principle of oral history is to inform people of their rights to the recordings you create, and to get their approval to use those recordings.
<p><i>What are the risks, to those you interview and to yourself?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will be the benefits of participation? Will they outweigh the risks? Outline the risks and benefits specifically. • When interviewing people at grave risk, it is necessary to mask the identities of those you interview, to secure the information you record on encrypted software, and to store the files in a secure place. • Consider that a recorded oral consent may be safer than a written consent. • Consider the risk the interview itself poses to the narrator and the interviewer. Make a safety plan and warn your narrator of the dangers. • The project must also consider the safety and emotional well-being of the interviewers, who will be deeply affected by the stories they hear. Create a plan to meet the needs of the interviewers to debrief and recover from difficult work.



Fieldwork

As we described in the introduction to this Guide, oral history fieldwork is flexible in form and adaptable to many different contexts. Sometimes we cannot understand big events without the life story, through which the human cost of events are measured. But in some cases, the life story has little meaning without the community or cultural story. Many oral historians around the world call this “cultural memory work.”

COLOMBIA



“The collective narration of the story of female victims enables greater understanding of women’s perspectives on the origins of armed conflict in Colombia and enriches the language of human rights activists regarding women’s issues.”

—Claudia P. González Perez

MEMORY IS ME: MEMORY, BODY, TERRITORY

Claudia P. González Perez is an indigenous feminist human rights worker at the center La Casa de la Mujer in Colombia who uses oral history with individual women who have experienced forced displacement, massacres, the disappearance of family members, and intimate violence to build a collective story. *Memory is me: memory, body, territory* is a program that was developed by La Casa de la Mujer in 2010 to help women victims of violence connect to each other in the project of developing historical memory. Women are invited to tell their stories and place them on maps, connecting the history of their body narratives to the territories they are from. The goal is to integrate the memory of body and territory while enabling women to learn from each other’s experiences. To protect confidentiality, the women tell “fictional stories” they elaborate together and then collectively analyze. In doing so they “recover” their histories literally and metaphorically—always acknowledging their shared experiences and relationship to their land and their bodies, as they sing, dance, and tell their stories.

“Our methodology allows us to do research on multiple origins of conflict, both civil and national. Through this approach we can recover the memories that have been erased by rival groups.”

—Claudia P. González Perez

TURKEY

Considering issues of security and risks is a matter of daily life in Turkey, where armed clashes occur between the state forces and the PKK guerillas (the Kurdistan Workers Party). A major challenge for oral historians is how to engage with the various groups of Kurds in narrating their own experiences of conflict.

In Turkey, Ramazan Aras works in community settings where there is active conflict, and the histories of “perpetrators” and “victims” are shared by virtue of living on the same land. His research involves working with both sides of a protracted conflict in which the story of a particular individual may or may not be eclipsed by the community story.

“Oral history as a methodology for creating multi-vocal histories provides a new ground for counter-narratives and histories. Hegemonic powers operate as surveillance apparatuses to ensure that their acts of violence against one group do not reach another group victim in the same region. In this context, oral history emerges as an instrument for connecting these groups. The labor of sharing their stories with each other and disseminating their stories and testimonies can be therapeutic. Therefore, oral history can play a crucial role in the process of democratization of history writing and of the political system in Turkey.”

—Ramazan Aras



INTERVIEW ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
<i>Establish rapport</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to gain the trust of the narrator, a stranger with whom the interviewer wants to engage in a dialogue in order to have a “successful” interview. • Negotiate with her/him the flow of the interview, when to take a rest, and when to record and not to record.
<i>Create transparency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To gain the trust of the narrator, the interviewer should be transparent about the project, including its aims and future plans for dissemination. • The interviewer should accept challenges and questions raised by the narrators. • The interviewer should go through the steps of the oral history process and explain the narrator’s rights.
<i>Choose the location of the interview thoughtfully</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting can influence what is said. People tell the story differently each time; their story is shaped by the context of the act of telling, including who is doing the interview, where, when, and who else is present during the interview, besides the interviewer and the narrator. • It is crucial to negotiate the time and the setting with the interviewees, and to respect their schedule. • Ideally, the setting should be a space where there is some degree of privacy.
<i>Be sensitive to nuance and context</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural sensitivity and knowledge of the narrator and his/her linguistic forms of narration are important to earn respect and engage with her/him in rewarding dialogue.
<i>Be aware of “official” or prepared stories</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrators, especially if they belong to marginalized social groups, are in general unaware of the importance of their own experiences of conflict and, when asked, tend to tell the “official” account or a prepared story. • If aware of official accounts or prepared stories that might be circulating among the research community, the interviewer can ask questions that move the conversation to other directions and make the narrator feel that they are in a position of power and have valuable information: “I want to learn something about . . . Teach me about it.”
<i>Structure the interview</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The skilled interviewer can negotiate the movements back and forth through time, across topics, and between personal and institutional histories to create a sense of a seamless story in which the narrator is always the focus of the interaction.

INTERVIEW ESSENTIALS	CONSIDERATIONS
<i>Use good questions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose language very carefully, trying to avoid terms and ideas that are provocative. • Begin with an open-ended question or series of questions. • Ask follow-up questions that directly relate to the stories and ideas the narrator has already conveyed: for example: "You just mentioned that the land was once yours and when it was it seemed so peaceful. Can you tell me more about that?" • Be sensitive to experiences, both individual and cultural, that are too painful to be articulated, and respect the silences that exist. When trust builds, people will open up naturally. • Focus on the specific and the general, and try to maintain a balance between the two. When the narrator becomes too specific, move to the general, and when she or he becomes too general, ask for a specific story or incident. • Move the interview temporally, and ask narrators to reflect on how the passage of time affects their memories and the meaning they hold.
<i>Probing vs. interruption</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrators enjoy talking about things of importance and of interest to them that may not interest the interviewer. • Do not interrupt the narrator. Interrupting the narrative flow will shift the narrative into an investigative style. Once the narrator stops, ask about topics of interest to you and/or something said prior, for more details or clarification.



THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCUMENTATION

It is crucial to create an implementation plan for each phase of your work, from research to interviewing to the documentation and processing of the oral histories you conduct. Document each phase of your work, including project planning.

Some important considerations:

1. Name interviewing files according to narrator name (or code #), date of interview, and time of recording. Include the name of the interviewer.
2. Keep tracking information of those whom you have interviewed or reached out to in the phases of your project, especially if you may go back to them over time.
3. Listen to the recordings within 1 or 2 days after the interview is over. Identify the themes and the topics that are resonant across the interviews and create a summary.
4. Evaluate your successes, and your failures, at regular points in the process through applying an evaluation procedure, and adjust your project design accordingly.
5. Document your findings: write regular reports on your progress that you can share with funders or supporters.

PRESERVING MEMORY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital technologies have transformed our ability to record professional-quality interviews in the field with affordable and portable audio and video equipment. However, digital technologies have complicated the curation of recorded interviews immensely.

- The data files you create using digital audio and video recorders are fragile and complex entities stored on media that will eventually change or break down.
- The shifting technological landscape will eventually render the formats you are creating today obsolete and therefore unplayable.
- Digital curation is an ongoing process to ensure future access and minimize the chances of data file corruption. This is accomplished by creating redundancy, monitoring data file integrity, and implementing a plan for future migration.

CURATION IN CONTEXT

If you are not an archivist or an archival institution, our strongest recommendation is for you to partner with an archival institution *before* you begin conducting interviews.

- Consider the curatorial phase of your project during the initial project planning stages.
- Once this archival relationship is built, it is vitally important that the chosen institution curate your collection in context. Make sure that the archival institution/partner has clearly articulated protocols for managing collections such as the one you will be creating.
- Interviews recorded in conflict and post-conflict environments may require special attention to restrict access or protect identity. If possible, mutually agree to those protocols before beginning your project.
- Work together with your archival institution so that they understand that the curation of your collection may require additional attention or protections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Make multiple copies of your interview and store those copies in multiple places.*
- *Maintain the original.*
- *Stay away from proprietary formats.*
- *Understand your formats:* Digital audio and video formats are made up of multiple elements. Understanding the elements is key to future playability and compatibility.
- *Pay attention to best practices.*
- *Avoid unnecessary compression of audio. Understand video compression.*
- *Overwhelm the future with metadata:* Knowledge is power. Make sure that oral history collections are well documented with administrative, technical, and descriptive metadata to empower future archivists to handle your digital assets.
- *Partnership:* Partner with an archival institution that has the most current capabilities in digital preservation. If you use a vendor, confirm that the system that you adopt is in line with standards and is implemented utilizing vendor-independent standards. Have an exit plan: can you take your data with you when you leave or if the vendor goes out of business?

UNDERSTANDING AND DISSEMINATING VOICES

The digital age has dramatically changed the potential for access and dissemination of oral history materials. Digital technologies have freed oral history from the constraints of the printed page, yielding the potential for large-scale access to individual interviews. Instant access can come at a profound cost. Oral histories typically contain a massive amount of personal and sometimes controversial information, which can put a narrator at enormous risk from a privacy perspective.

- The repository approach focuses on providing access to entire interviews.
- Providing access to entire interviews can be risky from the perspective of protecting a narrator's privacy
- Work with your archival partner to determine whether or not interviews in an archive should be embargoed or if digital access should be restricted.
- Audio and video editing tools are both free and easy to use, providing exciting opportunities.
- Excerpting or providing edited access can achieve the goals of amplifying stories in the short term, while simultaneously attenuating risk to the narrator.
- Simply putting excerpts online at a website does not constitute a long-term preservation or archival plan.
- Interviews that contain privacy risk should be restricted from access in an archival system dedicated to protecting access and curating the collection from the digital preservation perspective.

Oral history collections, once used only a few times a year by serious researchers in an archive, can now be accessed hundreds or even thousands of times by a range of users worldwide. This exciting transformation in digital dissemination of oral histories and related publications is energizing. Projects can be designed in such a way as to have an immediate impact on the historical record. The powerful capabilities we now have for disseminating oral histories worldwide can put narrators at great risk from a privacy perspective. Digital tools can be used to "re-edit" voices to tell unintended stories. Once in the digital domain, the potential for decontextualized use and even misuse of a recorded interview can be great. Instant access to oral history interviews may serve your short-term purposes as project manager or scholar but may prove harmful in the long view to those whose stories you so dili-

gently recorded and ethically try to represent. This is a heavy responsibility that must be carefully considered. Work with an archival partner who understands the contextual and cultural implications of providing future access to your collection and proactively engage archival partners in a long-term access plan for your collection.

CONCLUSION

Stories, like experience, are never finished and reflect fragments as well as patterns of meaning, the distortions of meaning, and the impacts of violence on people, cultures, and communities. The increasing use of oral history in our times demonstrates the value of understanding the meaning of conflict and change in the time that it is happening. This Guide is written in part to warn those who intend to work in zones of conflict about the very real dangers and limits inherent there, and of the importance of safeguards and ethical principles that must be followed to protect both the interviewees and the narrators. But it is also an argument—crafted by committed oral historians and ethnographers working in human rights contexts—for oral history to explore human connections across the divisions that arbitrarily separate us, to rebuild communities and connections between communities wherever and whenever we can. Our hope for change is based on voices and dreams of those we have interviewed, and many we could not.

ENDNOTES

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En enfrentamientos de
grupos armados



Riosucos

A Menaza
de la guerrilla
de las Parvas
Resistencia
ano de Jaime
des Po Jar de mi
~~territorio~~
territorio

La resistencia es
no ser nos de
Plazamos al municipio
de Quibdo por eso sobre
vivimos

