

Five Keys of Judgment: Truth and Fiction in Autobiographical and Oral History Research - Palestinian Oral History in Israel

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This article presents the problem of the scarcity and even lack of original historical documents related to the Palestinian Arab minority who were included in the State of Israel after its establishment, and the historians' consequent need to utilize autobiographies and oral history collected from Nakba generation Palestinians who remained within the borders of the State of Israel. The article takes a deductive approach, from the particular to the general, and proposes a research tool called "Five Keys of Judgment" that supports critical judgment work and refers to the trustworthiness of autobiographical documents and oral history collected previously by other historians and researchers and currently available in the form of audio records or written reports.

Keywords: *autobiographical research, oral history, selectivity, authenticity, identity voice, language, conditions of engagement with the past, Palestinians in Israel*

Introduction

The war of 1948 was a historical event and salient temporal point in the national narrative of both Palestinians and Jews (Berenskoetter 2014). From the perspective of the Jews, it was their independence war and enabled the ingathering of the Jewish people. From the Palestinian Arab perspective, however, this war brought upon them destruction and the *Nakba* (a term coined by Syrian historian Constantin Zureiq to describe the depth of the destruction and defeat following the war) and was the cause for the dispersion of the Palestinian people (Zureik 1948). This war junction has been the focus of vigorous work by writers and, journalists, intellectuals, historians, academics, and others, from both the Jewish and Palestinian sides, to document and commemorate their people's history.

From a research standpoint, first-generation Palestinian historians educated in Israeli academic institutions, such as Butrus Abu Mannah and Kais Firro, were cautious and preferred to engage in history that does not directly concern the war of 1948 and the Jewish-Palestinian conflict. It seems that their younger successors, however, such as Adel Manna, Mustafa Abbasi, Mahmoud Yazbak, and Mustafa Kabha, who were exposed in Israeli academia to the wealth of historical research on the Zionist movement and Jewish history, utilized the academic democratization and liberalization allowed them and aspired to facilitate the documentation of the Palestinian people's history, in the same way as their

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Jewish counterparts. They also strived to renew and fill the gaps in the writings of Palestinian historians, those who reconstructed the pre-war period, and on the events of the 1948 war itself, which they had themselves witnessed. Most of these historians, such as Walid Khalidi, Aref al-Aref, Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, and others, were exiled from Palestine. Much of the gaps were created due to the ethnic and political identity and social status of these historians, which whether intentionally or not, prevented them from addressing certain classes, groups, and individuals who could have completed the historical picture that they were trying to reconstruct. Over time, these Palestinian historians in Israeli academia were joined by other Palestinian scholars who had been exposed to postmodern social and cultural approaches, and who also wished to innovate and integrate quantitative comparative approaches based on scientific sampling.

Palestinian historians in Israel faced a serious problem involving the scarcity of primary sources on which they could rely, where sometimes these were even completely inexistent. The Palestinian people who remained within the borders of the State of Israel, were a people in a process of structuring and forming their social status and identity, whose memory of the pre-Nakba period included acts of banning, repression, distortion and forgetting, both deliberate and non-deliberate (Kabha 2014, Nets-Zehngut & Bar-Tal 2014, Nets-Zehngut, 2014). The few Palestinians (150,000) who were included in the State of Israel after its establishment, were mainly fellahs (a class of farmers or agricultural laborers) or remnants of the low bourgeoisie. A large part of them was classified as “inner refugees”, as during the war of 1948 war they were forced by the Jewish army to abandon their villages and towns and move to places where the State of Israel permitted Arab settlement. Archival documents containing the correspondence between these refugees and the Minister of Minority Affairs during the early years of the State of Israel, constitute a preliminary source indicating that, under the threat of war, these refugees did not manage to collect and take with them documents, certificates, photographs, and most of their portable memories¹.

Against the background of the 1948 war, the Jews became the new settlers who took over most of the lands, buildings, streets, and property of the Palestinian people. This is one of the reasons that many of the Palestinians’ documents and belongings were scattered and lost; another part was confiscated by the Israeli authorities and kept in classified warehouses and archives to which the researchers had no access (Sela 2009, Raz 2020).

Surprisingly and extremely paradoxically, the Israel State Archives and the National Library of Israel Archive in Jerusalem (along with archives of historical mixed cities, the Kibbutz settlement movement, political movements, and others) have released and are still releasing original documents (photographs, records, letters, diaries, maps, certificates, memoirs, newspapers, notebooks, books, etc.) that belonged to Palestinians and constitute primary sources for the use of Palestinian and Jewish historians and researchers, albeit under strict censorship.

The difficulty faced by Palestinian historians in Israel concerned not only the loss of physical resources such as land, buildings, property, and documents, but

¹See, for example, Files P-931/6; G-301/82. Catalogue. Prime Minister’s Office – Office of the Advisor for Arab Affairs Office. State Archives, Jerusalem.

was further exacerbated by the lack of memory preservation among the Palestinians who remained within the State of Israel. The declaration of Israel's independence spurred the building of the state and the narrative and memory of the Jewish people, with concurrent efforts to erase, distort, and blur Palestinian memory. In quite a few cases, the Israeli authorities almost completely destroyed Arab buildings in the deserted villages (Kabha 2014), implemented a policy of removing the history of the Palestinian people from the curricula of Arabs in Israel (Mar'i 1978, Smooha 1980), imposed censorship on the media and press (Kabha & Caspi 2011), and Hebraicized the geographic and public space in all its forms², etc.

Due to the great shortage of primary sources, as described above, the narratives written by Palestinians and published in the Arabic language press in the early years of the State of Israel are an important source that researchers could use for the purpose of historical reconstruction. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the government under the auspices of the Histadrut (General Organization of Workers in Israel) supported the distribution of a newspaper in the Arabic language (*Al-Yaum* [Today]) that represented its voice and policy. The government also allowed the renewed publication of the communist newspaper *Al-Ittihad* (The Union), first published in 1944 during the British Mandate government. Slowly, after coming to terms with the new reality, the Palestinians in Israel who were previously accustomed to an abundance of cultural life and newspapers attempted to publish two other magazines (*Al-Mujtama* and *Al-Fajr*).³ In these newspapers and magazines they published poetry and prose constituting first-hand photographic documentation that provided historians and other scholars with a partial portrayal of the reality of Palestinians in Israel at the junction of the 1948 war (Touma 1963, 1965). The difficulty with these sources lies in their limitations, i.e., their small number and the fact that they were written under the censorship of the Israeli military administration with no real freedom of expression.

The field of oral history developed beginning from the 1960s and 1970s as a pioneering academic field, followed by an increasing tendency of researchers to study issues involving special groups who left behind no written documentation, such as manual laborers, poor women, oppressed groups, and others. Moreover, political, cultural, social, and financial histories based on significant writings began to receive further breadth and new perspectives when the body of written documents and findings at their base was enhanced by oral testimonies of those who participated in that history, but their point of view was not previously taken into account (Perks & Thomson 2015).

The awakening of oral history and its presence in the international research arena, the reliance of Jewish historians on oral history (e.g., Bauer 1970⁴, Cohen

²File GL-22167/6, State Archives, Jerusalem.

³*Al-Mujtama* (The Society) was first published in 1954 and was a general literary journal with no declared political line. Its writers included known local Arab authors alongside Iraqi-Jewish writers; *Al-Fajr* (The Dawn) was a monthly journal first published in 1958. It was the organ of Mapam (United Workers Party) and it advocated the nationalist line represented by Gamal Abdel Nasser.

⁴Yehuda Bauer documented the escape of some 250,000 Jews from Eastern Europe to Central Europe, mainly Germany, Italy, and Austria, after the Nazi defeat, between 1944 and 1948.

1984⁵, Cohen 2000⁶), and the founding of oral documentation centers for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and other places⁷, were probably what drew the attention of Palestinian historians in Israel to the use of oral history as a source to be relied on in the act of reconstructing history⁸. These researchers also relied (and still rely) on autobiographies written by Palestinians as a primary source.

A. Between Oral History and Autobiography – Common Questions

Oral history is a practice and research method based on collecting primary sources such as personal memoirs and commentaries through recorded interviews. As it comprises both the act of documenting (the recording) and the testimony produced (the record), it may be seen as a research method based on the interviewee's memory, which integrates in a timely manner both practice and product (Perks & Thomson 2015, Abrams 2016, Ritchie 2014, Portelli 2009, Thompson 2017, Shopes 2011, Hall 2017, Portelli 2010).

Looking at the relationship chain as formulated by Portelli (2009) regarding oral history shows up the common elements with autobiographies:

“Oral history is a work of relationships; in the first place, a relationship between the past and the present, an effort to establish, through memory and narrative, what the past means to the present; then, a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and between the oral form of the narrative and the written or audiovisual form of the historian's product” (p. 21).

Autobiography, much like oral history, is a biography an individual writes (as opposed to says) about himself, his life, and events that influenced him and his surroundings, from a personal point of view. Similar to oral history, it also indicates the association between the past and the present, is based on memory and narrative, and is produced to form a link between the past and present (Smorti 2011, Ellingson 2009, Anderson 2001, Brockmeier 2012, DeGloma 2010, Walker 2017, Polkinghorne 1988, 1995, 2010, Westlund 2011).

The fundamental distinction between autobiography and oral history lies in the intrinsic requirement for an author, subject, and narrator. In the case of autobiography, the involvement of just a single individual suffices (Lejeune 1975, Byram et al. 2009, Neumann 2010), whereas oral history necessitates the participation of at least two people: the interviewee and the interviewer. This setup can be further extended by including multiple interviewers and observers, who

⁵By using oral history, Asher Cohen followed the role of the refugees who belonged to the pioneer youth movements from Poland and Slovakia in shaping the rescue movement in Hungary during World War II.

⁶Avner Cohen documented the establishment of the nuclear reactor in Dimona, drawing on numerous documents and about 150 interviews with Israelis and key figures in the US government.

⁷See, for example, the “Falastin fi al-Zakira” archive established in 2003 for Palestinian refugees in Jordan. <https://www.palestineremembered.com/OralHistory/Interviews-Listing/ar/Story1151.html> (May 21, 2020); The Nakba Archive - an oral history collective established in Lebanon in 2002. https://www.nakba-archive.org/?page_id=956 (May 21, 2020).

⁸At the head of the Palestinian historians who have used oral documentation stands Mustafa Kabha, who established in Kafr Qara, Israel in 2006 an archive for oral documentation of the Palestinians in Israel and refugees outside it. He also published a list of books based on oral history.

may engage actively or passively. Within the domain of oral history, it is common for researchers to employ a documenter who transcribes the interviews. This individual then becomes an additional contributor in the process, playing a pivotal role in the crafting of the final narrative (Perks & Thomson 2015, Kim 2008, Abrams 2016).

In analyzing the autobiography and transcribed oral testimony through the lens of those involved in their final production, it's essential to ponder certain inquiries. Here's a pivotal question that should be contemplated to assess the reliability of these two sources. These inquiries transcend the specific context of Palestinian research and are valuable for any scholar aiming to utilize these sources. In the following section, I will outline questions designed to aid researchers in evaluating these materials more effectively.

B. What Should a Researcher Ask when Examining the Credibility of an Autobiography or Oral History?

To enhance the understanding of the proposed model that aims to assist researchers in determining whether oral testimony or autobiography is more advantageous for their studies, this paper will leverage the example of American-Palestinian intellectual Edward Said (2000). Utilizing Said's autobiography and oral testimony as a case study, the model will be elucidated. Said embarked on the journey of writing his autobiography, "Out of Place", at the age of 60 while undergoing chemotherapy for leukemia, offering insight into his motivations for sharing his story. Within the narrative, he delves into his upbringing across various locations including Palestine (Jerusalem), Egypt (Cairo), and Lebanon (Dhour el Shweir), with a particular focus on his educational experiences. This raises questions about what elements were included in his reconstructed narrative. Composing his autobiography in the United States, Said navigates the complexities of recounting his history from a distance both in time and geographical location from the settings of his early life. This juxtaposition highlights the ongoing conflict between his Arab heritage and his experiences within the colonial context of the United States. A critical aspect of his narrative is the challenge of using English to recount events intrinsically tied to the Arabic language, introducing a layer of ambivalence to his discourse. The process of writing the autobiography spanned approximately five years, prompting reflection on the temporal and spatial dimensions of his historical reconstruction. Said's passing in 2003, three years after the publication of his book, marks a poignant conclusion to his narrative journey. Said indicated that his illness was the reason the led him to document his lost and forgotten world before it would be too late. The autobiography, as he pointed out, allowed him to bridge between time and place; between his present life and his past life. Said further noted his astonishment at the number of details he had not forgotten, and the pleasure that he received from the act of remembering and writing, which supported him and held him through the difficult period of receiving treatment for his illness (What is the personal experience during and after the reconstruction?). In the preface to his book, Said cautioned that several people that he described in his book are still alive and will likely disagree with or dislike his portrayals of them

and others (Was the testimony exposed to criticism?). Nonetheless, he indicated that it is him and only him who is responsible for what he recalled and saw, even though he was helped by two skilled editors who were his friends (Who is involved in writing the content and who is responsible for it?).

A year before Said passed away his former student, D. D. Guttenplan, convinced him to give a video interview to a common friend, Charles Glass (an American-British author, journalist, broadcaster, and publisher specializing in the Middle East and the Second World War)⁹ (Who is the interviewer, what is his identity?). This last interview with Said that was held at his home (What details can be produced beyond the interview?) took almost three and a half hours and included (in the first part) additional testimonies and clarifications on personal questions directed by Glass and related to Said's autobiography and the critique it received (What is true and what is false?). Following the publication of his autobiography, some reviews were published against Said, which questioned some of the facts he wrote and claimed that they are fiction (mainly Justus Weiner, 1999). The interviewer, Glass, knew how to lead the interview to clarify contested points and also asked questions regarding details that didn't seem to make sense for him. For example, the issue of Said's lack of enthusiasm for the works of Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi, as opposed to his appreciation for the music of Gioachino Rossini at a very young age. The interviewer also asked questions regarding passages in the autobiography that needed clarification.

The concept of trustworthiness serves as an alternative to the conventional metrics of validity and reliability utilized in both quantitative research and traditional qualitative studies, as established by Guba & Lincoln (1983). In the realm of naturalistic-qualitative inquiry, achieving trustworthiness hinges on the researcher's commitment to thoroughly and transparently documenting the research process. This includes explicating the criteria for database and category selection, as well as elucidating the analysis methodology through the verification of diverse sources, leveraging existing literature, and seeking insights from external reviewers.

Furthermore, the model introduced herein emphasizes five critical aspects designed to assess the trustworthiness of autobiographical texts or oral testimonies (whether written or recorded) upon which researchers intend to base their work. This five-key model is proposed as a practical instrument to facilitate a researcher's critical evaluation of both the structure of the narrative (and the content encapsulated within it, whether in written autobiographies or oral histories).

C. Truth or Fiction – the “Five Keys of Judgment” Model

Key #1: Motives: How do the motivations behind the narrative influence the selection of what is included or excluded from the reconstructed frame?

Key #2: Authenticity: To what extent does the narrative reflect personal memories versus collective or national memories?

⁹The Last Interview of Edward Said. By Brigitte Caland. Directed by Mike Dibb, Interviewed by Charles (Summer 2002). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzorBaplIFM>.

Key #3: The Voice of Reconstructing Identity: Can a distinction be made between the narrative voice of the current identity and that of the past identity being reconstructed?

Key #4: Language: What terminology is employed in the narrative, and what does it reveal about the narrator's personal and collective identity and culture?

Key #5: Conditions of Engagement with the Past: What are the conditions under which the past is reconstructed, including the physical and temporal setting, the narrator's age and health, the temporal distance from the period being reconstructed, the continuity of the narrative, whether the reconstruction was a one-off or extended over time, and whether it was more reflexive or reflective? Additionally, were there any external factors that influenced the reconstruction process?

In the following, each key will be presented in detail, while noting that it cannot be addressed effectively without understanding the background and general atmosphere of the document and without going over the report comprehensively time and again.

Content of the Critical Coding Keys

D1. **Motives:** This key includes the question of the author's motivation for writing the autobiography, the interviewee's motivation for giving the oral testimony, and the interviewer's motivation for collecting it (obtaining answers to research questions, confirming or refuting assumptions, etc.); the motives are an essential source for determining the frame and content of the reconstructed picture.

The examination of an autobiographical document or oral testimony (in the form of a recording or written report) by a researcher must be accompanied by preliminary collection of information about the identity and the social, political, and research position of the author, the interviewer, and the interviewee. Autobiographies are usually written by an elite political group, intellectuals, social activists, or others, after they have retired and stepped out of the limelight. Attorney Muhammad Nimr al-Hawari (1908-1984), who for a certain period was an associate of national leader Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, was one of the few Palestinians in Israel who wrote an autobiography (in 1955) about his life and actions before the 1948 war (al-Hawari 1955). Al-Hawari's declared motivation was to generate a historical record for the use of future generations. However, a slight search in his past leads to the conclusion, or at least to a suspicion, that he did so in order to clarify his position and to defend himself against allegations of national betrayal after the Israeli authorities approved his return to Israel in 1950. In addition, support of the Jewish narrative against the Palestinians and its dissemination is also a motive that should be brought to the forefront when examining the reconstructed historical picture in Al-Hawari's autobiography.

Bulus Farah was a communist activist during the British Mandate, and he insistently rejected the partition plan of Palestine into two states, Jewish and Arab. As a result, he was barred from the party's political activities and was compelled to

operate outside it. In his autobiography he writes: “I want to present myself as I really was, to refute what was written about and misrepresented me in other books” (Farah 1985, p. 13). Self-defense as a motive assists the researchers in interpreting and judging the truth presented by Farah from his own point of view.

Palestinian intellectuals such as Emile Habibi (1973) and Hanna Abu Hanna (1997) chose to write their autobiographies as novels about fiction figures. This helped them look into themselves and at their past while remaining outside the picture (Bruner 1985). The conclusion regarding their motives is that Habibi and Abu Hanna wanted to avoid reprimand and criticism, particularly because they were active in the political and cultural arena. The researchers can thus conclude that they reconstructed and revealed only part of the truth and not its entirety.

Eakin (1999) introduces the concept that individuals are shaped by their own narratives, highlighting a motivation tied to the author's desire for self-perpetuation and the intention to present oneself in a preferred light. This motive often leads authors to emphasize significant moments of trauma, sacrifice, and heroism, positioning themselves at the heart of these stories (Gilmore 2001). Researchers should consider this underlying motive when analyzing narrators' texts, assessing how narrators or authors leverage their personal experiences to construct their idealized selves.

The researcher needs to examine both the manifest and covert motives; the motives of the interviewee in the oral testimony are similar to those of the autobiography author. The interviewee consents to be interviewed to defend himself, reveal his own personal truth, gain prestige and reputation, or attain commemoration. Similarly, the interviewer has overt motives in the form of obtaining answers for the research questions and testing assumptions, and he may also have covert motives, such as his will to perpetuate groups and figures, to protect against and dismiss allegations raised against his associates, and also to promote a national narrative he is interested in.

Hobsbawm (1990), who coined the term “national engineering”, alluded to manipulations that bias the work of contemporary historians (in our case the interviewer), particularly those whose objective is the perpetuation of national memory. For example, a historian-interviewer whose goal is to promote the escape narrative of Palestinian refugees during the 1948 war will direct questions whose answers indicate a narrative whereby Palestinians fled their villages and towns without putting up a struggle, while not mentioning situations of deportation, killing, struggle, and so on. The religious identity of the interviewer can lead to focusing the interview on a specific religious group or a certain religious conflict, for example, the Christians from Beisan (Beit She’an) who remained within the borders of the State of Israel, in contrast to the deportation of the Muslim inhabitants, instead of focusing on a story whereby all the inhabitants of Beisan, whether Muslim or Christian, were deported.

The academic framework significantly influences the selection of interviewees and the formulation of questions. The interviewer's presence within an academic environment and its effect on their decision-making process play a crucial role in determining both the choice of interview subjects and the nature of the questions posed (Ankersmit & Kellner 2013, Lorenz 2002). Researchers employing the

"motives key" can monitor the interviewer's efforts to discern the ideologies and theories that drive their inquiries, focusing on the interviewer's careful engagement and listening dynamics with the interviewee's perspective. A lack of such meticulous effort can result in the interviewer's own motivations dominating the interview process (Grele 1991a). This interplay of motives outlines the framework and contours of the selectively reconstructed narrative. It also shapes the historical contexts, events, and experiences that are explored and documented.

D2. Authenticity: refers to the inclination or the subjective state of an individual, wherein he feels that he is behaving and acting in a way that is loyal to his inner thoughts and emotions despite external influences (Abulof 2017). The authenticity key examines the boundary between truth and fiction, between the internal and the external, and between the personal association and the wider collective association (Stanley 1992). The difficulty of finding this boundary lies in the fact that the narrator's selective memory is related not only to him, since it is produced and maintained by broader familial, communal, social, and cultural representations (Abrams 2016, Schacter 1999). For this reason, the researcher examining the autobiography or the document/recording the oral testimony must clearly discern between personal experiences and collective experiences. The recollections of a narrator originating from the period of military government can indicate his own personal memory, and may also be part of a popular memory of his collective, which has been communicated to him through public discourse and the media and might have mixed with his own experience. Multiple and accurate details, as opposed to inclusive reconstruction, are one tool for assessing the authenticity of the narrator's testimony (Smith 2014).

The researcher observing the text should consider the two approaches to the self – the first asserts that the narrator is free to choose the content and language of his story, and the other claims that the story is subject to the narrator's culture and its language. The tension between these two approaches, which leads to differentiation between the power of individual agency and the power of culture, between the personal story that reflects the narrator's identity and identification, and the conformist, culturally-enclaved presentation of the story, needs to be taken into consideration (Bruner 1994).

D3. The voice of the reconstructed identity (Identity transformation, the voice of the present identity, and the voice of the reconstructed past identity): Identity is a description, or in other words, a definition of existence and affiliation, and it is built according to the special state of the process of time and space (Kymlica 1998, Taylor 1992, 1994). Observing the identity definition of Palestinian autobiographic authors and/or providers of oral testimony in Israel is a fundamental matter that requires the attention of the researchers, because the narrator tells a story about himself in a time and space where his identity encompassed different components than it does in the present time. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, Palestinians' national identity was defined in two spheres—Palestinian and Arab (for a small group, also their communist international identity was part of their national identity). After the State of Israel was established, the component of the Israeli-civil identity was acquired as a new identity sphere in their collective identity, and the definition of their identity according to the Palestinian and Arab

spheres changed. This transformation of identity stimulated a wide research polemic that agreed that the identity of Arabs in Israel, which was moving between the ethno-national sphere and the civil-Israeli sphere, is a conflictual, divided, and hybrid identity (Smootha 1992, Rouhana & Ghanem 1993, Peres & Yuval Davis 1969, Rouhana 1997, Shehade 2019).

Examining the narrator's attitude to the State of Israel (rapprochement, alienation, or crisis; Smootha 2001), and to the definition of his national affiliation should be taken into account when following up the voice of the telling identity. Palestinian autobiographic authors and oral testimony providers in Israel are intellectuals who can, in the words of Edward Said (1994), be divided into insiders and outsiders. The former fully belong to society as it is, while the latter are exiles. There is a third kind suggested by Honaida Ghanim (2009), which is the liminal identity. According to Ghanim, Palestinians in Israel exist within a liminal space, meaning that they are neither inside nor outside. This is a space abounding with contrasts, ambivalence, and conflicts between the past and present, civil and political, national and state, and modern and traditional. Ghanim opines that in the reality of the Palestinians in Israel the liminality has been transformed from a temporary and transitional phenomenon, after the Nakba of 1948, into a constant and routine reality. She also argues that the Palestinians in Israel remained in their homeland but are in fact outside it, as their homeland became the state of the other and the Palestinian landscape became a ruin upon which the new state was founded.

In an interview¹⁰ the current author held with communist activist Samira Khoury (b. 1929) in April 2019, Khoury described a scene she experienced while in elementary school. In this scene, she and other pupils from her school in Nazareth took part in a support rally for the Mufti of Jerusalem and against the British (during the 1936–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine). Samira memorized the support slogan of that time, but it was accompanied by feelings of objection to that support. While she was telling the story, Samira was unable to detach herself from her communist identity, which she acquired after the establishment of the State of Israel and which promoted a narrative that opposed the Mufti. The interviewer in oral history can, by using in-depth questions, direct the interviewee to a reflexive procedure through which he can define his identity and even discover things about himself that he had not previously known. Although the oral interview is a golden opportunity for external intervention, with the aim of extracting more in-depth information (Abrams 2016), the interviewer's intervention and academic and personal motives might permeate the interviewee's voice and form a bias in the context of the identity issue and other issues (Kim, 2008).

D4. **Language:** Language represents a significant key as it reflects the identity and inner experience of the narrator and generates the personal, social, and cultural form of the story (Fivush 1998). Language enables us to look, in the present, at a past that no longer exists, with the use of images and terminology that belong to the narrated past but at the same are comprehended by the (present) society to which the person is presenting his story (Halbwachs 1992). For this reason, translating autobiographies and oral testimonies into other languages requires

¹⁰Nazareth, April 2019.

great effort, given the difficulty of rendering terminology from the narrator's cultural world into a language that does not contain such terms only because its speakers belong to another culture. Hence, the researcher's culture and his ability to understand and interpret the terminology used in the oral testimony, are critical; usually, such testimony is collected in the local (non-literary) spoken language and it reflects the unique dialect and terminology of the locals.

Despite the small geographical area they reside in, the Palestinian population is diversified in terms of dialect – every grouping of the population has its unique dialect. The dialect (the spoken language) in the center or southern area of the country is distinct from that used in northern Israel, and it is not that rare for two adjacent villages to speak different dialects. As a result of the 1948 war and the migration of many Palestinians from one area to another within Israel, their dialect too was transformed. Rural Palestinians who moved to cities such as Haifa or Nazareth as a result of the 1948 war, had their dialect, landscape, and content world changed as well. Acquiring the local dialect helped them become integrated and survive in their new place. In this transformative reality of the dialect, the interviewer can assist the interviewee to reconstruct the past in the dialect and terminology of his past place (the abandoned village). The researcher who receives the recording or the written transcript of the interview or autobiography, must take caution regarding the language that was used for reconstructing the past, and determine whether it includes terminology from the past world or the present world for describing the past.

The language choice of a narrator offers valuable insights into their self-identity, encompassing a spectrum from formal to colloquial, from openly emotional to restrained and conservative. Such linguistic choices reveal the narrator's inclination either towards highlighting personal experiences or favoring a more generalized approach, thereby shedding light on their self-perception (Renza 1977). Within autobiographical works or the transcripts and recordings of oral testimonies, the representation of the self may vary, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of individual identity.

To analyze the coherence of self-presentation through language, researchers can utilize the three criteria proposed by Charlotte Linde (1993): the continuity of self over time, the self's relationship to others, and the reflexivity of the self. These criteria facilitate the identification of a consistent self-narrative across both autobiographies and oral histories. Notably, the aspect of continuity tends to be more pronounced in oral histories, emphasizing the evolution and consistency of self-identity through various life stages and experiences.

The researcher should also take into account that the language of revealing the truth is related to gender characteristics, to the nature of the personal experience and the will to share it. Though Palestinian men and women both experienced the suffering of the Nakba, the current author realized, through the interviews, that women's testimonies were laden with much more emotional terminology compared to those of men who were inclined to state facts. The women were also willing to share detailed information even when it involved humiliation and personal suffering, while the men seldom shared details of humiliation and suffering. This restraint may be linked to both culture and gender – to the masculine

image as those who are supposed to protect women and children, the home and the land, and in fact failed to do so in the circumstances of war and refugeeness (cf. Bauer et al. 2003).

Language can also serve to protect the narrator against future threats and revenge, criticism and/or prosecution following the revelation of details from the past. Through the use of language, the narrator can conceal names, while also noting other cues that can lead to the truth he wants to reveal. The researcher will need to base his interpretation on this fact and search for the truth by cross-checking the cues with information from other sources.

D5. Conditions of engagement with the past: (time, place, health status, time distance from the recounted past, continuous or fragmented reconstruction, one-time or prolonged reconstruction, external stimuli, personal experience, interviewer intervention).

In autobiographies, engagement with the past is accomplished throughout a prolonged period of time, where the story can be updated and organized to produce a single consolidated and continuous memory. This is not the case in an interview, which in most cases is a one-time event, fragmented by the interviewer's questions and depending on the interviewer's resolve.

Creating an appropriate atmosphere that allows for easy recall is a prerequisite for giving voice to the narrator and hearing him or her (Abrams 2016, Grele 1991b). Palestinian interviewees who witnessed and could recall the events of the Nakba – the 1948 war – are at present over 80 years old (and many of them are over 90). Specifying the time and place of the interview (in the interviewee's home, nursing home, or the real arena of the reconstructed past, i.e., the deserted Palestinian village) and the health status of the interviewee would help future researchers judge the conditions under which the interview was held. These details would also need to be derived, by the researcher, from the autobiography of the narrator. The events of the Nakba took place 73 years ago, and the question a researcher would have to ask himself is whether the told memory is truth or fiction.

Daniel Schacter highlights those elderly interviewees and autobiographers, such as those from the Nakba generation, often retain vivid and emotionally potent memories because these memories are distinct and emotionally charged. Furthermore, the process of repeatedly narrating their stories serves as a method of reconstruction, solidification, and long-term preservation of these memories. Schacter points out that while transient memories tend to fade, become obscured, or merge with other memories over time, significant and emotionally resonant memories, like those of the Nakba, are more likely to be preserved and distinct.

For the Nakba generation—Palestinians in Israel for whom the Nakba was a pivotal event—the act of sharing their experiences with friends and family has been crucial in maintaining and reconstituting a personal narrative around these events. An illustrative case is that of Mohammad Ali Taha, a native of the now-abandoned Palestinian village of Mi'ar. Born in 1941, Taha managed to reconstruct precise details of names and events from the 1948 war in his autobiography published in 2017. Despite his young age of 7 at the time of these events, the detailed fixation of these memories was not solely the result of Taha's individual

efforts but was also supported by the collective memory of his community, who continually narrated and enriched these stories with details. This phenomenon of memory fixation, as described in Thomson's (1991) "Memory and Remembering in Oral History," underscores how, over time, Taha and others like him have been able to update and shape their stories, despite the significant transformations in the physical and nominal characteristics of the original settings of their memories.

The act of recalling details that have blurred or faded is an untrained action, and it is not an extraordinary experience for the narrator. In judging the credibility of a story that lacks reference to collective events, a historical researcher should take this fact into account. In addition, the researcher may encounter references to events in the reconstructed story which do not make sense. The recommendation for the researcher is to judge that this memory is fiction. At the same time, the researcher must try to understand the source of the fact fabrication. The concept of False Memory Syndrome (FMS) was introduced by Peter J. Freyd as an idea that a person strongly believes in but is objectively incorrect. The reason for this belief may derive from traumatic experiences, which cause him to make up false facts as a means of distraction and overcoming these experiences (Gilmore 2001).

Rose (1993) draws an analogy between the act of narrating a memory and a mechanical model of memory retrieval, suggesting that recalling a memory involves bringing it forth from deep storage, revisiting and refining the details, and then reconsolidating it back into deep memory. This intricate process encompasses neurological, social, and psychological dimensions, influenced not only by the individual's personal experiences but also by collective memory, which is shaped and disseminated through media and public discourse (Smith 2014). The narrative thus becomes a product of both personal recollection and the broader cultural and societal narratives that contextualize individual memories.

In the dynamic interaction between narrator and listener, the role of the interviewer is particularly significant. The interviewer has the potential to influence the memory that emerges during the conversation. According to Yow (1997), this influence can become particularly pronounced in cases where the interviewer has a strong emotional connection with the interviewee. Such affection or bias might lead the interviewer to consciously or unconsciously guide the testimony in a manner that casts the interviewee in a more favorable light. This interplay underscores the complex nature of memory recall and narration, where personal biases, social influences, and the interactive dynamics of the interviewing process can all impact how memories are recounted, interpreted, and ultimately recorded. To conclude this section, it is notable that it is not the responsibility of the historical researcher to act as a psychoanalyst who finds failures in a person's memory as a result of the terms of reconstruction or other causes. The role of the researcher, as mentioned above, is to discover the authentic details, considering the conditions in which the story was produced and the personal experience of the narrator, in order to back up the researcher's judgment as to whether the story is fiction or truth.

Conclusions

In this article, I have addressed the unique case of the Palestinian community within Israel, highlighting my reliance on oral histories and autobiographies as the primary sources for reconstructing their historical narrative. This approach emphasizes the critical importance of these narrative forms in capturing and preserving the experiences of a community that has faced significant challenges in having its history recognized and recorded. My analysis of the credibility of these autobiographical and oral historical sources is consistent with the critical research methodologies applied to similar narratives across different groups and individuals. Furthermore, I have developed a methodological framework that serves as a crucial tool in my research. This framework enables me to assess the extent to which I can depend on these personal narratives, ensuring that my reliance on them is both critical and methodologically sound. By integrating this framework into my work, I aim to contribute to the broader field of historical research, advocating for a thoughtful and rigorous approach to incorporating personal narratives into our understanding of history.

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