

Handout 35: Finding Answers to Our Research Question

Session: Analysis of (Oral) Historical Sources

I. For the sake of practice, let's apply these methods to our own practice interviews in answering the question how did the War affect the everyday life of ordinary people?

- In pairs, we **listen** to parts of each other's recorded interviews.
- We **identify relevant historical excerpts** of the interview. We note what strikes us as significant and relevant, as main excerpts that could answer the research question.
- We **identify main themes**: while listening, we identify main themes covered in the interview. These could include: neighborhood relations, demographic changes, village school, feelings of regret, life before the war, moments of celebration, hiding in shelters, etc.
- We **apply the 6W questions** (from *session History and Historical Thinking*) to determine the source's provenance, we ask: who is the author, what is the source, when was it created, where was it created, why was it created, and for whom (target audience). While these can be answered to a certain extent from the meta-data, they also help us evaluate the reliability of the source and its usefulness in contributing to answering the research question.
- What are the **limitations** of this interview in terms of detail? How significant do you think they are in addressing our research question?
- What do we need to do to **address** these limitations? What other sources do we need to find in relation to events, names, locations mentioned in the interview? As Portelli writes "no research is complete unless it has exhausted oral as well as written sources" (What Makes Oral History Different?).

II. In order to understand how to analyze oral historical sources, we use the help of the sample Narrator Pool in session Creating a Narrator Pool.

Our **topic** was: the Mountain War of 1983.

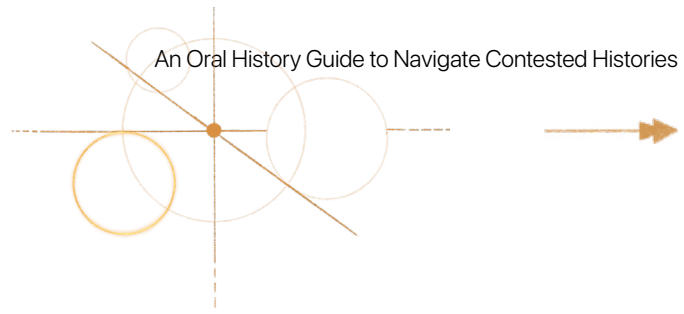
Our **research question** was: How did the Mountain War impact the social fabric (family and community connections) of the village/s and local communities of the most affected areas?

Below is a summary of the imaginary interviews conducted:

Narrator A:

the account of an 85-year-old man whose son was killed in the MW who still lives in his home. He doesn't have anywhere else to go and is attached to his land and his home even though all his neighbors have left. He feels a great deal of sadness when he thinks of the pointlessness of the war and blames foreign intervention for the death of his son.





Handout 35: Finding Answers to Our Research Question

Session: Analysis of (Oral) Historical Sources

Narrator B:

the account of a 55-year-old woman who lives in Beirut, but she grew up in XX village and went to school there. She has not returned to the area since the war ended. She feels that she and her family were kicked out of their ancestral home and never received any compensation. She follows-up on the news of her friends and former neighbors there from time to time, but doesn't plan on returning.

Narrator C:

the account of a 50-year-old man who moved back to the village to rebuild his family home and turn it into a bed and breakfast. His family was dispersed as a result of the MW, but since the late 1990s, he's been adamant about rebuilding his home and his place in the community, letting bygones be bygones.

Narrator D:

the account of a 78-year-old woman related to one of the political leaders of the region. While she recognizes the damage the war did to XX village, she believes that all has been repaired and accounted for, that XX village is healthy and whole, and that people have left the region for reasons other than the MW.

Narrator E:

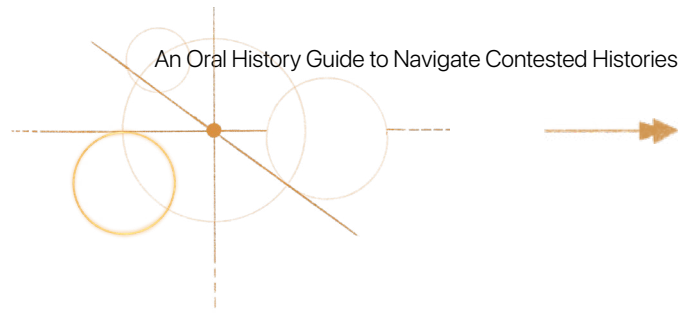
the account of a foreign journalist who reported on the war, deeming it one of the most brutal events of the Lebanese Civil War, that had long-term repercussions on what was formerly a religiously mixed XX village and on the continued political conflict in the present.

Let's say you and your partner/s completed the recorded interviews, created oral history sources, and are ready to share findings with each other by analyzing these sources in order to answer your research question. Do the sources answer your research question? Do they provide multiple perspectives? What else is missing? How do you analyze the sources?

Let's recall the **historical thinking skills**:

- a. **Contextualization:** what more do we need to find out to understand the perspective of this narrator? Do we need to conduct additional interviews? Do we need to consult other types of sources (such as maps, photographs, newspaper articles, books)?
- b. **Causation:** how do these interviews, as historical sources, help us explain causation? How do they reflect or connect to the causes of events? How do they reflect or connect to the effects of events?
- c. **Comparison - Similarities and Differences:** how do these sources compare to one another? How are they similar in content or in approach to the past? How are they different? How do we explain these similarities and differences? What can we understand by comparing these sources? Do these sources confirm the historical record, or are they conflicted? What is their contribution? What gaps do they fill? Which interviews represent one side or the other of the contested history? In what ways? What explains these differences?





Handout 35: Finding Answers to Our Research Question

Session: Analysis of (Oral) Historical Sources

d. Interpretation and Synthesis - making sense or making meaning of historical sources. All historical sources require interpretation and that is the work that historians do in making sense of them. How do these sources help us understand the past? How have they contributed to our understanding? How have they changed our understanding? What have we learned by working with them? How does our interpretation of them form the basis of a new synthesis?

Let's assess the interviews as historical sources with these skills in mind and evaluate them in reference with other historical sources for their usefulness, reliability, and the shared meanings they bring to what were considered isolated, individual experiences. For example, let's imagine that...

... Narrator B is maybe upset about her village because her father was accused of being responsible for some kind of village incident (theft, corruption, scandal). Whether or not this claim is accurate, it is useful because it might explain her feelings about the community, her sense of betrayal, and lack of trust. When conducting interviews, you might find it hard to believe a narrator's account, at some point. However, your role is not to challenge their account. Remember Alessandro Portelli's advice: "while the account may not be *true*, the narrator's conviction in these beliefs is, in fact, true". And that these beliefs go beyond the actual facts and events. They reflect the meanings and significance of the beliefs and how people make sense of their past in the present. It's not always easy to reconcile these meanings. But researching through multiple sources and perspectives helps us understand the context better. How does Narrator B's experience compare to Narrator A's (the 85-year-old man who lost his son)?

