Oral History in the Service of Communities

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Abstract   The narrative turn has several applications in therapy, education, medicine, and gerontology. Oral history, as the collection of individual life stories for the purpose of preserving and promoting the collective memory of communities, is another such application. This article describes the resurgence of oral history and its various genres. In this context, four international oral history projects are described: in India for the Tibetan exiles, in Japan for the tsunami victims, in South Korea for North Korean refugees, and in Israel for a binational Jewish-Palestinian village. The article discusses the changes that occur in the lives of interviewees and interviewers and highlights the role and the challenges of qualitative inquiry as a humanitarian endeavor.¹

Keywords: oral history, life narrative, humanitarian aid, Asia cultures, conflict resolution

Narratives: Ideas and Applications

For more than three decades, psychology and the social sciences have fostered the idea that narrative is a "root metaphor," a key to understanding human beings and human society (Cohler, 1982; Sarbin, 1986). The complex connection of life story to both identity and culture has been thoroughly explored (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991). All these contributions to theory were titled "the narrative turn" and have become a fairly popular subject in academic curricula (Bruner, 1996; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Lyons, 2007).

Can this idea, however, have applicable consequences as well? Several examples can be proposed as an answer: Firstly, almost all kinds of psychotherapeutic intervention have to do with stories people tell about themselves and the significant others in their lives. Psychological treatment has been conceived as uncovering, telling, revising, and perhaps even constructing our life stories. The mere sharing of personal stories in a safe space provided by therapy is considered as healing. Moreover, the
subtle therapist-client interaction gradually produces changes in these life-stories, thus creating autobiographies that are easier to live with. While a genre of psychotherapy named “narrative therapy” has put this process on its banner (White & Epston, 1990), similar processes prevail in all kinds of therapy (Spence, 1982).

The second field in which narrative ideas have been applied is in education (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). Many studies conducted all over the world suggest ways to use stories in education, whether autobiographical or biographical (e.g., cultural heroes), published or personal. Stories are widely used in teachers’ training and supervision and are known to promote empathy in the classroom and deter teachers’ burnout.

More recently, narrative approaches also have been introduced into medical practice. The advocates of this trend strongly believe in the significance of stories for the enhancement of patients’ and their families’ welfare and for the humanization of the medical profession at large (Charon, 2008). Finally, among the fields that have applied narrative concepts we may include gerontology, in which the collection of life stories of the elderly is becoming an important tool in caring for this sizeable population (Kenyon, Bohmeijer, & Randall, 2011).

While this is not a comprehensive inventory and a very partial reference list, the above indicates the penetration of narrative ideas to a wide array of care and education practices. To this list I would like to add what I see as another, perhaps neglected application, namely the use of individual life stories for the purpose of preserving and promoting the collective memory of communities. This application stems from the humanities, rather than social sciences, and is often named “oral history” (Clark, 1999; Shopes, 2011). It exemplifies the natural bridge between disciplines, mainly history, folklore, and literature, on the one hand, and psychology, sociology, and anthropology on the other hand. In fact, every type of qualitative or narrative interview is gathering some kind of oral history and its preservation in museums, archives, books, documentary films, or on the Internet consists of an application of narrative concepts in the interest of saving our past and making it known to ourselves and others.

**Oral History, Its Revival, and Genres**

Oral history grew out of the oral traditions of all cultures and has probably persisted more in illiterate societies. The history, scope, and dilemmas of oral history at the present moment have been recently summarized in a comprehensive paper by Shopes (2011). According to Janesick’s (2010) book on the topic, oral history is “the
collection of stories and reminiscences of a person or persons who have firsthand knowledge of any number of experiences” (p. 2). It refers to a cluster of practices: telling of first-hand experiences, listening to and respecting such accounts, and collecting and preserving them, which frequently entail the transition from oral to a recorded form, such as written, audio recorded, or filmed. These practices deal with ordinary people—the narrators—who tell their stories in an ordinary language.

Oral history captures a variety of forms of life, from common folks talking about their jobs in Terkel’s classic *Working* (1974) to my own studies of an Israeli Kibbutz (Lieblich, 1981) or a binational village (Lieblich, 2012). They are part of the oldest human forms of being. They are performed in natural settings or, in modern times, as part of a study in which a scholar interviews a narrator or informer, provides the setting for the telling of an oral history, and records it in any possible manner. In everyday life, multiple occasions evoke the telling of or listening to oral histories: family or friends meeting in private to share stories about their past, court proceedings in which witnesses are cross-examined, funerals and eulogies about the dead, or rituals in which the history of certain collective events is repeated in public. These are just a few that come to mind. Academic scholars may then make use of these “natural” oral histories by providing an interpretation of the narratives and setting them within a theoretical or historical context. Many oral histories are never transformed into written texts, or are never published, but remain as manuscripts, tape recordings, or audiovisual recordings in archives, libraries, or private collections.

Oral history accounts are often transferred from one narrator to another or from one generation to the next. While the subject of an oral history may be a private experience (my first job), it is always set within a collective context (agricultural or industrial life at the time). Often the initiative or request to tell a story is primarily aimed at a certain historical, collective moment (war or an earthquake) witnessed by the narrator.

In spite of the apparent tension between traditional academic scholarship in history and its oral so-called popular version, the recent revival of interest in oral history and its prevalence in research may be attributed to the “narrative turn.” One example for the resurgence of oral history is the recent publication of the five-volume *Community Oral History Toolkit* by MacKay, Quinlan, and Sommer (2013).

Several factors contributed to the revival of oral history, as will be briefly suggested below. The era of postmodern ways of thinking demystified some of the dominant paradigms of intellect, knowledge, and scholarship. Postmodern theorists often rebelled against traditional ways of knowing and respected more popular and simple approaches to experience. They emphasized "narrative truth" (Sarbin,
or multiple voices and perspectives for every event, as opposed to the one-and-only conclusive "historical truth" (White, 1973).

In addition, the attempts to document the Holocaust drove many researchers into giant projects of interviewing and preserving survivors' accounts. This is part of cultural attempts to collect testimonies in order to "prove" that these events happened and remember the victims as well as to influence future events through drawing lessons from the past (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013; Funkenstein, 1993; Langer, 1991).

Moreover, the late 20th century can be characterized as allowing minorities and silenced segments of society to claim their place in the canonical history of culture, to "have a voice." This social-political development brought about a turn toward pluralism in history and included, for example, black history, which lacked written documents, followed by the women's movements that struggled to include more "herstory" in Western history and the gay rights movement, etc. Confronting their absence from canonical written history and the attempts to compensate for it, these minorities popularized the tradition of oral history. As a result of these developments, much of oral history work has a critical, political edge to it.

Finally, technological advancements have contributed in several ways to this growth of oral history work. Among them is the facilitation of recording and filming, home computers, access to the Internet as a source material, digitalization, ease of publication, and the proliferation of archives for various purposes. Many nonscholars are able to conduct their private oral history study for family circles or other individual goals. Cyberspace enables general access to and use of such materials for private needs as well as for research. (For a full discussion of the multifaceted impact of the "digital revolution" on oral history inquiry, see Shopes, 2011, p. 460.)

Two basic models of oral history, which are often mixed in reality, can be distinguished: fact-finding and meaning-making oral histories. The first consists of attempts to gain exact, detailed, and factual knowledge of something that the narrator has witnessed or experienced. They are often termed "testimonies," "documentation," or "evidence." In this model, the narrator is directed to be objective, namely to minimize his opinions and feelings, and focus on "hard" facts that he or she saw, heard, or witnessed in some way. The process of collecting such oral histories typically involves an interrogation, where questions are asked about the exact time and place, number of participants, duration of the event, and so on. The practices of the system of justice are an example of this type, but many historical archives, such as The Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1998/2007), have developed detailed protocols and procedures for the collection of such oral histories. In this model, there is a tendency to rely on expert
witnesses, who are considered more knowledgeable of the facts. This may result in a disproportionate reliance on leaders and other “important” narrators.

Meaning-making oral histories endeavor to reach the subjective sense and significance of certain life events from the point of view of the narrator, who is recounting them. The typical procedure for obtaining such histories involves asking the narrators to “tell their story” from their perspective, in their own words. The interviewer does not ask a listed set of questions. Rather, she allows the narrators to use their own means of telling, in a most detailed fashion. The narrators are encouraged to report their feelings and attitudes as well as those of other people who participated in the event. Furthermore, they are prompted to guess or hypothesize about things they did not directly witness. The terms used for the outcome are often “narrative” or “story.” The narrators in this approach can be any person, preferably ordinary people, women, minorities. As mentioned above, though, the distinction between these two models of oral history is often blurred in practice, and it is advisable to see them as two ends of a continuum.

Being a psychologist, not a historian, my inclination over the past three decades has been toward the second model of oral history. The remaining part of this paper is dedicated to the description of four oral history projects with which I have been involved these past two years. They demonstrate the contribution of narrative scholarship to real life concerns, namely they consist of applied narratives. Except for the fourth, these projects were not research intended. All four, however, can be classified as social activism. I see them as a combination of professional and humanitarian work (Shopes, 2011, p. 456).

A comment about the language: All four projects involve narrative interviews, always carried out in the native language common to the interviewer and interviewee. Thus, in the first three projects, my involvement consisted of training local people to collect the actual oral histories of their compatriots. The fourth project took place in Israel, where I myself conducted the oral history interviews in Hebrew, my first language. While carrying out the interviews with the Arab interviewees, who were completely fluent in Hebrew and might be considered bilingual, I was deeply aware and apologetic of being unable to conduct our conversations in Arabic.

**Project 1: The Tibetan Exiles**

In the summer of 2011, I was invited to conduct an oral history workshop in Dharmsala, India, the site of the Tibetan government-in-exile. My host was Lhakdor-la, the head of the National Library of the Tibetan People, a former translator and a close adviser to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This invitation was the result of a long-
standing relationship between the Israeli Friends of the Tibetan People and the Tibetan government-in-exile. At the basis of this relationship is the understanding that there is a certain similarity between the history of the Jewish and Tibetan people in terms of attempts to preserve national heritage, religion, language, and patriotic sentiments in exile.

In his introduction to my workshop, Lhakdor-la said “the Tibetan culture is dying; we have to make every effort to save it from extinction.” This was a clear purpose for our small workshop, and a great responsibility for me. Our aim was to promote the collection of stories from expatriated Tibetans living in India, the main idea being that their individual stories contain various meaningful perspectives on the old culture and traditions as well as the 20th century stormy history of the Tibetan nation, presently under the Chinese regime.

It was previously agreed that I would conduct a two-week workshop of daily meetings (50 hours in total) where I hoped to train a group of participants, all of them employees of the government-in-exile (as I later found out), in oral history interviewing, analysis, and writing. The group consisted of nine Tibetans, four men and five women, their ages ranging from 24 to 40. All but two were born and raised in India. In actuality, the training focused only on interviewing and presentation methods.

Besides teaching a variety of interview skills and mainly what I term “active listening,” my workshop was essentially an attitude-change process. It was not easy to persuade my class that meaning-making narratives were no less significant than fact-finding interviews and that “ordinary” narrators had much to teach us. Providing space for emotional displays was not habitual for the participants. They hesitated to come in touch with their interviewees’, or their own, pain. Focusing on private life events seemed to them at first disrespectful, or even inappropriate, within a religious tradition that cherished the Buddhist goal of limiting the ego. However, by providing myself as a model while working with individuals from the workshop, I was able to help them become “professionally reflexive” (Wyatt & Tamas, 2013, p. 6), and by exercising the participants’ narrative interview skills first within the classroom and gradually in wider circles of the exile community, much progress was achieved. The climax of our learning experience was during the last two days, when each of the nine participants presented a complete life story of one of their interviewees.

The story of Phunsok Lamden, a nun

* I was born in Lhasa, Tibet. We were eight children at home. I never went to school during my childhood. I spent my days looking after the young ones and taking care of
family work. When I was 20, in 1988, I decided to become a nun. My first reason was that as a nun, I would have more time to accumulate good merit, while as it was, at home I would have more chance of accumulating bad merit. As a nun, I could devote more time to help other sentient beings.

The nunnery that admitted me had been destroyed by the Chinese in 1959. So I was engaged most of the time in rebuilding our nunnery.

Right at the beginning, three nuns and myself were caught spreading Tibetan freedom pamphlets. We were arrested but managed to escape. In 1989, when His Holiness received the Nobel Prize, we protested again. We shouted “The Chinese quit Tibet!” and “Tibet is a free country!” We were all arrested. Chinese policemen held us down and took us to be interrogated. They asked so many questions in such a brutal way. They tortured us very badly, for example beating me with electric wire. I often fainted and cannot remember anything. I was in darkness for a long time. Then we were taken to prison, each of us was put in a different cell. After 15 or 20 days, with many other freedom fighters, I stood to trial and the punishment I got was three years in Gutsa Prison.

The Chinese prisons are in very bad conditions. We didn’t get enough food and were cold all the time. The Chinese police also took blood from the female political prisoners every day. They said they were checking for our diseases, but I know the blood was taken for the Chinese army’s needs.

I was released after three years. I was given some strict rules: never enter a nunnery, but stay at home. I was not allowed to go anywhere. So I had no choice but to escape to India.

I joined a group of 25 runaways. We crossed the Sharkumbu by foot. It took us 27 days to get to Nepal. On the way we faced many hazards—robbers who attacked us, bad weather, shortage of food and clothing. We were so scared. Fortunately we all reached Nepal Tibetan Reception Center alive. It was a huge relief after such a terrible journey.

From there we were sent to Dharamsala. It was in 1995. I felt so good because finally I was living near the Dalai Lama. It was like a dream come true. I remember after a few days I got an audience with His Holiness. My eyes were full of tears, and I could not stop crying. It was a miracle.

My body was so weak. I was sick for a long time, but in Dolma Ling Nunnery they took good care of me. It took me a few years to get better. Presently I live and study at the nunnery nearby. We all work and pray; we do our daily meditation and chores. I work mostly in the vegetable garden. Now, at old age, I am finally getting my education. I am glad to be able to learn Buddhist philosophy. It interests me a great
deal. It is now the best period ever in my life. I am only very sad that freedom is so rare in Tibet. So this is my life story.

Immediately after our workshop, two of the participants were sent to remote areas in India with concentrations of Tibetan refugees to collect oral histories of the old men and women. The departments that employed them became aware of the urgency of such an action. I have not been informed of any outcomes so far, but I believe that the values and practices promoted in the workshop may affect the work and its results.

Project 2: Japanese Victims of the Earthquake and Tsunami, 2011

Immediately after the tsunami, Israeli volunteers belonging to the humanitarian organization IsraAID arrived at the disaster site. They performed a variety of emergency assistance and became aware of the survivors' great need to talk about what they had lost and what had happened to them. In response, IsraAID asked me to volunteer and spend some time at Tohoku, Japan, training local individuals to interview for oral history purposes. The project that evolved out of this later received the title "The Voices of Tohoku" and was supported by several Japanese organizations.

The primary purpose of the project was providing service to the communities through documentation on two levels: on the personal level by giving the interviewees (survivors and helpers alike) a record of their narratives to keep or share with others and on the collective level by contributing to the creation of archives of oral history and commemoration for the communities seriously damaged by the disaster. The importance of establishing some form of record for individuals and communities that have lost their personal belongings, among them albums, family files, or community records, goes without saying. The secondary purposes of the "Voices of Tohoku" project were to create an online database for possible future research and art and to help individuals find emotional relief by sharing their stories with others.

To achieve these purposes, I designed a protocol for the Japanese volunteer interviewers, who were recruited from the communities. The semistructured interview focused on three main topics/questions referring to three life stages: your life before the earthquake, your experience during the earthquake-tsunami, and your life since the disaster, focusing on the changes that have occurred. In October 2012, I conducted a series of workshops for the local interviewers in Japan, most of them teachers and community workers. In longer or shorter workshops, as dictated by the local conditions, I trained more than 15 interviewers, all volunteers. In these
workshops they were trained to present the stage-questions as formulated above and then follow their interviewees' narratives with minimal interference. As in India, I tried to teach them to be active listeners, to be respectful, empathic, and nonjudgmental, and to contain all the emotions that came up during the interview session. Special training focused on the proper beginning and ending of every interview session.

As a result of the project, almost 100 individual interviews were conducted in the struggling communities during the fall and winter of 2012–2013. All the interviews were video recorded, and all the participants received their own DVD as well as a photograph album of their community during its disaster and first steps of recovery. Local archives are presently being constructed in the villages taking part in the project, within schools, public libraries, or community centers. The participants, as well as the local leadership, have expressed deep gratitude and satisfaction from the Voices project, which is still going on as more communities are interested in joining the project. Thus, this applied project demonstrates the importance of life stories as a humanitarian endeavor for individual healing, for the commemoration of the deceased, and for the creation of a collective memory of crucial events. Moreover, the oral history data may be used in the future for studying the effects of trauma and a variety of recovery processes, as exemplified by the Voices' narrators.

Yuka (38) and Misato (26), Yamamoto Village, Tohoku Region

Yuka provides very few details about her life prior to the earthquake. She was a married woman, with two children. After her marriage, she moved with her husband from the city to the village, where her husband became a fisherman. They owned a boat. She used to help her husband to clean the fish and take them to the local market. They had a small home in the village.

The earthquake was terrible; it lasted forever. She was outside in her yard when it happened and immediately started to run to her children's school to pick them up. Luckily they were safe there. In school she heard there were tsunami alerts, and she was advised to stay there. Luckily, she was with her children when the waves came. They climbed on top of the roof of the school building, with all the children, teachers and other adults, and saw the fierce water carrying houses, cars, everything. From the roof, she saw her house and car being swept away. All night it was very cold, and they had to stay in school with many other villagers. But the worse thing was that Yuka was sure that her husband lost his life. She felt totally helpless and was mad with despair. On the second night at school, she heard a man calling her name and stepping between the sleeping refugees. It was her husband!
After a few weeks they were given temporary housing in the village. They were told that rebuilding their house would be impossible. It was declared a danger zone. Her husband lost his work as a fisherman. But Yuka was offered to help as an assistant at school, and so she had a job, at least. She could now be close to her children, who went back to school. The school was the only building that was not damaged.

Yuka tells the interviewer that she was in despair, but she never allowed herself to show it outwardly. Many of her friends and relatives lost their lives in the disaster. Only after her participation in a stress-relief music group (organized by IsraAID) did she allow herself to cry for the first time, and this made her feel better. She understood that she should encourage her children to cry as well, since this relieves some of the inner tension.

Now she has gotten used to life in the temporary housing project and looks forward to the future. Perhaps it will be better.

I see Yuka’s story as exemplifying the passive modality of a person helplessly facing a natural disaster. The focus of her interview is how the tragedy has changed her life and character. Her coping is attributed entirely to external help and therefore a major theme in her narrative is gratitude.

Misato starts the interview with a detailed picture of her childhood in the village, where her family owned a fish restaurant close to the beach for generations. She praises the life in nature, and the freedom she felt as a child when her parents and grandparents were always close by in the restaurant.

Misato left the village after high school, went to Tokyo, and graduated from acting school. At the time of the disaster, she was living with her young husband in Tokyo. They have no children. Misato managed to get small acting roles in a local theater and was hoping for a career as an actress.

She felt the earthquake in the city but was not hurt in any way. She heard about the big tragedy that befell her native region. She couldn’t reach anyone by phone so she decided to go home immediately and see what had happened to her family. On the train she heard about the tsunami. All the roads were blocked. She is not sure, but it took her almost three days to get to her village. There she found out that her father was killed by the rushing water but that her mother and grandparents managed to escape before it was too late. Their house and restaurant were all gone.

Right from the beginning, and in spite of her mourning, Misato understood that the disaster was collective, and she tried to be of help to others. She volunteered to help in the food distribution in the different shelters and did all kinds of services for children and the elderly. She worked day and night in the shelter and helped people search for their relatives. She particularly tried to help people that she noticed alone.
Thus, she was occupied for weeks and hardly saw her own mother. She told the interviewer that her grandfather died two weeks after the tsunami. He was a very old man but died probably from heartbreak, she said.

As time went by, she decided to return to live in the village and help her mother reopen the restaurant in its old location. She was able to do this. She is now the cook. Her husband, who joined her, and her mother serve the food and manage the repairs. In spite of local warnings, they are rebuilding their home in the same spot, above the restaurant. Misato loves to live in nature, in the open space, where she hopes to bring up her children. This gives her a lot of satisfaction, and she never misses her former life.

Misato’s story is also about a victim whose life changed drastically after the disaster. However, it is important to note that she was not present at the moment of the quake and tsunami. She arrived at the scene later. And yet, her story is that of a very brave woman. She continuously provided help to others, thus empowering herself as well. The change and the direction she undertook result from her agency (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008). Internal processes, her private values, and her independent realization and decision are leading her on her chosen route. I was not surprised to hear her request to join the team of interviewers who are continuing the oral history project in Yamamoto.

Project 3: Training for a Future Study of North Korean Refugees

The initiative for this most recent project was academic as well as humanitarian. C.E., a social work professor in one of Seoul’s top universities, plans to conduct a study on North Korean refugees who have reached South Korea recently and are making their first steps in adjusting to a free, democratic society. The planned research, still in search of funding, proposed to investigate primarily female refugees and collect evidence about their experiences of sexual abuse in its various manifestations. The planned study will use “mixed methods.” While the main sections of the research proposal suggest studying the phenomenon by quantitative means, namely various questionnaires, qualitative life story interviews were also included in the proposal, and my role was to train young scholars to carry these out.

A weeklong intensive workshop was carried out in Seoul in February 2013. Fourteen members participated in the training, the majority of them graduate students, and the rest Korean professors and some civil workers whose jobs concern the refugees. Within this framework, several humanitarian activists who are deeply
involved in helping the refugees both on their escape route and in South Korea also attended the workshop from time to time. These people expressed their profound interest in the collection of such life stories for the sake of publicizing around the world the unspoken tragedy of the North Korean people (see also Demick, 2010). In our conversations, we realized that only the collection and preservation of these individual life stories may prevent historical revisionism, namely the denial of the horrors—as, for example, the Holocaust denial—in the future (Lipstadt, 1993).

A special topic that came up concerned the risk involved in revealing the identity of the narrators or the interviewers in case they still have family members in North Korea. Although the workshop’s initial aim had to do with academic research, toward the end of the week, given the evolving understanding and the examples of narratives brought by the participants, the concept of “collecting stories for humanitarian aims and historical goals” clearly emerged. It was not conceived only as helping the individual refugees by giving them voice but as an action of the utmost historical-political value.

‘Use Yourself as a Container for the Other’s Story’

During the break, on my last day of the workshop, two young women approached me, soon to be joined by most of the other females. I was sitting sipping my coffee surrounded by the students, as one of them started: “Look,” she said, “how were you able to study Holocaust survivors? We have just started to do some training interviews in the refugee camps, and the stories we hear all around us are so terrible! It is so hard to listen to such stories one after another; I feel like crying with the narrator more than anything else. It is too painful!”

Her friend supported by nodding and continued: “In our social work classes I remember one of our professors saying: ‘When you go to speak to a client, you have to use empathy. You have to try to put yourself in his or her shoes! Think about them as your mother, or yourself!’ ”

“No!” I interrupted forcefully. “I am sure you are misquoting, or that your professor didn’t mean it as simple as that. In any case, for our narrative oral histories, I would advise you to forget this suggestion altogether. Total subjectivity is wrong here. Putting yourself in the shoes of the victim of persecution or abuse will just make you helpless and totally unable to be of any use. Empathy is not that, in my view. I would say that you should create a safe space for the victims to speak out, use yourself as a container for the other’s story and pain, but always remember that you are not her, your container has many layers and parts other than that momentary contact. You must
be in touch with your strong, happy, and healthy parts. Only through these parts will you be able to hold the other's pain and not be broken and thus do your professional work as a collector of oral histories in the land of loss, suffering, and pain.”

“Oh,” said one of the young women. “I was feeling so guilty knowing that my family is safe and that I was brought up in this safe country. They speak so much about hunger . . . I never suffered hunger, you know.”

“Don't feel guilty! It is good that you are not in the same spot as your interviewee. This difference is the source of your resilience. You cannot change their reality, but you being there with your resilience is of immense help.”

I cannot express in words the relief I sensed all around me as the little group dispersed and our class continued for the last half-day.

**Project 4: A Study of a Jewish-Arab Binational Village**

This study can be conceived, in the present context, as taking oral history one step further and applying narrative ideas to the field of conflict resolution. As in the similar field of family therapy, the core of the healing process is in telling and listening to life stories of individuals, who consist of a certain group and tell their experiences from a variety of points of view.

In 2011–2012, I interviewed 40 members of the only binational village in Israel, Neve Shalom / Waa-hat i-sal-aam—Hebrew and Arabic names that mean “Oasis of Peace.” This is a small village in the Judean Hills, midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Founded in 1977, this is the chosen home of 50 families, half of them Jewish and half Arabs (Muslim or Christian, all of them Israeli citizens), who live together as neighbors and educate their children in a common bilingual school. There is no other mixed-by-intention Arab-Jewish community like Neve Shalom in Israel or, for that matter, in the entire world.

My initial purpose was to write an oral history book about the village and the community, thus trying to examine and publicize its possible significant contributions to peace. I intended to study the community through the individual life stories of its members, gathered via open, long narrative interviews (Josselson, 2013; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In my open-ended interviews, I asked every narrator to tell me about his or her origin and what had brought him/her to join the village. Consequently, I asked the interviewees to tell me about their life in the community, the good times and bad times, their evaluation of the project as a whole, and their views about its future. Some members from the second generation were asked to tell me about growing up in this unusual community.
One of the repeated descriptions of the community, offered by many interviewees, was that within the general climate of animosity, terror, and state of war between the nations, in order to enable normal life to proceed and harmony between the members to be maintained (at least on the surface), the men and women who live in Neve Shalom have developed the practices of "agreeing not to agree" and "conflict avoidance by silence." The first practice, earlier in its appearance in the village’s culture of discourse, is based upon the understanding that Jews and Arabs have conflicting narratives and claims, that no agreement or compromise can be reached at the moment, so the best strategy is to accept the differences and live with them. As time passed, when confronted by many crises, even this practice became too difficult to maintain and the members chose the way of suppression or avoidance, namely silence. Some topics, such as the service of Jewish members in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), are too dangerous to face and thus are designated as outside open discourse in the community.

Because I am an outsider with many hours of experience in life story interviews, I was able to provide some safety in the interview “space” and, as a result, each one of the interviewees revealed in our conversation many of the “forbidden” issues and their experiences, feelings, and opinions herein. Thus, through the pages of the published book (Lieblich, 2012), an indirect encounter or conversation seemed to have taken place among the members, and many told me that reading the texts made them feel more understanding and closeness toward people with whom they had only causal contacts. Without going into the details of this fascinating process (a detailed report of this subject is now under preparation), suffice it to say that some progress toward interpersonal conflict resolution emerged as an outcome of reading each other’s narratives. Village members have proposed open discussions of chapters of the book, hoping to maintain the accepting atmosphere that characterized my interviews when talking among themselves. This process has just begun, but it implies important interpersonal possibilities and consists of another application of narrative studies to real-life concerns.

"It Makes Me Feel Like a More Open-minded Woman"\textsuperscript{10}

The interviewee is Rita, a Christian Arab woman of 58, married and a mother of four grown children. She was born and grew up in Lod, an Arab town taken by the Jews in the 1948 War.

"I have a great longing to Lod still. People want to go back to their roots and live there."
"The tragedy is that Jews also feel that their roots are here," I blurt.

"Yes, I don't deny your longing, but they are two thousand years old! . . . I do not object to Jews living here. The opposite is true—I want you here, I think that Jews are part of the Orient. I don't accept the view that all Jews should be thrown out of here. I like it that Jews live here, I love the heterogeneity. I don't see it as a threat. On the contrary, it makes me feel like a more open-minded woman."

"And when you see one of the Jewish boys in military uniform, what do you feel?"

"It is indeed very difficult for me. This is my private view: Tell me, how can a mother send her son to the army? And she knows it is a war situation; it's not like military service in Switzerland. . . . I'm asking myself—how can the Jewish mothers tolerate it? How do they keep quiet? I would have gone mad, or taken my son and run away. I have absolutely no tolerance for the military! I don't think the earth is more sacred than my children, and that's it."

Obviously what Rita said during our private conversation is directed at her Jewish neighbors' ears. However, such a dialogue is too dangerous to carry out directly, thus I and my book became the mediator carrying the message to its destination (Lieblich, 2014).

Reflection and Discussion

Applied scholarship has much to do with changes within individuals and communities. Thus, it is illuminating to see the projects described above as producing many levels of change in the involved people and communities. Mainly, the question is how the process of telling one's life story produces change in the teller. Next, we may explore how the experience of interviewing affects the interviewers. Finally, one may contemplate on the changes that emerge in the training workshops when participants are exposed to the narrative life story interview and exercise it on themselves.

If we start from the last point, in my own teaching, the main lesson is how to listen with respect and compassion to the others' life stories, how to be nonjudgmental in relation to them, and how to maintain ethical and professional conduct in the midst of a traumatic or emotional setting. If people were able to internalize some of these values, I am sure it has changed them. Moreover, when people become continuously involved in this practice, it produces an appreciation of the endless variety of human experience on the one hand and of our deep similarities, which consists of our common humanity, on the other hand. These are clearly significant educational outcomes. As to the interviewees, their reports indicate that they found
the procedure healing, and the recorded form of their life story became an important
document for themselves and their families.

I was able to experience these profound effects in my own study (Project 4). In
Neve Shalom, I was the sole interviewer of all the participants, and no training stage
was, of course, required. I am a Jewish-Israeli woman, and in spite of my liberal
egalitarian views, I have been accustomed to viewing the Arab-Israeli or, as they
prefer to call themselves at present—the Palestinian—as “others.” The process of
“othering” (Krumer-Nevo, 2002) is unavoidable in the climate we inhabit in Israel:
Jews and Arabs speak different languages, have different religions, and seem to stand
at opposite sides of a huge historical conflict. Although the Arab members of Neve
Shalom, like all Israeli-Arabs, are not under occupation, they are a minority in Israel
and, in general, feel discriminated by the Jewish state. Furthermore, they carry scars
from the Nakba1 of 1948 and identify with the Arabs, their so-called brothers and
sisters who are under occupation or are in a state of war against Israel.

Within this context, I performed my oral history study and gradually felt it
changing me as can be epitomized in the following. While all my interviews took
place in Hebrew, because I do not speak Arabic, in the first months I was acutely
aware of when I was speaking to a Jew or to an Arab. My major personal transfor-
mation occurred on the day that I sat for two hours with a Palestinian woman and
recorded her life story, suddenly realizing that for hours I had stopped seeing her as
an Arab. She was a human being, a woman, a wife, and a mother like me. Her
different accent in Hebrew did not matter at all; it did not even register! The destruc-
tive effect of othering and dehumanization, which are the natural outcome of any war
or national conflict, had suddenly been lifted.

Concerning the four summarized projects together, several implications emerge.
First of all, in spite of vast cultural differences, people all over the world enjoy the
attention and the opportunity to tell their story, even during times of hardship, or
perhaps especially during such times! They feel empowered by the process. They
appreciate the goal of oral historians to “give voice” to their stories for the sake of
their family and community. They are more willing to participate in projects that are
presented as a contribution to their society, as we see in the Japanese case, or to
history, as in the Tibetan case, rather than research per se, particularly research
carried out by somebody from outside the community.

Moreover, it is my experience that narrative interviewing can be taught and
applied in different cultures and settings. While in the West, it is perhaps the main
role of training to teach people to abstain from the arrogant gaze, to avoid probing
and to be silent, letting the interviewee take the lead. In the East, I felt that the main
role was to provide the interviewers with tools to encourage self-centered narratives and emotional disclosure and learn to contain it. This is, of course, a major generalization that should be taken as a didactic point of reference, and no more.

Another generalization concerns the form of many life narratives as three-chapter stories. It is my impression that many individuals take a crisis, disaster, or trauma, such as a war or a major earthquake, as an anchor for their entire life story. It then becomes a story of “my life prior to the fall,” “the fall,” and “my life since.” This is a clear pattern that was found for Holocaust survivors and immigrants who had experienced a difficult absorption process in Israel (Lieblich, 2011). In the Tibetan case, the fall is the Chinese occupation and the resulting escape route. In the Japanese project, it is the earthquake and tsunami. In the Korean project, this may be the final event that led to the escape from North Korea, and in Neve Shalom, it is one of the Middle East wars. This is not surprising given the nature of a “good story” as described from ancient times until now (Bruner, 2003). Since I have become aware of this pattern in the life stories produced in my oral history studies, I even used it as a scaffold for the interviews in Japan, where I was forewarned that the interviewees might need some structure for the task of telling their lives. As described above, in Japan the oral history interviewers suggested the participants tell their story in three chapters: before, during, and after the earthquake-tsunami.

Going back to the basic ideas of oral history, it is important to note that in most parts, the projects that were described above were not planned to bring about research in the first place but to result in socially, politically, and historically meaningful documentation. They are clearly part of a humanitarian endeavor in fulfillment of Denzin and Giardina’s (2013) most recent outline for qualitative inquiry and the challenge for qualitative inquiry as formulated by Gergen (2013). The projects described above were often initiated by the communities, who looked for experts to fulfill the role. The slogan of “save the stories, save the culture” is a strong expression for that idea. In terms of “give and take” relationships, it is clear that individuals and communities are going to “gain” from the project—by establishing a local archive—while the scholars or experts are on the “contributing” side. In the Neve Shalom study, the local members were the ones who initiated the idea and approached me as a writer. Bringing to the public awareness this innovative and challenging community was the basic reason for the undertaking, and the additional “result,” concerning some progress in conflict resolution within the village, was an unforeseen aspect of the study.

In retrospect, when looking at the four projects above as applied narrative inquiry, a classification of inward-versus outward-oriented work emerges. While
these are extreme poles on an imaginary continuum, most studies manifest both attributes in different proportions or degrees. In the inward-oriented cases, the oral history is conducted for the sake of the community in which the interviews take place. This was the case in the Japanese project, where the motivation to conduct the project and to participate in it was essentially to create archives—collective memory—in the damaged villages or towns. Similarly, the project of the Tibetans in exile was conceived primarily as an effort to preserve cultural narratives in danger of extinction for the Tibetan people themselves. In comparison, the planned project in South Korea is directed mainly outside, simply stated, to make the horrors of the North Korean regime known in the free world. The Neve Shalom study also started from an outward orientation—to tell about this innovative binational village to readers in Israel and the world. As described above, however, its product became important for the community members as an indirect instrument for their communication with each other. In other words, Neve Shalom is an example of a dual-oriented project. The significance of this classification for oral history studies should be further explored and elaborated.

To close this paper, I propose that with all due respect to academic researchers, research is for most people an alienating framework in which they see no benefit for themselves. The context of social-humanitarian projects is probably much more productive in procuring a willingness to participate and share with the interviewers’ open, authentic narratives.

Notes

1. This is a revised and detailed version of a paper given in May 2013 at the Ninth Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

2. The author wishes to thank the National Library of the Tibetan people in Dharmsala, India, and the Israeli Friends of the Tibetan People for supporting the project.

3. All these widely held norms surfaced even more as I continued my work in the East in the next two settings, so they are relevant to all three projects but the last.

4. The following vignette is based on a workshop participant’s presentation. The oral presentation, given in Tibetan, was presented with a printed English translation, from which this abbreviated story is quoted.

5. The author wishes to thank IsraAID for supporting this project.
6. The two following vignettes are based on video recordings of field interviews I received with subtitles in English.

7. The author wishes to thank IsraAID and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs for supporting this workshop.

8. Because it is too soon to report on any outcomes of the described workshop, I include here a dialogue between me and the female members of the teaching workshop.

9. It is mandatory that every Israeli-Jewish citizen enroll in the army at the age of 18 for two to three years of service. In Neve Shalom, this law is often seen as in stark contradiction to the idea of promoting peace and to the goals of the local educational system. About 50% of the Neve Shalom youngsters are avoiding the draft, but this was never brought up as a subject for public discussion, debate, or vote. For Israel overall, the estimated draft avoidance rate is about 20%.

10. The following vignette is a dialogue between me and Rita during the interview, which is in fact an indirect conversation with others. What appears here is the author's translation of a section of Lieblich, 2012, pp. 140–141.

11. In Arabic, Nakba means “Day of the Catastrophe.” It is generally commemorated on May 15, the day of Israel's Declaration of Independence.

References


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Amia Lieblich is a professor of psychology and an author of numerous academic and popular books based on life stories. Her main research has dealt with individuals and communities in Israel. Together with Josselson and McAdams, she has edited the series “The Narrative Study of Lives,” and together with Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, she has authored *Narrative Research: Reading, Interpretation and Analysis.* Her most recent book is *Narratives of Positive Aging,* Oxford University Press (2014).