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Wali, Farhaan

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by Farhaan Wali

Abstract: This article, which arises from lengthy fieldwork conducted in the city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), utilises the oral history method to evaluate the changing nature of identity in a post-conflict setting. This appraisal is to be conducted with the wider goal of assessing the utility of oral history in understanding post-conflict identity. The personal narratives obtained from the fieldwork are placed into an opposing frame of reference related to the effects of conflict. The reference frames were two differing accounts of the Bosnian civil war, the first supplied by a Bosniak and the other by a Croat. These accounts will be used to exemplify the importance of oral history as a research tool for studying contested and complex social realities.

Keywords: post-conflict identity; oral history; Bosnia and Herzegovina; collective identity; ethnic conflict

The ferocity of violence witnessed in the Bosnian conflict reaffirmed how social identity can provoke savage behaviour amongst human agents. For this reason, attempting to disentangle the social realities in which people are embedded before and after the conflict is vital because people's identities are actively reshaped in these contexts.

The civil war in Bosnia plunged close kin and neighbours into bloody conflict with each other. According to Finn Tschudi, this can give rise to powerful and deep-seated negative emotions about the 'other'.[1] Therefore, the making of identity in post-conflict Bosnia is naturally rooted within individual experiences of the civil war – murder, rape and displacement – forming the bedrock segments of individual and collective sense-making about the other. Therefore, not surprisingly, a recurring feature of the oral research conducted in the war-ravaged city of Mostar concerned the participants' desire to 'recover the truth'. This meant that both sides of the divide sought the truth about the violence of the past. Before social reconstruction can be actualised, there is an inherent need for the residents of Mostar to assign blame.[2] This makes oral history a rather integral feature of post-conflict identity reconstruction, as I spent lengthy periods with locals in order to learn about their life history. This gave them the opportunity to put forward all the significant events that have formed their life history, which gave me substantive insight into post-conflict identity.

Mostar: a divided city

Mostar, the fifth largest city in BiH, stands as a visible symbol of the post-conflict fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia. On the one hand, Mostar is a region with defined boundaries, a recognisable landscape, and a long and diverse history of diasporic peoples. On the other, its inhabitants are much harder to describe. First, demographic data about the population are contested and remain a recurring source of conflict as rival political parties wrestle for local government control.[3] On paper, as declared by the Dayton Accord

(1995), Mostar is defined as a mixed ethnic municipal city; yet, in reality, the city remains firmly divided along ethnic fault lines. According to Steven Burg and Paul Shoup, the essence of ethnic conflict is the struggle between mobilised identity groups for greater power.[4] This was visible during the civil war when ethno-nationalist groups sought to establish separate nation states. In Mostar, the current struggle amongst ethnic groups relates to the need to control resources, which perpetuates intergroup competition and division.

This divide is most evident in the social space of the city, which is heavily segregated. After the civil war, the city was geographically reshaped along ethnic pathways, leaving it permanently divided between the eastern Bosniak and western Croat blocks. This division has complicated the process of post-conflict reconstruction, especially at the social and political levels. Not surprisingly, a common theme identified by the respondents throughout the oral narratives concerned the seemingly illegitimate remapping of ethnically cleansed municipalities.

Historically, the population of the city before the civil war was roughly 126,000 residents and the demographic makeup of the three largest groups was Bosniak-Muslim (34%), Croat-Catholic (29%), and Serb-Orthodox (19%).[5] The city was relatively integrated; for example, interracial marriages accounted for one-third of its marriages.[6] This multi-cultural synergy was uprooted in 1993 when the Croatian Defence Council launched an attack on the Muslim-Bosniak populace in order to turn Mostar into an exclusively Croat city. After the civil war ended, the long process of post-war reconstruction commenced, but Mostar remains a divided city.

The process of post-conflict identity reconstruction in the city will inevitably conform to the ethnic divergences of the population. Therefore, thinking in terms of a shared national identity is extremely difficult, as the social divide has become deeply institutionalised. In this respect, the residents of Mostar do not have a straightforward relationship with the state as they continue to preserve deep-rooted emotions about the other. Another significant problem in the city of Mostar is the need to control resources. The control of resources goes back to the imbalance of power created during the war period, which continues to skew perception in post-conflict Mostar. As VP Gagnon asserts, the warring factions wanted to remap the national boundaries of BiH, and thus strategic violence was employed to polarise society.[7] As a result, the perception of violence experienced by the residents of Mostar was not necessarily proportionate, as the power imbalance between Croat and Bosniak was radically dissimilar.

Nearly two decades after the conflict, the people of Mostar are still trying to make sense of the conflict. This sense-making aspect of identity developed an internal logic and continuity that every generation had to confront and deal with in order to form a post-conflict identity. From a social constructionist perspective, people's existing identities sharply hinge on their previous encounters, and thus violence in the Balkans has deeply marred identity construction. On the surface, trying to track the formation of post-conflict identities might seem straightforward, but in actuality it is an extremely difficult task. This is because post-conflict identities do not necessarily follow a linear path, as there are multiple points of intersecting experiences.[8] In other words, different social categories – such as gender, ethnicity, class, and religion – exist amongst people, giving rise to multiple points of divergence. This would suggest that a Bosniak might experience violence in ways that are largely different from those experienced by a Croat, as their trajectories towards violence may have already been fashioned at an earlier point in their life history. Only after contextualising their experiences does it become clearer; thus, it would be a mistake to assume that conflict gives rise to similar life experiences, as people emerge from divergent backgrounds and experiences.

Employing oral history

As Graham Dawson suggests, trying to employ oral history in a post-conflict environment can be challenging.[9] This is because the telling of a life experience after a bloody conflict is usually embedded within the deep-rooted desire of the interviewee to set the 'record straight'.[10] In the context of the Bosnian conflict, each interviewee sought to shift the blame to the opposing side, absolving his own ethnic people of culpability. As Stef Jansen asserts, this places significant responsibility upon the interviewer to extract meaningful records that can be used to construct an impartial window into post-conflict identity.[11] This entails moving beyond oral traditions that distort the image of the 'other'. In this regard, my goal was to record a number of oral narratives from the residents of Mostar, drawing on their living memory of the civil war. However, while the life stories would be a central feature of my research, this did not mean exclusively atomising the individual to the exception of the social world. In other words, individual experiences of civil war often brought residents closer to their social group identities, which in turn, alleviated their hostility towards out-group members.

For the purpose of this paper, it is worth reviewing the key features of oral history that make it such an important research tool for studying post-conflict identity. First, as a non-static research method, oral history will enable me to track changes in identity before and after conflict. As Lynn Abrams argues, the collection of Holocaust narratives enabled historians to assign significance to each individual narrative, encouraging 'victims to see themselves as survivors'.[12] This will help me give a voice to those who feel displaced by the conflict because each person had a life story to tell. Second, by exploring life histories, I will be better placed to understand the social contexts in which the residents of Mostar were embedded. As I discovered, the respondents sought to contextualise their life stories. They talked openly about their upbringing in a

relatively integrated social world, and contrasted these experiences with the traumatic events of civil war and genocide.

As Sean Fields acknowledges, the oral history method is an 'affirming and open process' that enables linkages to be made across the narrator's life cycle.[13] These self-purported linkages were important for the residents I interviewed, as they reinforced the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society. Third, by conducting a range of interviews amongst members of each ethnic group in Mostar, I could construct common patterns related to their shared experiences. This helped me understand the ways in which identities were actively constructed post-conflict. This gave them an opportunity to convey their own experiences, enabling me to place these narratives into a wider spectrum of social significance.

The oral stories reported in this paper are set in the regional context of Mostar, a city struggling with ethnic segregation and conflict. According to Azra Hromadžić, the city of Mostar is intensely divided, making it very difficult to carry out fieldwork as the residents are greatly distrustful of outsider interference.[14] However, the oral history method provided recognition that each resident has a meaningful story to tell about his or her experiences, which appealed to both sets of ethnic groups, who felt extremely marginalised by the civil war. For the purpose of this paper, two main life stories are presented, each of which could, in itself, provide a good starting point for a discussion of the development of post-conflict identity. Each is like a sketch of an event glimpsed from a particular perspective. These sketches, or life stories, relate and overlap, but are not reducible to a single view. Furthermore, although, when combined, they offer the beginnings of a complete description, my knowledge of the whole is still imperfect. The meaning and significance of these life stories will become clearer as each is developed and interpreted. However, the stories are not self-contained; each takes as its focus a different aspect of the same whole process. Each draws upon the same essential phenomenon – the experience of civil war.

Methodology: collecting the narratives

The lasting experience of conflict continues to plague the social space across BiH. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the interviews conducted with the residents of Mostar were soaked in 'subjective partiality', making the fieldwork extremely challenging.[15] Trying to ascertain reliable and valid narratives from a diverse and wide-ranging sample of Mostar's population quickly became a significant problem. The first challenge concerned determining an adequate sample size for the oral histories. Before commencing the fieldwork, I rather optimistically sought to collect 250 oral histories. However, due to logistical problems and time constraints, only seventy-eight oral histories were collected.[16] This reduced the capacity to look for causal relationships between narratives, as I could not gather oral histories from different parts of Mostar. Essentially, the interviews were restricted to the eastern and western blocks of Mostar.

The sampling problems occurred due to translator bias. During the course of the fieldwork, I started to notice discrepancies emerging when translated accounts were compared to casual conversations that were conducted with interviewees in English. The fieldwork began with the use of two translators, as the research sought to allow respondents to narrate their experiences in their native language. Regrettably, it was discovered that the translators were adding and embellishing the oral narrations. This meant several oral histories were tainted. However, as Goriee points out, if the translator's bias or error distorts the 'real facts' documented by the narrator, then its reliability becomes problematic. After a short review period, I decided not to discard the translated interviews, because they still offered insight into the experiences of conflict. As a result, forty-two oral histories were conducted in English.

The inability to use translators throughout the project had several methodological implications. Firstly, as a relatively low proportion of Mostar residents speak English fluently, the number of interviews collected was drastically reduced. Secondly, losing the ability to access the residents in their native tongue was a significant limitation, as it meant the oral narratives lost a cultural and linguistic dimension. Therefore, the forty-two English-orientated interviews had a number of contextual problems, becoming more prevalent during the fieldwork.

Firstly, the English language oral histories seemed to lack detail, especially related to explaining traumatic events. Respondents would often assert that these events were simply 'indescribable'. This inability to explain events can be attributed to language, but the Bosnian language oral histories also had similar limitations. Trying to narrate traumatic experiences can be a difficult task, as it is done through verbalisation. As Samuel Totten and Steven Feinberg explain, this creates a space between the 'victim and the event'.[17] In turn, this creates a distance in the act of remembrance and reconciliation, as the observer struggles to appreciate the suffering experienced, as it cannot be properly explained. This could make one question the validity and functionality of the oral history method, because it interrupts the flow between speech and memory. However, as Stevan Weine suggests, oral history projects are needed in order to give survivors a voice to express their individual experiences, which can assist the recovery and reconciliation process.[18]

Thirdly, residents from working-class backgrounds were significantly underrepresented, because a higher proportion of English speaking residents were middle-class. For this reason, the paper has focused on two oral narratives, Goran and Midhat. It was not my attention to focus exclusively on these two oral histories, as I had collected seventy-eight in total. However, it became clear early into the collection of oral histories

that these two narratives stood out. In particular, despite the fact that both men emerge from different ethnic groups, their social positionality is relatively similar in terms of income, education level and status. I felt these two contrasting narratives could best exemplify the research goal. The goal of my research was to map out the 'turning-point moments' in the lives of the residents who had undergone a life-altering experience.[19]

Focusing on the oral history of Midhat and Goran gives the reader an opportunity to glimpse the 'transformative' aspect of the post-conflict identity as expressed through their oral accounts. Consequently, the two accounts may seem somewhat dramatic, but they exhibit a distinct social world of lived experience. However, the problem with focusing on two distinct oral histories is that it can reduce, or even skew, social reality. The accounts provide insight into the 'reconstructive' elements of recalling conflict. However, as Cécile Jouhanneau explains, narratives of conflict also underline the problem between recollection of trauma and the politicisation of events.[20] Namely, I felt the two accounts seemed less pragmatic, and thus illustrated the complexity of forging a post-conflict identity. The deep-seated emotions spawned in the midst of ethnic conflict seemed to be kept alive by the narrative; but could these oral histories transcend hatred and be used to engage in the process of reconciliation?

Life story one: Midhat

Midhat, a 46-year-old Bosnian Muslim, was born and raised in the city of Mostar. Understanding why, twenty years after the civil war, Midhat still believes Croats are a malevolent group of people requires dissecting the narratives of his past. In particular, my analysis of Midhat's story needs to be deconstructed in two ways: first, I need to analyse how he negotiated his own identity during different stages of his life; and second, how he negotiated his group identity before and after the civil war. Therefore, this brief glimpse into Midhat's life story explores the change in identity he underwent after the civil war.

According to Midhat, 'Croats are a wicked race […] they attack us and kill us after we live together for centuries […] they are cowardly monsters'. To some extent, this somewhat bleak view may be directly traced to Midhat's experiences of the war; but before I explore these experiences, it is worth first looking at his early upbringing. He grew up on the west bank of the Neretva River, which was predominantly Croat. This makes understanding his early social interaction crucial, because individuals belonging to minority groups may develop multiple pathways to adulthood.[21]

Historically, Bosniaks are a Slavic ethnic group characteristically categorised as Muslims. However, according to Midhat, this ethno-religious difference was not visible before the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Midhat, for example, described in vivid detail his early childhood experiences:

> Before war, we live together – school, work, football, marriage – we [were] one community. I went to school, mostly Croat, but no problems. My best friend Croat; my first girlfriend Croat, my next-door neighbour Croat. Then war start, everything change […] they kill us. Imagine neighbour after twenty, forty year kill you.

One thing that emerges strongly in Midhat's life story is the sense of social integration experienced during his upbringing. Despite growing up in a predominantly Croat area, ethnicity is not singled out as a marker that created division. Yet, on the other hand, it seems too simple to assert that life before the war had no bearing on his current identity. However, Midhat's account implies that what appears to be important, from an identity-formation perspective, is how the war transformed his identity. In particular, the positive pre-war view of other ethnic groups is altered, and thus a negative post-war identity is constructed in which Croats and Serbs are seen as everlasting adversaries. This represents a significant change in identity makeup. Midhat mentioned that he found it easy and natural mixing with Croats before the war; but since the civil war, he finds it incredibly difficult to even engage in simple interaction with them.

Clearly, one key event played a major role in transforming Midhat's identity; the civil war changed his perception of the other and, in the process, reaffirmed his Bosniak group identity. Let me now explore his memories and perceptions of the civil war, because this singular event triggers a holistic change in identity. As he describes:

> I remember they [Croats] kick us out from homes. My family forced to move from West Mostar across the Neretva River to the Muslim side. We move in with family, thousands were kicked out […] but we lucky, we not captured and taken to Croatian concentration camp. My friends die at the hands of Croats, killed in fields like dogs. In the Muslim side, we bombed and attacked night and day. We put women, children, and old people down in basement, we had no food or water. UN brought us this, if not we die. I help fight, but I no soldier, I help first, and then I become fighter. We fight for our life, street to street, we have little weapon we drive Croat back […] but we want our homes back; we should fight until we win the city.

As this extract reveals, Midhat experienced prolonged and systematic violence at the hands of Croats, which radically altered his perception of them as a people. In 1993, Midhat and his family were forced to flee their home to escape the Croat army. During this turbulent period, Midhat described how he 'lost everything' that he considered valuable – his home and belongings were seized, family members and friends were murdered or sent to concentration camps, and his social status and place in society were

reduced to those of a second-class citizen. This displacement from society became a major turning point in his life. The civil war forced him to radically alter the way he lived and challenged his attachment to society at the social level. Before the civil war, he felt no visible division between Croat and Bosniak, embracing a collective national identity. However, after the war, he had to reconstruct his identity around a revived Bosniak identity.

The process of rebuilding civil society after the Bosnian War of Independence (1992-1995) became another landmark turning point for Midhat. First, as Midhat reflects, adjusting to exile was extremely difficult as he felt emasculated; he could not provide for or protect his family and this loss of power had a dramatic effect on his identity makeup. As he explains, 'On my own, I have no power to fight; but together with my people we defend our land'. In this respect, power is equated with the collective benefit of identifying with the group, as this enables the in-group to protect and defend the whole against outsiders. This, to some extent, guarantees the ethnic group immunity from further violence. Second, Midhat adopts a new sense of communal identity, which is a direct reaction to the collective violence seemingly committed by the Croat population in Mostar.

The ethnic violence in the city pushed the rival groups further apart while uniting all the members of each ethnic group. For this reason, Midhat begins to exclusively identify with his ethnic group, because it is composed of similar people who share the same ethno-religious identity. Thus, he actively constructs his new identity in order to reconcile what he had to endure during the war, which gives meaning to his new life. This allows him to establish a unified narrative about the war and his identity. Yet, on the other hand, it also seems too simple to say that this new collective identity is homogeneous. In fact, social identity in the eastern zone after the war was not evenly distributed, as those exiled from the western side were, at times, considered second-class citizens within their own ethnic group. As Midhat suggests: 'we were burden on the family for many year[s], struggling to find work, so they think we are burden because we have nothing after war'.

By tracking Midhat's life history, I can see that he was an active agent in the rebuilding of his identity, especially after the war. Therefore, for Midhat, a post-conflict identity is an active attempt to unify turbulent and contradictory life events into a complete whole. However, collecting this oral history has shown that individuals navigate in and out of various narratives of identity. For example, the interview with Midhat would shift and change, and thus his identity appeared far more fragmented than the notion of a unified post-conflict identity might infer. The notion that Midhat's identity is in a constant state of change reflects the uncertainty of the social world into which he was placed after the civil war. What seems to have been decisive for Midhat is the breakdown of civil society during the war, which challenged his multi-ethnic pre-war worldview.

According to Margaret Wetherell, this type of identity shift consists of internalised social narratives. [22]In other words, before the war, ethnicity and religion were not important social divisions for Midhat; but this position was radically altered when Croats launched an attack on his ethnic group. As a result, a post-conflict identity was eventually reached, transcending time and place. It is not something that already existed; rather, it has a particular historical context, which is constantly changing. Therefore, the post-conflict identity manufactured by Midhat is a type of identity that allows him to reconcile the narratives of the past with his current position in society. By using oral and life history, I was able to track how a post-conflict identity was crafted; it provided me with multiple insights into how Midhat negotiated his life at different stages and how he reacted to the turbulent events within it.

Life story two: Goran

Goran, aged forty-nine, is a self-employed contractor living in the western part of Mostar. The purpose of this life history is to provide a personalised account of the war, as told from a Croat perspective. A biographical study of life histories is fascinating, not only because it has the potential to tell me so much about the processes of post-conflict identities, but because it can also tell me so much about the narratives of the past.

Like all life histories, Goran's account is actively woven together to tell a story from his life experiences. This type of approach has been necessary in order to identify more clearly some of the differences and commonalities that exist between rival ethnic groups in Mostar. In the first interview with Goran, he began his life story by telling me about his early upbringing in the west side of Mostar. A recurring feature of Goran's narrative was his need to reinforce his ancestral origins and connection to the land. He talked at length about his ancestors and how their 'Slavic blood fills the land'. The view emerging from Goran's narrative suggests that, growing up, he was more socially aware of ethnic divisions than Midhat. As he confirms:

> As boy, my father tell me we [Croats] different […] *rightful heirs of this land* [Mostar].[23]We are different from them [Bosniaks]; our religion, our culture, our race is all different […] *Growing up, we tolerate them* [Bosniaks] b*ut we never accept* [them]; *they Muslim, they do not belong here.*

It would seem that identity, for Goran is a cultural marker underpinned by his membership in an ethno-cultural group which has a long and distinct history. In this context, cultural identity is interwoven with narratives of the past, which must be recovered in order to gain self-meaning. In this regard, the group narrative is personalised and incorporated, giving social significance to his life. Importantly, this process of internalising collective cultural narratives is passed

down through the generations. As Goran suggested, he was taught at a young age about the cultural markers that distinguish him from those around him. According to Barbara and Philip Newman, exposure to subjective parental narratives during early socialisation often distorts social reality as children recognise and respond to the cultural differences in negative ways.[24]

Goran, a Croat-born Catholic, found it very easy to come to terms with his own ethnicity. However, the generic problem with Goran's life history is the tendency to construct the past rather than describe the events he experienced. This appeared more visible when he began to talk about the war. He talked, for example, about the need to homogenise the city through force in order to recover the land of his ancestors. Goran was not describing the specific experiences of war and giving his reaction to it; rather, he was constructing a justification narrative of the war. This, in many ways, is a sense-making exercise. On one level, it allows him to sway the listener; on the other, it justifies an internal narrative constructed post-event. Goran's war narrative had an internal logic which gave the events meaning to him. However, he was not necessarily recounting events from his memory; rather, he often constructed his narrative based on stereotypical perceptions of the other that he gained before the war. For example, he described Bosniaks as 'uneducated, uncivilised, dishonest, and weak'. These descriptions do not necessarily mirror observations made over time; rather, they are more reflective of him constructing a representation of the other that justifies his ethnic superiority argument.

When Goran talked about the war, it appeared to be crafted as a narrative that was underpinned by ideology. In particular, he described it as a battle between good and evil, imbuing the conflict with a larger-than-life dimension. As he explains, 'It [the war] was a struggle against Muslim; they are evil. Look 9/11; they kill. The war was not about survival; it was about removing these people from our land'. This stereotype strips the other of any humanistic qualities, and, in the process, justifies acts of violence against them as they are seen as less than human. Goran cautiously acknowledged committing acts of violence against Bosniaks, but these were described as defensive acts. As he mentions:

> When the Serbs attack, we fight and defend city, but Muslims want Mostar [as] their country […] *we have to fight again because we cannot allow this. I join and fight, so we remove them. This is why we fight them*. They tell many lies about the war; they say we commit crimes against them […] I fight in war and there was no crime; it was war. *We had to fight to defeat the enemy* […] but you must know they lie about war because they lose and are weak people.[25]

It is clear from Goran's life story that his own identity is relatively fixed and somewhat singular in its construct. Throughout his narrative, there was minimal evidence of identity shifts. The ethnic conflict experienced during the war only served to strengthen pre-established negative archetypes about the other, which became permanently embedded into his identity makeup. Much of the subtext in Goran's interview appears to be echoes of other voices. In other words, he often spends much time reporting narratives about others (eg 'they tell many lies', 'they are evil', 'they fight us so we fight back' and so on). According to Lev Vygotsky, this narrative construction is reflective of collective identification.[26] Throughout the interview, Goran cites imaginary voices of others, but, more importantly, he is communicating in synchronisation with his ethnic group, which reinforces his own identity.

Edward Said explains how individuals all reside in a world made by social agents, in which things like ethnicity or nation are the result of agreed-upon dialogue, providing people with an identity they can communally recognise.[27] In other words, for Goran, there is very little difference between the Croat group identity and post-conflict identity, as both reflect collective sense-making. To some degree, this description is an important way of looking at post-conflict identity. This is because I seek to document how people construct oral representations of the self and the other, especially in the post-conflict context. For this reason, the post-conflict identity Goran constructs is still a prototype of his past identity.

In the interview, Goran is clearly speaking for himself; yet, what he says more likely represents a collective mindset rather than an individualistic one. For this reason, oral historians must exercise significant caution when exploring a narrative, because even though the narrators were present during the event, this does not necessarily mean they fully understood what happened. In Goran's case, he seemed overly concerned with presenting an ideological argument regarding his ethnic group's activities during the war. It was important for him to set the record straight, as he felt 'Bosniaks were lying about the war'. This meant he had a personal interest in representing a specific type of 'truth'.

In order to generate greater consistency, I conducted nine further interviews with Croats from the same area. When these accounts were compared with Goran's narrative, I discovered that though often dramatic in his tone and description, his account was similar to those of other interviewees. This similarity in the narrative was not surprising, as collective memories of the war had been crafted amongst the social group. The ideological agenda presented by Goran was echoed across the interview sample, to the extent that most locals on the Croat side seemed to undergo minimal identity shifts. There were uniform representations of the other constructed before and after the war, which, in some cases, legitimised acts of violence committed during the civil war.[28] However, the level of

consistency between interviewees possibly indicates that they were socially constructed; for example, stereotypes were narrated about Bosniaks which denigrated them. These negative stereotypes were disseminated across society, distorting the image of the other. It is equally interesting to see how the interviewees learned these stereotypes, but this discussion is slightly outside the scope of analysis. In short, socialisation plays a key role in providing the cognitive cues people use to interpret their social world.[29]

Despite the fact that Goran recalls events in a collective form, it is more important to isolate and understand the larger context within which these acts of remembering occur. The civil war is a key landmark for personal and group sense-making, which eventually becomes 'social memory'.[30] As Alessandro Portelli explains, 'Errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings'.[31] Therefore, as Donald Ritchie maintains, oral history is an interpretive tool that looks to capture the life history of a person; it will always be underpinned by 'selective subjectivity'.[32] In this respect, the interview with Goran was a narrated description of past events that were told in the present, making it an act of recollection as well as a sense-making exercise.

Post-conflict identity

The two oral narratives emphasised the centrality of ethno-religious fault lines. The accounts illustrate how both Midhat and Goran's current identities seemed greatly dependent on their past and present experiences. Although I was not surprised that this topic came up so frequently, it was difficult to deal with because identity is crafted from many different sources. Thus, a number of themes and issues must be discussed to reveal the importance of the social settings in which the interviewees are embedded.

As Amy Peterson asserts, there is a need to study the 'intersecting experiences' of individuals.[33] By drawing on the personal experiences of the seventy-eight narratives, I was able to explore post-conflict identity and its multiple intersections, making it possible to observe the different social positionalities that exist amongst people. For instance, some narrators concentrated particularly on race and ethnicity, while others noticed features such as religion, cultural background, national identity and so on. Hromadžić, speaking specifically about the social reality of Mostar, identified the interplay among 'groups of people differently positioned in relation to power' as another salient dynamic of post-conflict identity.[34]

In some way, the social reality of post-conflict Mostar appeared to reflect the discrete power-imbalance between ethnic groups. Ethnicity has become a highly heterogeneous issue in the city. After the war, residents tend to construct distinct forms of ethnicity that divide individuals into different communities. In other words, the construction of a post-conflict identity should be seen as a process of re-classification. Midhat, for instance, lumped together his ethnicity, religion and nationality into a single term, namely Bosniak. What is common to Goran and Midhat, in all their diversity, is that they base their current identity around their communal origin. This origin, mythical or real, amalgamates history, territory and ethnicity together. Thus, in this context, ethnic groups entail the positioning of boundaries in relation to who can and cannot belong according to specific parameters related to ethnic origin.[35] For this reason, ethnicity has been fused together within the social and political space in Mostar, which has promoted exclusionary practices in order to maintain political control. This has meant that post-conflict identity provides people in Mostar with a mode of interpreting the world based on shared ethnic positioning, especially regarding other ethnic groups.

Now that I have presented the particularities of each case study, it is important to tackle one key conceptual issue: how can oral history be effectively employed to understand the formation of new identity types that emerge after conflict. In theory, an individual has not one identity type, but rather several, which are stimulated by different social contexts.[36] In order to investigate the tensions that exist within these identity types, one must explore how individual and collective forms of memory intersect. In this respect, oral history gives me a unique picture of different life stories, providing a multifaceted view told through diverse experiences. Trying to reconstruct identity types during the war is extremely problematic, as the social landscape shifted so rapidly from one day to the next, making it even more difficult to understand post-conflict responses to the violence. Consequently, accurately capturing the deep emotions and feelings generated by the civil war will be equally important. In addition, collective forms of identity will constitute a key component of the social narrative, as category-based identities may be sought out in response to group violence. In other words, post-conflict identity is greatly influenced by a member's affiliation with a well-defined and clearly distinct social category. This may give rise to homogenous group identity, producing inter-group favouritism, as members align their identity with the common attributes and norms of the group.

In keeping with the above, I have crafted a definition of the appellation 'post-conflict identities' that can be separated into three distinct segments: (1) a new cognitive perspective is engineered after conflict that is (2) internalised, so that (3) a new collective identity is created (fostering in-group solidarity and reinforcing out-group bias).[37] An obvious problem with this definition is that it overlooks the complexity of constructing 'national identity' post-conflict. In some ways, national identity cannot be marginalised from the post-conflict framework, as communal co-existence cannot occur without re-building a national identity. In Mostar, it is clear inter-ethnic division still dominates the social and political landscape of the city. The break-up of the former Yugoslavia triggered widespread identity-based conflict, which in turn fostered the homogenisation of identity amongst rival ethnic

groups. In the post-Dayton period, these competing and opposing identities manifest systematically, sustaining a socially divided city. A prevailing sense of racial exclusivism exists across Mostar, as ethnic identity continues to play an important role in the process of social differentiation. Therefore, it is not surprising to see widespread social division, which as Hurst Hanum asserts, undermines national-identity reconstruction.[38]

The most fundamental aspect of post-conflict identity formation is the deep emotions generated during the conflict; this provides a new cognitive perspective through which to view the social world. At this point, I want to briefly look at cognitive theory in order to clarify its meaning in the post-conflict context.[39] Social cognitive theory defines behaviour as a reciprocal interaction between an internal emotional state and triggers that are available in the environment. Social psychologists have long tried to identify the key cognitive and motivational changes that occur within individuals when they become group members. Conflict is the primary trigger for the creation of a new cognitive perspective because individuals are willing to 'bend towards group expectation'.[40] This explanation shows the strong interplay between personal and collective identity, which enables the group to change members' cognitive perspectives.

Some social movement theorists have argued that a 'cognitive opening' is required before the wholesale transformation of previously held beliefs can occur.[41] The triggers for this opening are multifaceted and greatly hinge on the experiences of the individual, making him/her vulnerable to cognitive and collective identity change. Thus, prolonged and intense exposure to group violence can lead to a cognitive opening, which may activate a process of identity change. As a result, individuals are categorised and placed in an in-group. This membership is then internalised by members as an aspect of their identity.[42] In this respect, the basis for a member's self-definition changes within the group, allowing his or her personal identity to be submerged into a collective identity.[43] According to Norman Triplett, moving from a state of social conflict to a group setting can drastically diminish one's sense of individuality.[44] Similarly, TM Newcomb found that increased interaction with other members prompts individuals to change their attitudes in accordance with group consensus.[45] In other words, for cognitive transformation to take effect, the individual must align his or her viewpoint with that of the group.

According to David Snow, cognitive change provides a framework for understanding the external world by rendering a situation meaningful.[46] Therefore, with the initial outbreak of violence during the civil war, residents immediately aligned their cognitive perspective with that of the group. This alignment acts as a unifying force, moulding the individual's ideas and actions into synchronisation with the collective identity. This makes the cognitive process an active force in the construction of one's reality. Making sense of the 'other' lies at the heart of this cognitive process. Individuals undergo a set of processes by means of which they are reconfigured and various forms of 'us and them' are constructed. Some social theorists believe that this occurs in individuals who have suffered some form of emotional damage, usually at the hands of the 'other', during early life.[47] In theory, the individual then internalises these representations in his or her actions and responses. This is why oral history is important; it provides a way to observe shifts in identity over the course of a life history.[48] For instance, the life histories narrated by Goran and Midhat saw them contextualising events and experiences, and in doing so, they made connections to different 'life-altering' stages in their lives.

Truth recovery

Since the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia, a number of important debates concerning post-conflict identity have been pushed to the fringes of social significance in order to facilitate reconstruction. This has meant pragmatic issues continue to dominate the socio-political and legal landscape, which has adversely affected the process of 'truth recovery'. More significantly, historical perspectives appear overshadowed and neglected, excluding oral history as a practical instrument in post-conflict reconciliation. A recurring feature of the oral research conducted in the war-ravaged city of Mostar concerned the interviewees' desire to 'recover the truth'. As Dawson notes, traumatic experiences often constitute the central features of life stories told by survivors.[49] This meant that both sides of the divide sought the truth about the violence of the past. Before measures towards social reconstruction could be achieved, there was a deep-rooted need to assign blame. The pragmatic need to solve the post-conflict landscape appeared to only lead the divided communities into greater socio-political conflict. Within this rather thorny social space, I sought to demonstrate that historical research could be used to cut across the social boundaries created by civil war, allowing historians to reconstruct an impartial narrative of the past.

Since the end of the Bosnian civil war, attempts to overcome the conflict have been overshadowed by legal frameworks about truth recovery, relegating historical narratives. Even though the interviews have uncovered two opposing perspectives regarding the conflict, they still provide a way to understanding shifting narratives and diverse social experiences. Naturally, truth recovery is an important marker after a bloody conflict, yet this search for truth is still firmly embedded within ethnic group membership. For this reason, oral history can be used as a way to document the human experience, providing insight into competing narratives of the past. In this respect, the collected oral histories provide significant explanatory value in regard to understanding individual and group perspectives of conflict.

Despite the war ending two decades ago, the conflict still casts a lasting shadow over the city. In

particular, the impact of the war can be seen in three interconnected ways. First, the city is still plagued by sporadic outbreaks of physical violence between rival ethnic groups. Second, social divisions between ethnic groups have deepened, creating entrenched ideological positions that express hostility towards the other. Third, socio-economic inequalities and divisions in the city have created greater conflict related to accessing material resources. Therefore, post-conflict identity reconstruction in Bosnia is layered upon a web of complex problems, such as marginalisation of ethnic groups, which have preoccupied social scientists since the civil war first erupted.

Midhat and Goran's experiences of civil war tell me a great deal about the way in which the past intersects with identity. However, as Bosnia slowly progresses past the war, understanding narratives of the past has become an essential element of modern debates about national identity. More significantly, the war tribunals that have been conducted often impose a generic and authoritative narrative of the conflict. Trying to generate categories of understanding in this artificial manner can help reconciliation, but participants must collectively enter a blank void regarding their experiences. In reality, such controlled narratives deny the traumatic experiences of the war, and thus history cannot be eradicated in order to accommodate political unity. In addition, this form of selective narrative allocation can create a division that is more social, as one social group's historical experiences and collective narrative is considered more worthy. Therefore, the narratives exhibit very little harmony; this is to be expected as they reflect fractured experiences of the conflict.

In sum, it is difficult to know whether Mostar can work through the past conflict, because ethnic groups construct their own historical narratives of the war. Thus, the post-conflict identities that are created simply reflect the 'truths' in which people are embedded. In a city like Mostar, where collective forms of identity are so deeply entrenched, greater study is required in order to explore alternative types of identity that may emerge based on class or gender.

Contextualising oral history and post-conflict identity

The two life histories I have explored provide a rich source of insight into the construction of post-conflict identity; but, as I observed, each account exhibited much subjectivity. However, as Portelli explains, this subjectivity is natural because oral history is not just about what 'people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did'.[50] For this reason, the underlying goal of oral history is to 'give voice' to those who have been socially sidelined, allowing them the opportunity to express their unique perspective.[51] There were several key advantages of using the oral history method to unlock insight into post-conflict identity. First, as I discovered, the life history approach placed narratives into a historical frame. This allowed me to focus on identity shifts over the life cycle of the respondents. For example, I could visualise how Midhat negotiated his identity before and after the war, marking the changes he underwent because of the civil war.

Second, the oral history method enabled me to monitor identity changes at a personal and group level, and from this I could explore the connection between narrative and identity. As articulated by Paul Ricoeur, 'narrative identity' allows the researcher to document how identity is negotiated and interwoven with different types of narrative.[52] For example, the interview with Goran illustrated how he often narrated his life story through a fixed cultural lens which distorted the identity narratives of rival ethnic groups. This rather subjective recollection of events was still insightful, as David Henig explains, because the storyteller is sketching out and connecting life experiences in a way that explains how he obtains meaning from the world around him.[53] Third, when dealing with ethnic conflict, one must be mindful of the emotional landscape that might be encountered when respondents evoke deep memories of war. Oral history gives residents an opportunity to narrate their personal accounts and, in the process, confront disruptive emotions. For this reason, constructing oral histories can be extremely difficult; for example, Midhat struggles to understand the violence he witnessed.

The civil war acted as the primary conditioning agent that altered people's identities. As a result, after the war, residents manifested a new way of viewing the social world, which in Midhat's case contradicted his pre-war identity. The post-conflict identity that emerges has a powerful influence on individual behaviour, justifying the in-group's negative opinions of the out-group. Barbara David and John Turner argue that people in a group setting tend to 'depersonalise' and 'stereotype' themselves and others.[54] Consequently, pre-war similarities are eroded, making it easier to impose differences between themselves and the other. More importantly, the new cognitive perspective, gained in a group environment, spawns greater empowerment.[55] Empowerment is an essential part of the post-conflict identity, increasing the ideological strength of individuals; the empowered develop a greater sense of confidence in their own security. Midhat told me that he did not see social divisions between ethnic groups during his teenage years, believing instead that he resided in a multi-ethnic community. However, his experiences of conflict with rival ethnic groups during the civil war radically altered his cognitive perspective of the other and himself.

A recurring problem in the construction of oral history in Bosnia has been the way in which residents often reduce their life history to 'who did what to whom'.[56] Oral historians frequently have to challenge central aspects of the stories told. In the oral history of Mostar, for example, I had to counterbalance ethnocentric tales that assigned blame to the other with known historical facts. Both Goran and Midhat made great efforts to narrate tales that discharged their

ethnic group of any culpability – which makes reconciliation difficult, as no one is accountable for the past. However, oral histories of the conflict can place a spotlight on past events, generating more pluralistic engagement with key social issues. As the oral histories reveal, constructing a post-conflict identity will invariably assume a multitude of forms, of which collective and individual dimensions are the central features. This diversity has stimulated much specialisation about the manifestations of violence that result from group membership. However, as the two narratives showed, despite some similarities in relation to collective identification, each life story has distinctive features based on individual experiences.

NOTES

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Address for correspondence:
f.wali@bangor.ac.uk