"Every Morning before You Open the Door You Have to Watch for that Brown Envelope": Complexities and Challenges of Undertaking Oral History with Ethiopian Forced Migrants in London, U.K.

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Abstract: The experience, "voice," and perceptions of the "individual refugee" is conspicuous by its virtual absence from academic research. The few studies dealing with black and minority ethnic experiences from an emic perspective in relation to mental health do not specifically refer to refugees or asylum seekers. This article explores the use of oral history techniques when researching Ethiopian forced migrants in the U.K. Based on two pilot research projects which explored Ethiopian culture and experience in reference to mental health and well-being, it will focus on some of the complexities and challenges encountered. This article acknowledges the need for an understanding of cultural traditions as well as history and experience when planning and implementing such research as this proved to be an essential part of the research process, ensuring that individual stories and truths were allowed to evolve. The oral history approach for this research therefore ensured that the experiential knowledge of the Ethiopian forced migrant participants was given space, authenticity, and validity.

Keywords: ethics, Ethiopians, forced migration, mental health, oral history

> No one knows about me . . . I have experience, a sense of history, real experience, and real history. Yes, that's it . . . it's real history.[1]

Forced migration results in a radical life transformation, and the migration process, settlement, and adaptation experience, along with the loss of

"geographical space" combine to produce a set of social, cultural, economic, and psychological challenges for forced migrants which are likely to impact on integration, mental and/or physical health, and access to health and social care provision.[2] The experience, "voice," and perceptions of the "individual refugee" is conspicuous by its virtual absence from academic research, and the few studies dealing with black and minority ethnic causes and experiences in relation to mental health do not specifically refer to refugees or asylum seekers. In addition, studies that have been undertaken on mental health and settlement in exile tend to focus on organizational or institutional processes rather than user perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. There has been little focus on the forced migrants themselves as human agents; instead, they are, for the most part, regarded as "recipients" of policy.[3]

There are relatively few studies which discuss the issues of settlement and adaptation, and this is especially so for the Ethiopian migrant population (with the exception of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel). Remarkably, little is known about the processes and extent of Ethiopian settlement and adaptation in the U.K. There is an increasing need for studies and research with Ethiopian forced migrants, for culturally specific knowledge and understanding "informed by the experiences of people themselves . . . who are involved in the everyday struggles of war and flight" and then, subsequently, in processes of settlement, adaptation, and the struggle for identity.[4] Marita Eastmond argues that studies should inform and challenge generalizations made about refugees and capture "the political and cultural dynamics, as well as the diversity of social constructions."[5] More specific research in relation to the search for continuity, coherence, meaning, and identity through the medium of culture and customs, as understood as a coping strategy, is even more neglected within dominant research and theory.[6]

The context of my own research is an interest in the mental health experiences of forced migrants and Ethiopians in particular.[7] This article will make reference to interviews carried out between 2007 and 2009 which recorded narratives and testimonies based on a mental health and well-being topic guide and with health-related prompts, with Ethiopian forced migrants in London as part of exploratory research for a Ph.D.[8] The methodological approach, with the use of oral history techniques adopted for this research, was found to be particularly appropriate for researching Ethiopian forced migrants. One significant reason for this is due to the great worth Ethiopian society places on oral traditions as a primary and traditional means of conveying culture while at the same time transmitting feelings, attitudes, and traditional values.[9] In addition, Ethiopian society is heterogeneous, stratified ethnically, culturally, and socially,[10] and an oral history focus on the individual story and experience recognizes these

differences and enables "the researcher to look at mere dependent variables in their own right."[11]

This article explores the use of oral history techniques when researching Ethiopian forced migrants and focuses on some of the complexities and challenges encountered during such research. One of the most significant challenges facing oral history research concerns the issue of reliability and subjectivity of research "data." Although many social researchers have increasingly embraced oral history as a methodology able to expose hidden and absent views or ignored topics and present diversified perspectives on the past, a suspicion that oral sources may be inappropriate for the discipline lingers. As discussed previously, the discipline of oral history has provoked criticism and has been viewed as subjective or partisan and has frequently suffered from accusations of bias and distortion for relying on the potentially poor memories of the narrator.[12] Remembrance, however recorded, is dependent upon the way individuals perceive themselves and the present, as well as their expectations of the future.[13] Recording the past through narrative accounts raises complex questions about what is recalled and about the role of retrospective interpretation in the selection and presentation of memories. Memories can fail and perceptions can change over time which can introduce error or falsification. It is also crucial that we acknowledge how gender, race, and class, as structural and ideological relations, have shaped the construction of historical memory.[14]

However, the important question for oral historians, in view of the fact that it is impossible to claim that a completely factual, frank, and precise interview is obtainable, is whether the issues related to memory are evidence of its limitations as a research methodology. According to Paul Thompson, it does not have to be seen as a limitation: "the key point is to be aware of the potential sources of bias and the means for countering them . . . One of the deepest lessons of oral history is the uniqueness, as well as representativeness, of every life story."[15] In this way, bias is part of the learning process; oral historians need to either detect the nature of the bias or identify the truth within it, showing how it is the bias that provides the meaning. As R. Kenneth Kirby explains: "Informants may not always agree upon what events occurred, or in what order, or for what reason, but something in the recording or telling of the events just might reveal the important 'expectations and norms' that are the most valuable part of the story."[16] Indeed, if the oral historian needs to understand what historical subjects did and how they perceived their era, actions, or experiences, then any reevaluation or changes in perception before and/or during the interview are just as relevant.

This argument can be used to counter the criticism levied by Nadia Auriat, among others, with reference to migration. Auriat considers the influence of memory on recall accuracy and concludes a high level of errors in recall when

compared to available migration data and records.[17] If, however, memory is seen as part of human consciousness, and as Thompson, Kirby, and others propose, then precise dates, countries, or demographic statistics are secondary to understanding the meaning of experience to the individuals, and reevaluation is an important part of the process for interviewees as they themselves may have experienced a change in historical perspective. Indeed, it has become increasingly recognized that the reshaping of memory from the standpoint of the present gives "a second dimension to the value of oral testimony as evidence, conveying not only past facts but also the evolution of consciousness over time."[18] Acknowledging some of these issues can maximize the interview as a special means of preserving the past and involves a recognition that memory is revisionist, that what is forgotten or absent may be as important as what is remembered, and silence may equally reveal important feelings. Memory is an evolution of consciousness over time. The complexity of memory was evident in my own research when interviewing a participant, AH, who was able to recall aspects of her past and talk about missing her family and culture. She was unable to talk about the actual reasons for leaving Ethiopia, however, and it is the absence of these reasons, or her fear of recall, that is so significant to her story:

> I get upset when I like a New Year or Easter time or when it's a festive time. I always remember my family . . . because you know all the things they do. You know the smell, the essence of food, sheep, chicken, things . . . We don't eat frozen things back home. You have to get fresh lamb or chicken and then . . . you all those things. Happy New Year, Happy Christmas, all that things. I missed, I always crying, crying, crying, especially on that time. I can't even talk to them when I phone them …. I always crying and my mum says to me, "Why am I crying? If . . . you are not happy please come back." But I can't you know. I can't go back. It's too dangerous for me. I can't go back. I worked, you know, in what's it? …. the Civil Service, but even now I can't discuss it. It could be dangerous.[19]

Individual access to the past through memory is inevitably subjective, variable, autonomous, and yet remains as true as any form of human consciousness. As explained by Edward Casey, "Implicit in all remembering is a commitment to truth concerning the past, a truth that reflects the specificity of this past even if it need not offer an exact likeness of it."[20]

A further aspect of the issue of reliability concerns the criticism levied at oral history in relation to the issue of questions or, more pointedly, the problem of gathering consistent data from narratives in view of the potential for bias.[21] This criticism, though not limited to oral history research, still needs to be addressed in terms of a perceived limitation of oral history techniques and is especially

important for research with forced migrants. As stated, a central concern seems to be the potential for bias in the interviewer's questions; however, best practice oral history can in fact mitigate against this potential for bias, but rigorous preparation is crucial. When researching forced migrants, it is therefore especially important to ensure that wording and language are presented so as to ensure full understanding of terms, concepts, and meanings. The planning and wording of questions and prompts should consequently be rigorously tested by utilizing the knowledge and experience of the community networks of those involved. Throughout my own research with Ethiopian forced migrants, the phrasing of questions for "topic guides" was discussed at length with a steering group which included, at different stages, various representatives from the community to ensure validity and reliability in the context of cross-cultural research. In addition, it is important to acknowledge and incorporate that the premise of oral history is to approach research in an open and flexible way, not to adhere rigidly to research agendas and questions but rather to attempt to put aside assumptions and preconceived ideas and perhaps even to abandon agendas altogether when more interesting or illuminating information evolves. My own research was therefore structured to promote informality and I found that this approach worked to develop a space where participants contributed information, stories, experiences, and feelings that were important to them without having to restrict their answers because they had a specific question to answer or because of time restrictions or, more importantly, because they felt they were being judged in some way. The problem of bias is not, however, limited to questioning and/or research agendas. The reliability and, indeed, validity of results (or data) within oral history is also linked to the wider discourse on the concept of knowledge and the reliability of the informant in terms of memory and misrepresentation, which will be discussed later in this article.

Throughout my research, I have found an interesting aspect of the preparation process to be that which requires the most self-reflection and is related to the issue of power within the interview/narration space. I am aware of the uneven power relationship between myself as the "researcher" and those I am researching and have therefore worked hard to remain conscious of my position as researcher and reflect on how this could affect the feeling and responses of respondents.[22] These concerns are not unique to me. Kirin Narayan discusses these issues in relation to the assumption that "native" and foreign anthropologists have necessarily different identifications in relation to the people they research. Narayan, however, challenges this assumption. For her, it is more important that anthropologists are aware of the shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations than the dichotomies of native/non-native, outsider/insider, and observer/observed.[23] In my own experience as researcher, I have indeed had to reflect and engage with such

shifting identifications as discussed by Narayan and I consider this to be an essential ongoing aspect of my research work and preparation. In addition, in relation to my position as researcher, I also acknowledge that no research is disinterested, and as such, I recognize that my own priorities undoubtedly influence my research. However, throughout my research, I have been careful to initially locate myself in terms of my own interests, position, and concerns but to then subsequently ensure that expressions of interest or point of view were not repeated in the "narration space" so as not to influence the content or course of the conversation.

The issue of power was also addressed, in terms of ensuring that participants were given full and clear details and information on the study and plenty of time to think about their involvement, ask questions, or be part of the steering group. Another crucial factor was to engage with Ethiopian community networks in order to ensure effective communication, knowledge, and understanding and to provide constructive advice on best practice approaches and processes such as how to create an environment within which the narrations were undertaken that was the most appropriate and welcoming. This most notably resulted in the respondents themselves deciding on the location which engendered a sense of control over the process and also consequently meant that they were more likely to remain at ease and to explore issues, ideas, and experiences.

It is widely adhered to that effective preparation is crucial when planning and undertaking any research; however, the additional cultural dynamic when undertaking research with forced migrants makes the process even more complex and requires knowledge and understanding of the cultural aspects and challenges of the community in question. Such preparation ensures that approaches are culturally appropriate and demonstrate tact and sensitivity. Without such knowledge and understanding, the opportunities for gathering reliable and illuminating data from interviews are reduced. The issues of cultural knowledge, understanding, and interpretations are not only limited to the preparation stage of the research process. My own research confirmed the importance of ensuring that during each stage of the research process, from recruitment to implementation and dissemination, investigators need to be aware of these issues. This is particularly important and relevant when researching issues and experiences in relation to mental health and well-being. The context within which both the researcher and the "researched" find themselves is therefore of great importance and it is essential that the researcher has a knowledge of the related historical, political, social, and economic factors which may influence the research dynamic and content. Many complex interacting factors determine the context in which refugees find themselves after arrival in the U.K. and shape the experience of many refugees after arrival.[24] While the role of traumatic

experience should not be overlooked when determining the psychological illness patterns of refugees, the potential effect of contextual circumstances of the refugee experience in the host country is high. There is a consensus in the global literature that Ethiopian refugees are particularly disadvantaged in relation to their mental health experience, a disadvantage attributed to premigration experience and a wide variety of postmigration factors, and also specifically due to culturally defined characteristics associated with a lack of "help-seeking" behavior.[25] These include many of the factors outlined by Karen Duke such as language difficulties, a lack of knowledge and understanding of services and systems, cultural disorientation, family separation, social isolation, stigma, insecurity about immigration/refugee status, hostility, racism and discrimination, and stresses caused by the situation in Ethiopia, both pre- and postflight:[26]

> I heard a couple of people, they make suicide, so I don't blame them as the system is very difficult. When we were in Ethiopia we used to live in extended families but when you come to the UK it's very difficult because you are living by your own and with language barriers and employment barriers and immigration problem with all these sort of issues. So you have to live with . . . it's really difficult for you to assess the problem because you feel isolated . . . loneliness and employment, housing problem, immigration problem. All these things add up to make suicide . . . Yeah, especially Ethiopians we really prefer our own community, we are comfortable with our community so the loneliness is very strong .. . .[27]

Researchers also need to be aware that in addition, many societies and cultures stigmatize mental health, and the diagnosis of mental illness may therefore be unreliable cross-culturally. Cultural differences and interpretations about psychological distress, trauma, and mental health may be viewed differently in different parts of the world, particularly when given associations with "madness":

> Ethiopians are afraid of talking about mental health problems, as there is a strong stigma attached to it in the culture. Many lay people with little knowledge or exposure with the Western world or life style . . . are unable to express what is wrong with them in English. The usual method of dealing with these problems is seeking help from traditional healers and through the church.[28]

Most notably, the relationship between the individual and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian church in London was presented as extremely powerful and a central part of Ethiopian identity, influencing beliefs and over the years becoming an integral part of individual community support mechanisms: "Church plays a real importance. The Bishop tells us to visit each other in prisons, hospital or go to the houses . . .. The church gives them purpose and support."[29]

> I don't know, all these mental health labels . . . it's all alien to us. People worry, we worry about being mad. It's hard for us to understand it . . . as it's very, very different back home. We use *tsebel* [holy water] to fight away demons.[30]

This diverse and challenging context involving many of the different factors as outlined will potentially influence how individuals place themselves on the continuum of mental health need and will also therefore influence how they interpret their own behavior and how they potentially represent these issues within a research framework. It is therefore crucial that researchers need to be completely aware of external issues that may impact on participation and responses. These may also specifically include understanding the situation or fears of the potential participants; in particular, many Ethiopian forced migrants exist in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety in relation to their official immigration status:

> Frustration at the Home Office [UK], that's the main problem. Every morning before you open the door you have to watch for that brown envelope. People are very worried about it in the community and we [the community] are now sending information in white envelopes.[31]

This may, for some, create an additional anxiety when being asked to sign an "official looking" informed consent form. The signing of such a form may be viewed with suspicion, seen as a possible official tool for tracking refused asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Procedures for informed consent (which will be discussed in more detail later in this article) should ensure participants are fully aware of the security provided by consistent and robust confidentiality and anonymity procedures. Community engagement is again one of the most effective ways to improve knowledge and understanding of cultural contexts and reduce the potential limitations of an uninformed interview process.

Susan K. Burton has reflected on some of the complexities and challenges involved when undertaking cross-lingual oral narratives and has addressed areas such as gaining access to a community/individual, conducting the interview, language, linguistic communication, and the role of the interpreter, translation, and meaning.[32] While it is evident from my research that community engagement is a crucial aspect of the research process when researching forced migrants, access and engagement with community groups are not without its own complexities and challenges. Researchers need to consider the best and most appropriate methods to engage with minority and other hard-to-reach communities. My own approach has been to make contact with as many different networks as possible, approaching voluntary and organized community groups, attending festivals or cultural events, rituals, and talking to church leaders or

other prominent community leaders. These collaborations and the resultant advice and participation of such groups and individuals were invaluable to my own preparation and ongoing research processes and were therefore incorporated into each stage of my research.

The most successful and productive source or starting point was achieved by attending rituals; in particular, the coffee (*Buna*) ceremony. This facilitated successful access to individual participants and the most open and informative narrations, possibly due to the familiarity and pride individuals felt in talking about a traditional ritual marker of their Ethiopian heritage. Furthermore, the Buna ceremony was a particularly successful medium for my own research as traditionally it is considered to be a safe place to express genuine feelings and emotions. Oral history techniques allowed participants to talk, unrestricted, and provided an insight into what happens, what is talked about, and the feelings and meanings attached to the ritual gatherings. It is this information that proved to be the most significant (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Abebe Tessema in August 2009, holding a picture of her parents back home in Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of author.

> Buna gives you a sense of being back home and getting some bits from home. A sense of satisfaction and identity and that has implications for feeling or how we feel about ourself. Yes they feel relaxed and they feel back home and they are doing something, what they have been practicing back home.[33]

The Buna ceremony provided a unique passage into the communication of this notoriously private community and facilitated the possibility of gaining an insight into the well-being of participants and how they constructed a sense of self and belonging in exile:

> Let's make coffee and then you can talk. You do talk. I do talk frankly with friends. I have friends who talk very frankly as well during the . . . it's like . . . you open the conversation while you do the coffee ceremony . . . The coffee ceremony help us talk more. The coffee ceremony helps to allow people to say . . . it's like going to a GP [General Practitioner] very private room so you can feel whether you cry or shout, it's like that.[34]

Community collaboration is also an important approach to alleviate some of the ethical dilemmas presented by current research on refugees and asylum seekers.[35] The involvement of some members of the Ethiopian community in confronting the ethical challenges of my own research impacted the success of the planned research by increasing the potential for enhanced community and individual support and participation. The ethical aspects of implementing respectful, informed consent procedures that ensure confidentiality and anonymity from design through to dissemination are particularly important when researching complicated and sensitive issues with forced migrants. A lack of familiarity with the research process, terminology, and concerns about officialdom and immigration status can be a potential barrier to participation:

> By tradition, we are . . .. secretive, secretive in nature. We are suspicious of things. People are also worried. I think it's . . .. well good, yes, to talk with leaders, like our church at St. Marys and the people at the community group . . . It will help us to . . . people will listen . . . and understand better what's going on and what it's all about. They will then pass it on.[36]

Oral historians therefore need to clarify and enhance their role by providing a clear description and purpose of the research study and by implementing culturally appropriate, informed procedures which can be enhanced by arranging for translation into the interviewee's language preference or involving "respected community leaders" to speak about the research.

The challenge of cross-lingual research is present across all research methodologies but it is especially relevant to oral history as the "data" gathered is designed to be more comprehensive, detailed, and lengthy and, as such,

requires significant consideration within the research process. The Ethiopian community come from backgrounds where English is neither the national language nor an established second language. It is hardly surprising then that many Ethiopians face language barriers on arrival and when attempting to adapt and settle in the U.K. This reality can also be a significant barrier to any cross-lingual research undertaken with individuals from the community. The interview procedure "involve[s] more than just a literal transfer of information."[37] While the decoding of meaning may be unconscious if the researcher and narrator speak the same language or are from the same gender, if the interview is cross-cultural and cuts across gender the narrator needs *to learn to listen* and attend to the narrative genres.[38]

Although much has been written about the role of interpreters in qualitative research, it is not possible within the confines of this article to comprehensively discuss all the issues; it remains imperative, however, that the oral historian "ensures that the best possible communication and services are maintained."[39] The translation of research terminology/narrations is complex; in some circumstances, it may not be possible to translate word-for-word, especially when there is no direct correspondence between Western concepts/words and those contained in the culture of the participant. The strength of oral history is the flexible interview process that allows adequate time for explanation and clarification. Immediate translation between interviewer and respondent may also allow for the translator to double-check on the meaning or phrasing of questions or concepts and allow for the repetition or rephrasing of questions if necessary. This is inevitably a lengthy process, but time invested in this way can produce the most accurate and interesting results and is therefore beneficial to the integrity of the research study. Issues of anonymity and confidentiality are especially important when selecting interpreters/translators. The ethical considerations need to be fully explained and understood and the individuals involved need to sign a confidentiality agreement.

An interesting aspect of the use of interpreters is the possible positive outcome of the developing researcher-interpreter-narrator relationship. This can be illustrated by a particular narration experience during my own research. Interviews undertaken with AH and interpreter SW highlighted that some interesting and illuminating developments can evolve when true collaboration exists between all parties involved in the oral history interview. The interviews were undertaken in various cultural and community settings including the Buna ceremonies over several different occasions in 2009. The informal and flexible research approach and the frequency of meetings allowed a positive and trusting relationship to develop between all participants and most significantly allowed me, as the researcher, to gain confidence in the interpreter's interpretive

judgment. This trust and confidence changed the relationship from my perceiving her as merely an accurate interpreter of specific speech and language to a dynamic and developing partnership in research. The interpreter, as a partner in the research, was able to clarify meaning, understanding, and, with an increasing knowledge and confidence in the topic, a guide to elicit additional information. Perhaps the most significant impact of this relationship on the narration space was the impact of having someone else with a shared cultural understanding, resulting in the interviewee being more culturally comfortable and at ease and therefore more likely to share experiences and concerns. An additional benefit of a collaborative relationship is the usefulness of debriefing sessions. When interviews are undertaken with interpreters it is, I believe, good practice to carry out post-interview debriefings which, according to Sheila Twinn, allow for the discussion of issues of wording, behavior, and attitude that will inevitably maximize the reliability of data.[40]

One of the most significant challenges of undertaking oral history interviews with forced migrants is preparing for the possible re-traumatization of the interviewee. Oral history interviews may be limited by an interviewee's reluctance to re-live harrowing and disturbing traumatic experiences. John Robinson argues that many narratives remain hidden due to "shame, anger, often guilt in the victim, and are regarded as secrets rather than stories to tell."[41] Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, in their study of war veterans, emphasize that "[m]any war veterans actively avoid traumatic recollections by staying out of situations which they know will activate such memories."[42] This reluctance is potentially problematic for oral historians in terms of gaining access to such individuals; however, as discussed previously, the informal, flexible interview process, and community collaboration can have a positive impact on participants and facilitate the building of trust and confidence to talk in a safe, non-threatening environment. Nevertheless, the vulnerability of the individual and the possibility that an interview may result in re-traumatization always needs careful consideration. In my own research, each individual was given complete information about the study themes and was especially informed about the emphasis on personal narrations based on feelings, experiences, and well-being.[43] However, it is also crucial that in aiming to protect individuals, you do not actually take away their rights by selective processes or questions and incomplete information. In addition, some feminist historians argue that, in fact, oral history as a method has a unique strength because it negates the need for levels of reflexivity and can be placed in terms of a therapeutic frame:

> as a method with strong emphasis on subjective experiences and interpretations of events, it has become almost a natural extension of consciousness raising, enabling women to understand and overcome their

experiences of oppression by examining contradictions in their lives, past and present. This therapeutic dimension of oral history is in many cases considered to be more important that the accuracy of the historical facts.[44]

It is also important to acknowledge that interviewing those who have been traumatized is a challenging process for both the interviewer and narrator. My own experience of undertaking an interview with a traumatized Ethiopian woman was extremely challenging.[45] She became intensely emotional during her narration and the interview triggered unexpected emotional reactions in both myself and in the narrator, RW. During the interview, RW talked about her reasons for leaving Ethiopia and provided insight into the grave violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed against her:

> It's hard, I mean . . . it's, it's . . . memories and things. It goes . . . but doesn't go. The man, em . . . soldier, from the neighborhood . . . he, he raped and .. . . It's the shame. The family, mother, father, brother, sisters, everyone . . . the community. Everybody knows and talks back home. I lose everything . . . It shame on me, but you go on but . . . you don't really live on . . .[46]

The interviews were carried out over several sessions and a valuable and trusting relationship developed during these narrations. During this time, RW recalled the harrowing experience of being raped, externalizing her pain and complex feelings. The flexibility of the oral history approach, then, allowed the time and space for the narrator to process this experience and then to subsequently voice her personal interpretation of the use of rape as a weapon in conflict. Her narration moved beyond the accepted understanding of rape as first and foremost a violation of the human rights of women (though still of utmost importance) to its use as a weapon to humiliate the woman, her family, and her community. This process resulted in her re-externalizing the traumatic event back into the outside world and, as Mark Klempner states, then taking ". . . it back again in a new version with a new frame."[47] It was in the recalling of the event that RW was able to process the experience and review it in the context of a situation of conflict, thus not changing the experience or necessarily her feelings but giving her the opportunity to process and vocalize her own interpretation of the experience and its wider impact and implications. This harrowing narration and subsequent processing and contextualizing by RW were later viewed by her as having a positive (and perhaps as feminist historians have argued, "therapeutic") effect. The unconscious dynamic between RW as narrator and myself as interviewer also had a lasting and significant impact on me and required much work on my own part as well as the support of colleagues, to process and compartmentalize the narration. This process of transference and

counter-transference is, according to Michael Roper, "not confined to heavily emotive subjects" and occurs in all interviews and is largely "rendered invisible as text."[48]

It is evident that the dynamic narrator/interviewer process can have a lasting effect on both the narrator and the interviewer. It is therefore an important ethical component to provide for such eventualities and ensure referral systems are in place to deal with adverse reactions. It may also be worth considering the possibility of clinical supervision for researchers if available. This not only allows for the discussion of the often very difficult and traumatic information obtained in interviews but also allows for clarification of issues and confirmation that ethical considerations in terms of "doing no harm" are reiterated. Formal and informal support therefore not only helps the interviewer, it adds integrity to the study as it monitors and provides a type of review that ensures the adherence to ethical standards and practices.

Oral history is not just what happens during the interview, it is a joint construction, in effect, a relationship between narrator and researcher (and, indeed, interpreter). In addition, it encourages a complete examination of the theory and validity of accepted forms of knowledge; it demonstrates the advantage of flexibility of approach, being open to new experiences and challenging pre-conceptions and agenda-driven interviewing. This method, at the very least, makes every effort to balance the often-established vision of the interviewer against the possibility of new understandings. Phenomenology has proved to be an important theoretical framework with much relevance to oral history; it reminds historians that "all human perspectives are both subjective and inter-subjective, with one human being subjectively reacting to the subjectivity of others."[49] Oral historians work within this understanding, allowing the narrator's perspective to be known "not with scientific objectivity, but in a manner that is actually more in line with the way human knowledge is formed and transmitted."[50] This communication between different perspectives allows for a more significant level of understanding. Oral history can therefore ensure that the experiential knowledge of forced migrants is given space, authenticity, and validity.

The nonhierarchical structure of the oral history interview itself can also be particularly illuminating when undertaking research with forced migrants, many of whom may have negative experiences of formal immigration interviews and processes. The recording of interviews is a particularly relevant technique when working with forced migrants as it is more flexible, less formal, and not restricted by written recording methods, which is particularly challenging when recording narratives in a different language. The possibility of collaborative research can also improve confidence and trust and therefore increase the possibility of more open, honest, and revealing responses. This unrestricted exploration of

perspectives can therefore expand our understanding, suggesting possibilities rather than offering definitive conclusions.

It is evident that oral history is not without its challenges and this article has explored many of them both in terms of generic challenges and those that are specific to research with forced migrants. The use of the term "challenges" here, in place of limitations, is also significant as it is less definitive (or negative) and reflects the complex dynamic processes within oral history. Oral history pushes the boundaries of traditional research looking for best practice solutions to problems and even sometimes embracing perceived limitations and demonstrating how they may in fact be strengths. The importance of knowledge and an understanding of cultural traditions, history, and experience when planning and implementing research has proved to be an essential part of the research process. An understanding of the cultural rituals of the Ethiopian community provided an opportunity to use the Buna ceremony as an access point for research. This should not be underestimated, especially considering, as I observed, that personal experiences are imperatively kept away from a public gaze. The gatherings, therefore, served as a metaphorical lens, helping in the exploration of concepts of "community," "mental health," "well-being," and "identity" relating both to the country of origin and to the country of exile and providing a deeper understanding of the complex social reality in which Ethiopian forced migrants live.

Undoubtedly, the oral history techniques adopted for the purpose of this research contributed to the success, insight, and knowledge gained. The oral history narratives provided the "meaning" participants gave to actions, events, and experiences. These meanings are central to understanding the action or event and its significance to the individual and therefore to the collectivity of society. Throughout this article, oral history has proved to be an indispensable tool in understanding the human dimension of the migration processes and can undoubtedly add to our understanding of the significance and impact of forced migration on individual lives.

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NOTES

1 Haile Bezuayehu, interview with the author on June 14, 2009. Given the undocumented status of some of the narrators, initials have been used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. However, some respondents have given full and informed consent for their name to be used in this article.

2 See Kevin M. Fitzpatrick and Mark LaGory, *Unhealthy Places: The Ecology of Risk in the Urban Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Rachel Tribe, "Mental Health of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers," *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 8 (2002): 240–47; Charles Watters, *The Mental Health and Social Care Needs of Refugees in the UK* (London: Refugee Council, 2002).

3 David Palmer and Kim Ward, "'Lost': Listening to the Voices and Mental Health Needs of Forced Migrants in London," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 23.3 (2007): 198–212.

4 Joke Schrijvers, "Fighters, Victims and Survivors: Constructions of Ethnicity, Gender and Refugeeness among Tamils in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 12.3 (1999): 307–33.

5 Marita Eastmond, "Nationalist Discourses and the Construction of Difference: Bosnian Muslim Refugees in Sweden," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 11.2 (1998): 161–81.

6 Fredrik Barth, "Enduring and Emerging Issues in the study of Ethnicity," in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries,"* eds. Hans Vermeulen and Cora Givers (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Het Spinhuis, 1994); Nancy Wellmeier, "Rituals of Resettlement: Identity and Resistance Among Maya Refugees," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29.1 (Summer 1995): 43–60.

7 I refer in this article to the Ethiopian community representing all those who have come to the U.K. via Ethiopia. "Forced migrant" refers to all those who are involved or have been involved in the migration process and therefore includes asylum seekers, refugees, refused and destitute asylum seekers, and those who are now classed as British Citizens. The category "Ethiopian" is not in itself unproblematic; Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) refers to transnational and diasporic communities as "imagined communities" a concept that refers to a national community as socially constructed, which is to say, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group. (6–7) The Ethiopian community is therefore imagined as a homogeneous entity, relating to an imagined existence. However, in reality, the community is hugely divided in terms of ethnic groupings and religion.

8 The initial exploratory research was carried out in 2007. Some of the findings were published by David Palmer, "An Exploration into the Impact of the Resettlement Experience, Traditional Health Beliefs and Customs on Mental Ill-Health and Suicide Rates in the Ethiopian Community in London," *International Journal of Migration Health and Social Care* 3.1 (2007): 44–55. Additional narratives for a Ph.D. study were collected in July, September, and December 2008 and in June, July, August, and September 2009. All interviews were carried out in London, U.K.

9 Palmer, "An Exploration into the Impact of the Resettlement Experience."

10 There are at least 80 cultural and linguistic groups that live together in Ethiopia. The major ethnic groups include Amhara, Oromo, Tigrean, Sidama, Shankilla, Gurage, and Afar; the dominant religions are Christianity (mainly Ethiopian Orthodox) and Islam.

11 Östen Wahlbeck, *Kurdish Diasporas: A Comparative Study of Kurdish Refugee Communities* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 89.

12 Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998). Many of the complex theoretical and methodological issues raised by the practice of oral history are comprehensively covered in this wide ranging international anthology.

13 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*: *Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

14 Interesting reflective discussions about this can be found in a collection by the Personal Narratives Group. Joy Webster Barbre, Amy Farrell, Shirley Nelson Garner, Susan Geiger, Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres, Sue M-A Lyons, Mary Jo Maynes, Pamela Mittlefehldt, Riv-Ellen Prell, and Virginia Steinhagen, eds., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

15 Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 129.

16 R. Kenneth Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 35.1 (2008): 22–38, especially 25.

17 Nadia Auriat, "Who Forgets? An Analysis of Memory Effects in a Retrospective Survey on Migration History," *European Journal of Population* 7.4 (1991): 311–42.

18 Paul Thompson and Elaine Bauer, "Recapturing Distant Caribbean Childhoods and Communities: The Shaping of the Memories of Jamaican Migrants in Britain and North America," *Oral History* 30.2 (Autumn 2002): 49–59.

19 AH, interview by the author, May 27, 2009.

20 Edward S. Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 283.

21 Frederick L. *Ahern*, "Psychosocial Wellness," in *Psychosocial Wellness of Refugees: Issues of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, ed., Frederick L. Ahern (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000).

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24 Angela Burnett and Michael Peel, "Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Britain: Health Needs of Asylum Seekers and Refugees," *BMJ* 322 (2001): 544–47. Derek Summerfield, "War, Exile, Moral Knowledge and the Limits of Psychiatric Understanding: A Clinical Case Study of a Bosnian Refugee in London" *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 49 (2003): 264–68.

25 Gadi Benezer, *The Migration Journey: The Ethiopian Jewish Exodus* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2002); Yeshashwork Kibour, "Ethiopian Immigrants' Racial Identity Attitudes and Depression Symptomatology: An Exploratory Study," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 7.1 (2001): 47–58; Lucia Ann McSpadden, "Ethiopian Refugee Resettlement in the Western United States: Social Context and Psychological Well-Being, *International Migration Review* 21.3 (Autumn 1987): 796–819; Mammo Muchie and Irena Papadopoulos, "Ethnohistory of Ethiopia," in *The EMBRACE UK Project: The Ethiopian Migrants, Their Beliefs, Refugeedom, Adaptation, Calamities and Experiences in the United Kingdom*, eds. Irena

Papadopoulos and Alem Gebrehiwot (London: Middlesex University, 2002); Palmer, "An Exploration into the Impact of the Resettlement Experience."

26 Karen Duke, "The Resettlement Experiences of Refugees in the UK: Main Findings from an Interview Study," *New Community* 22.3 (July 1996): 461–78.

27 SR, interview by the author, June 25, 2009.

28 EA, interview by the author, July 15, 2007.

29 SR, interview by the author, June 25, 2009.

30 RW, interview by the author, September 13, 2009.

31 TB, interview by the author, May 18, 2007.

32 Susan K. Burton, "Issues in Cross Cultural Interviewing: Japanese Women in England," *Oral History* 31.1 (2003): 38–46.

33 Abebe Tessema, interview by the author, August 18, 2009.

34 SA, interview by the author, July 17, 2009.

35 Karen Jacobsen and Loren B. Landau, "The Dual Imperative in Refugee Research: Some Methodological and Ethical Considerations in Social Science Research on Forced Migration," *Disasters* 27.3 (2003): 185–206.

36 SA, interview by the author, July 17, 2009.

37 Bogusia Temple and Rhetta Moran, eds., *Doing Research with Refugees* (Bristol, UK: Policy Press, 2006), 40.

38 Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds., Perks and Thomson, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32–42.

39 Lucy Williams, "Interpreting Services for Refugees: Hearing Voices?," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 1.1 (2005): 37–49, especially 47.

40 Sheila Twinn, "An analysis of the effectiveness of focus groups as a method of qualitative data collection with Chinese populations in nursing research," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28.3 (1998): 654–61.

41 John A. Robinson, "Personal Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of American Folklore* 94 (1981): 58–85, especially 63.

42 Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbins, "Telling Stories of the War: Aging Veterans Coping with Their Memories Through Narrative," *Oral History* 26.2 (1998): 57–64, especially 61.

43 In addition, some feminist historians argue that in fact oral history as a method has a unique strength in that it negates the need for levels of reflexivity and can be placed in terms of a therapeutic frame: "as a method with strong emphasis on subjective experiences and interpretations of events, it has become almost a natural extension of consciousness raising, enabling women to understand and overcome their experiences of oppression by examining contradictions in their lives, past and present. This therapeutic dimension of oral history is in many cases considered to be more important that the accuracy of the historical facts" (Bridget Macey, "Social Dynamics of Oral History Making: Women's Experiences of Wartime," *Oral History* 19.2 [Autumn 1991]: 42).

44 Macey, "Social Dynamics of Oral History Making: Women's Experience of Wartime," 42.

45 RW, interview with the author on June 6, 2009.

46 Ibid.

47 Mark Klempner, "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *The Oral History Review* 27.2 (2000): 67–83, especially 69.
48 Michael Roper, "Analysing the Analysed: Transference and Counter-Transference in the Oral History Encounter," *Oral History* 31.2 (2003): 20–32, especially 24.
49 Kirby, "Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History," 32.
50 Ibid.