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ABSTRACT

Media pundits, politicians, and academic observers have frequently described the Northern Irish Troubles as a religious conflict, a description the Irish republican actors of the conflict reject. In 2009 and 2011, I interviewed twenty-five former Irish republican women activists. Other scholars have argued that the emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences of the researcher can have several roles and functions and, thus, shape our research interests and decisions. Similarly, the interviewer's presence, as much as the narrator's perceptions, will shape the story the narrators tell. Based on these considerations, I discuss how the Irish republican women I interviewed projected their own Catholic convictions on me, despite stressing that they were not overly religious or even practicing Catholics. These women acknowledged that as I was Austrian, I was a “neutral outsider to the conflict” (as one woman put it), but nevertheless, they projected a supposed shared affinity on me. These projections shaped their answers during the interviews. Furthermore, while these women emphasized that their political motivation for Irish republican activities was not religiously driven, they were raised in a Catholic environment. Thus, these subjective experiences shaped their answers and attitudes towards the interviewer. In essence, this article examines, first, how Catholic convictions were projected on the interviewer by narrators in oral history projects on the Northern Ireland conflict and, second, what roles and functions these religious projections served during the interview process.

KEYWORDS

Cumann na mBan; Irish Republican Army; Northern Ireland conflict; Trust; Women in the IRA; War

One of the best-selling books on the Northern Ireland conflict tells the thrilling story of the abduction of mother-of-ten Jean McConville by the Provisional IRA (PIRA) from her Belfast flat in December 1972. In *Say Nothing*, a critically acclaimed and yet heavily criticized account of the events, *New Yorker* journalist Patrick Radden Keefe wrote, “One by-product of the Troubles was a culture of silence.”¹ Although Keefe was not part of the research project himself, his book grew out of one of the most controversial oral history projects in Northern Ireland—or indeed anywhere: the Boston College (BC) Belfast Project.

In the early 2000s, former *Irish Times* northern editor Ed Moloney led an oral history project that collected dozens of republican and loyalist paramilitaries' testimonies. Moloney archived the recordings in the Burns Library, Boston College. One of this projects' participants was the late Dolours Price, who acknowledged in her interviews that she drove Jean McConville from Belfast over the Irish border to be shot and disappeared by a local PIRA unit. Her revelations ignited a legal battle on both sides of the Atlantic. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) demanded the release of selected interview records and transcripts, a request eventually granted by Boston College in a supposed breach of the interview consent forms. As a result, Gerry Adams, the former president of the Irish republican party,

Sinn Féin, was arrested and questioned by the PSNI, while another Belfast republican, Ivor Bell, was charged for his role in the abduction of McConville. Although the charges were dropped in fall 2019, the use of oral history recordings for the prosecution of so-called historical crimes brought oral history into jeopardy. Richard English, of Queen's University in Belfast, one of the leading experts in the field, concluded in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that "a shadow [has been] cast over this kind of research." He also claimed that the fallout of this goes far beyond Northern Ireland.²

The events surrounding the BC Belfast Project raise crucial ethical questions about oral history projects, as well as relevant questions for oral history fieldwork in postconflict societies such as Northern Ireland. Oral history is undeniably a controversial subject amid conflicts and in postconflict societies, particularly if one's research subjects are former perpetrators of violence. Researchers face obstacles in the form of legacy, legal, and ethical questions.³ This is particularly true for Northern Ireland, and the outcomes of the BC Belfast Project have only reinforced these challenges.⁴ Nonetheless, the case provides not only a useful avenue into understanding political violence—"to understand," in Kathleen Blee's words, "the historical attraction of ordinary people to violent political movements"—but also perhaps the only source available to researchers that involved simply talking to (former) activists.⁵

Through conversations with the actors of conflicts, we can make sense of what historian Luis von Isschot calls "a litany of tragic events."⁶ However, since the controversy over the BC Belfast Project, potential interview partners have become increasingly suspicious of historical research in Ireland. One republican woman I first interviewed in 2010 told me in a follow-up conversation after the BC case: "I will not do another interview after that thing with Boston, and you can be lucky that you asked me for the interview before it happened."⁷ Drawing on my experience in researching Irish republicanism, this article discusses the intersubjectivity of the researcher and the narrator, which, inevitably, leads to a question of trust. Ultimately, if a researcher is unable to establish a certain level of trust, the interview process is doomed to fail, an outcome particularly evident in postconflict societies.

Since 2010, I have interviewed about eighty former and active members of Irish republican organizations, both political and paramilitary. My first project was an oral history with members of an Irish republican women's organization.⁸ In 2010 and 2011, I interviewed twenty-five members of a women's organization the British government proscribed as terrorist, Cumann na mBan.⁹ Irish socialist and suffragette Constance Markiewicz founded this militant organization in 1914 and between 1970 and 1986 it became the women's wing of the PIRA. However, while the mainstream movement accepted the peace process in the mid-1990s, Cumann na mBan rejected the initiative, splitting from the PIRA to align itself with the radical Continuity Army Council, later known as the Continuity IRA.¹⁰ Since then, British law has listed Cumann na mBan as a terrorist organization. My research focused on the organization and its role in the conflict between 1969 and 1986 when it split from the PIRA.¹¹ In this article, I will argue that the interviewer's biographical background is crucial for building trust in oral history projects in postconflict societies. To illustrate my argument, I will use field notes collected during my oral history research on Irish republican women.

Alexander Freund has recently studied the advantages and disadvantages of off-the-record incidents in oral history research. Albeit in another context than Freund discussed, the request to speak off the record is frequently made in the Northern Irish context, mainly for reasons of security and a desire for anonymity. Freund wrote that "off-the-record

incidents tell us something about our troubled and troubling relationship with silence. We are faced with a dilemma.”¹² In his essay, Freund stressed the value of these incidents. Building on his argument, this article aims to make sense of this dilemma; in my case, the off-the-record conversations were not necessarily a dilemma but instead helped me to contextualize the narratives in the recording.

This article is structured in three parts. I will first briefly introduce the Northern Ireland conflict and the challenges of field research in this (post-)conflict setting. I will then discuss the controversy over the BC Belfast Project and its implications for oral history projects. Finally, I will introduce my field research and my experiences in building trust between the narrator and interviewer to collect oral histories in a postconflict setting.

Field Research during the Northern Ireland Conflict

The conflict in Northern Ireland, often called the Troubles, resulted in some 3,500 deaths between 1968 and 1998. There were several groups of armed formations involved in this conflict, including the British and Irish state forces and loyalist paramilitary organizations. In opposition to those were republican paramilitaries such as the PIRA. Irish republicans are Irish nationalists, overwhelmingly Catholic, who support the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic. An attempt to end this conflict with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was only partly successful.¹³

The question of trust in the tight-knit communities of Northern Ireland is not only an underlying theme in Keefe’s *Say Nothing*, but it has also been the focus of academic research.¹⁴ Social scientist Diego Gambetta defines trust as “a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independent of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action.”¹⁵ The *American Anthropological Association* stresses in its *Code of Ethics* that among “anthropologists’ primary obligations to those they study” is the centrality of trust between researchers and their subjects in ethical research.¹⁶ The counterterrorism think tank RAND defines ethics “as the systematic reflection of existential questions relating to the ‘good life,’ moral obligations, and ‘just’ society.”¹⁷ The relationship between building trust in the interview setting and other moral obligations in ethical practices have occupied scholars studying political violence in Ireland since the outbreak of the Troubles.

As this special issue demonstrates, interest in the ethics of oral history, particularly in the aftermath of violence, has grown in recent years.¹⁸ To a lesser extent, this has also been reflected in Northern Ireland.¹⁹ While research on political violence has been dominated by scholars in the field of terrorism studies, Tom Mills and his coauthors note that “for some time relatively little was written on the ethics of terrorism research.”²⁰ This observation is particularly true for research on Northern Ireland, which is currently dominated by scholars from the field of terrorism studies. Conversely, discussions of ethical issues surrounding fieldwork have mainly occurred among social anthropologists working on the Northern Ireland conflict; these academics, overwhelmingly from US universities, established a particularly thriving field in the 1990s.²¹ Jeffrey Sluka, who pursued participatory observation in a Catholic ghetto in West Belfast during the 1980s, was among the first to discuss how to establish trust. Focusing on “impression management,” he attempted, through social contacts, honesty, community involvement, and street smarts to counter suspicion that he

was a spy. In 1995, he questioned whether anthropologists could or should remain neutral in such highly charged political situations as the Northern Ireland conflict.²²

Allen Feldman, another anthropologist who conducted fieldwork contemporaneous to Sluka's, observed a "culture of secrecy" that hinders research in Northern Ireland. To get access to the field under those circumstances, researchers of paramilitarism were "careful to avoid subjects such as arms and explosives or the identity of members."²³ Conversely, John Brewer stressed that "social researchers ... know that the confidentiality of interviews cannot be guaranteed."²⁴ These sentiments were echoed by Marie Breen-Smyth, who summarized that "collecting combatants' accounts is inevitably fraught with risks" because the researchers of armed conflict "do not control the environment in which they work."²⁵ However, she acknowledged that outsiders to the field have an advantage, for they "can offer interviewees a more disinterested opportunity to consider issues of consent and disclosure."²⁶

Following this observation, it comes as no surprise that researchers with access to Irish republican paramilitaries and other political activists came almost exclusively from outside Ireland and the United Kingdom for the first three decades of the Northern Ireland conflict.²⁷ As I will demonstrate below, this perceived status as an impartial but empathetic outsider to the conflict also became an advantage in my field research in Ireland. However, this outsider/insider relationship eventually changed with the advent of the peace process, when more researchers with British and Irish backgrounds were granted access to the field. This has been reflected by a growing presence of oral history in so-called Troubles research, exemplified by the establishment of *Quote*, an oral history hub at Queen's University Belfast; the promise to develop a state-funded oral history archive; and increasing activities by the Oral History Society and the Oral History Network Ireland within the region.²⁸ Within the context of the early 2000s, the Boston College project used insiders, such as the former IRA prisoner Anthony McIntyre, as interviewers, instead of outsiders, to avoid suspicion and build trust between the project researchers and the narrators. Somewhat ironically, this was the project that eventually brought oral history into jeopardy. Following years of decreasing suspicion from potential narrators towards oral historians and anthropologists, the BC project threatened to revive a "culture of secrecy" around Northern Ireland.

The Boston College Belfast Project

The Boston College project was a watershed moment for oral history research in Northern Ireland. In the preface to his book, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law*, John Neuenschwander wrote that "despite such astronomical growth and the increasing public awareness of how oral histories enrich the historical record, there are still only a handful of reported court cases that address the legal issues that the practice of oral history can generate."²⁹ Neuenschwander's comments predate the 2011 Boston College subpoena in the US; since then, Northern Ireland's situation has changed dramatically, with oral histories of the Troubles sparking legal battles on both sides of the Atlantic following the collapse of the BC Belfast Project.³⁰

In recent years, scholars from a variety of disciplines have analyzed the impact of the BC Belfast Project. These include Christine Anne George's consideration of the legal consequences for archivists; James King's discussion of the repercussions for archives and collections; and in two papers, Ted Palys and John Lowman look at the legal and ethical

aspects surrounding the BC Belfast Project and other projects in British sociology and criminology.³¹ In spite of the BC controversy and its aftermath, including the critical examinations mentioned above, the recording of oral narratives has continued to provide an invaluable historical research source on armed conflicts.³²

Despite reaching some semblance of a peace treaty with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, Ireland has not witnessed any reconciliation process.³³ Thus, until the conflict is resolved, recorded oral testimonies can potentially be subject to the interference of the authorities. Under current circumstances, former loyalist and republican activists are reluctant to provide testimonies of their past involvement. Yet, collecting frank testimonies from these activists while they are still alive is vital for an understanding of Ireland's recent past. Newspapers and official archives in Ireland, England, and beyond tend to mirror the perspectives of those institutions, rather than of those activists in militant social movements and paramilitary organizations. Unsurprisingly, paramilitary organizations do not hold their own archives. As a result, collecting memories in postconflict Northern Ireland has remained a pivotal and contested issue.

Niall Ó Dochartaigh stressed the importance of oral history in the Northern Irish context when writing about Brendan Dudley, a Derry businessman who was an intermediary between the British government and the PIRA for two decades. Ó Dochartaigh argued that public statements from any party of the conflict were always directed towards a target audience. The public posturing that parties often engaged in severely distorted the message. He reached this conclusion when interviewing Brendan Dudley. In an interview with Ó Dochartaigh, Dudley said, "You halved everything you read in the media or you took it as the exact opposite."³⁴ This statement by Dudley, a central figure of the Northern Ireland conflict who viewed newspaper accounts of the Troubles as inaccurate, demonstrates the importance of consulting oral histories from this period in addition to written primary sources. Yet, while interviews are important historical sources, one needs to keep in mind that they carry the same dangers and opportunities as any other source in terms of objectivity, and even more when considering issues of privacy and legality. Discussing this aspect in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Beth McMurtrie asked, "What obligations do oral historians and their colleges have if someone reveals sensitive information—perhaps even a crime—during an interview? Who is allowed to hear the tapes and when? Do interviewees understand what might happen to their stories once they speak into the microphone?"³⁵

The inadequacies of approaches to Northern Ireland's past are reflected in the controversy over oral history in the aftermath of the BC Belfast Project, in which interviews with Irish republican and loyalist paramilitaries were collected between 2001 and 2006 and archived in the Burns Library at Boston College. In 2010, the first interviews from the archive were published in the book *Voices from the Grave* and featured in a documentary of the same name.³⁶ These interviews, with former Provisional IRA leader Brendan Hughes and former Ulster Volunteer Force and Progressive Unionist Party member David Ervine, were made public upon the death of the interviewees as per their agreement with Boston College. The arrangement that the archive would keep recordings sealed until after the death of an individual participant was designed to encourage people to come forward and contribute to the historical record without fear of prosecution. The legal team, advisors of BC, and Ed Moloney modelled this approach on a similar program run by the Irish Bureau of Military History in the 1950s, which recorded veterans' experiences during the

Irish War of Independence and the Civil War. However, that project was conducted almost thirty years after the end of the War of Independence, when those supporting the treaty with the United Kingdom won the war and established the Irish Free State; thus, the data for the Bureau of Military History was collected by the winners of the conflict, resulting in a much different context than that of the BC Belfast Project.³⁷

In March 2011, the British government contacted the US Department of Justice (DOJ) to initiate a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty proceeding, which led to the issuing of a sealed subpoena for all materials relating to two interviews in the archive, those of PIRA members Brendan Hughes and Dolours Price. Price's interviews were still embargoed under the terms of the agreement she had with the Burns Library. The subpoena caused the collapse of the BC Belfast Project; although interview recordings had already concluded at this stage, the project stopped publishing its findings. Since the release of the *Voices from the Grave* documentary and book, no other interview material has been published as part of the BC Belfast Project. The subpoenas also brought the challenges facing oral historians researching paramilitary conflicts to public attention in Ireland and the US.³⁸ Forced by the DOJ's subpoena, Boston College disclosed sensitive material from the interviews with former paramilitaries. Consequently, Belfast republican Ivor Bell was arrested by the PSNI and eventually charged. Gerry Adams, the former president of Sinn Féin, was also arrested but later released because of claims made in the interviews. The Democratic Project Institute in London understood that the arrest of these republicans endangered the Irish peace process, arguing that "the mere arrest of republican politicians, who claim not to have committed criminal acts, can imply a politicization of the new police force which was designed to represent the interests of both communities equally. If those from republican communities lost faith in the PSNI, then support for other Good Friday institutions could falter, potentially heralding a new era of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland."³⁹ At the time of this writing, there is no sign that the peace process as such has indeed been damaged due to these arrests.

Yet further creation of the historical record has been damaged. Former activists announced that they would not cooperate with any oral history projects in the future. This included all loyalist participants of the BC Belfast Project, who demanded the return of their recordings.⁴⁰ Similarly, Henry McDonald reported in the *Guardian* that as a result of the BC project subpoenas, "police officers, soldiers, and spies who fought the IRA have pulled out of a proposed parallel project potentially involving a London-based college."⁴¹ Thus, journalist and civil rights attorney Harvey Silverglate observed that "The Belfast Project was supposed to *recount* history, not *make* it. But thanks to a federal court in Boston, the project's good faith attempt to gather historical evidence may create a precedent detrimental both to academic freedom and to historians' ongoing efforts to inform the future about the past" (emphasis in the original).⁴²

As the BC Belfast Project and my own oral history research demonstrate, collecting sensitive material from paramilitary organizations can raise ethical questions, problems of trust, and challenges of validity. Anthony McIntyre, a former PIRA prisoner and a researcher with the BC project, reminds us that "it is not the task of a researcher to become a gatherer of evidence for law enforcement."⁴³ The illusion that oral history material is suitable evidence for court cases shows a poor understanding of memory studies; as Stephen Baker and Greg McLaughlin wrote, "Recordings are not historical documents but interpretative documents of the past."⁴⁴ Similarly, Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van

der Hart stressed that we do not recall events precisely as they happened because “memories easily become inaccurate when new ideas and pieces of information are constantly combined with old knowledge to form flexible mental schema.”⁴⁵ Acknowledging these subjectivities, it is not merely damaging for oral history research in Northern Ireland to use recordings for court cases but also fruitless to try to gather evidence via these recordings.

Various subpoenas to obtain this material to investigate historic crimes in Northern Ireland have nonetheless been issued. Following the first subpoena, McIntyre immediately argued that all the material should be destroyed rather than handed over to the police. In response, Jack Dunn, the director of the Boston College News and Public Affairs office, stated that no university would ever consider destroying historical archives.⁴⁶ As a direct consequence of this development, participants became suspicious of historical projects, and former paramilitary, as well as political activists, have become increasingly reluctant to speak with researchers. The Boston College case not only elicited the fraught decision of how to deal with the recordings when they might be used for legal prosecution, but also raised crucial issues for the practice of oral history more generally regarding the collection of sensitive data. Since the BC project brought historical research in Northern Ireland into scrutiny, now oral historians face the question of establishing trust more than ever before. In the following section, I will discuss my experience with building trust and intersubjectivity with narrators during my field research in Northern Ireland. This section will provide observations from my oral history research in postconflict societies during and after the failure of the BC Belfast Project.

Interviewing Irish Republican Women

Media pundits, politicians, and academic observers too often wrongfully describe the Troubles as a religious conflict, a characterization rejected by Irish republican actors within the conflict.⁴⁷ Other scholars have argued that emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences have several roles and functions and thus shape our historical research interests and decisions.⁴⁸ Similarly, an interviewer’s appearance as much as a narrator’s perceptions shape the stories narrators tell us in interviews.⁴⁹ Based on these presumptions, I discuss how Irish republican women first reacted to my academic background, and, second, projected their own Catholic convictions on me, the interviewer, despite stressing that they were not overly religious or practicing Catholics. Both were factors that facilitated a more trustworthy interview setting for the narrators.

I faced three obstacles in this research project because of the fact that Cumann na mBan is still proscribed as a foreign terrorist organization under British law. First, I needed intermediaries, also referred to as *go-betweens* or *gatekeepers*, to establish contact with the paramilitary organization and for permission to conduct interviews with its members. Therefore, to ensure the support of all participants in the research project, it was crucial that the intermediaries and interviewees both understood “exactly what I am trying to write about (my perspective and my intention), and that I never pervert the spirit of a subject’s testimony.”⁵⁰ The standing of the intermediaries within their respective organization and the wider republican community was crucial for the quality of the interviews and for gaining the trust of the narrators. In the case of Cumann na mBan, it was, furthermore, necessary to seek permission from the national leadership of the organization to conduct interviews with its members. Under these circumstances, researchers need to ensure

academic independence. In my case, I also made clear with the text in my interview consent forms that my research was not influenced by Cumann na mBan in any way. Cumann na mBan certainly had no involvement or input in my interview guide, my interpretations, or resulting publications.

Second, because Cumann na mBan remains a proscribed organization, I needed to anonymize the interviews, since the material collected in these interviews includes highly sensitive information that could potentially lead to the prosecution of the interview partners. Although anonymity in oral history interviews has been criticized for compromising validity, the practice is not unusual.⁵¹ Thus, without a full guarantee of strict anonymity and confidence, access to these interviewees would have been prohibited by the Irish republican organizations and their activists. In other words, since the recording “could seriously harm” participants in the research, the interviewer is, as Palys and Lowman put it, “ethically obliged to protect participant identities.”⁵² This was indeed the case in the research project on Cumann na mBan.

Third, because of the sensitivity of the material and prior experiences with oral history projects, including that of BC and well as interviews with journalists, the activists had concerns over where the content would be stored after the final stages of the research project. Although I support the idea that oral testimonies should be made as widely available as possible, both for other academics and the general public, through archival preservation and dissemination, Irish republican activists have viewed state-financed and official archives and libraries, such as the Northern Ireland Collection of Linen Hall Library in Belfast, the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, and other institutions with suspicion. Therefore, my gatekeepers in Cumann na mBan demanded that only I would listen to the full recordings. I guaranteed this demand and the complete anonymity of the narrators through my consent forms and legal release agreements.

Next, I will first briefly introduce the interview collection process—namely, how I gained access to (former) members of an Irish republican paramilitary women’s organization. This is followed by a section outlining how my interview partners perceived me. The observations discussed in this second part are based on informal comments made by the narrators after the completion of the recordings, with two excerpts taken directly from my field notes used to illustrate my argument. The first excerpt deals with my academic background at a non-British university, while the second relates to my Catholic convictions. Both comments were made off the record and thus reflected only in my field notes rather than in recordings or transcripts. Using these two excerpts, I will show that an interviewer’s academic and biographical background is essential for building trust during the interview process of activists in postconflict societies.

In 2010 and 2011, I interviewed twenty-five former members of the Irish republican women’s organization Cumann na mBan. Although British law categorizes it as a terrorist organization, activists may associate freely in the Republic of Ireland. Under these circumstances, contact with members is restricted. Through connections with Irish republicans, I met three women for lunch at a Dublin city center restaurant on Easter Monday, 2009. Among them were the former Irish republican prisoner Josephine Hayden, former Sinn Féin Ard Chomhairle (National leadership), and *An Phoblacht* editorial board member Lita Ní Cathmhaoil, as well as a third woman that cannot be named for legal reasons. These women later acted as go-betweens and, therefore, agreed to be named in publications, unlike interviewees who wished to remain anonymous. A few weeks later, these gatekeepers

granted me permission to conduct interviews with former and current members of Cumann na mBan. Subsequently, I established contact with another woman from Belfast, Geraldine Taylor, who became my go-between in the North. Additionally, I was able to arrange a small number of interviews without using my go-betweens.

For most of my interview partners, this was their first experience with a researcher, so building trust was essential to establish a fruitful conversation that could be audio recorded. I observed two main factors that helped forge the necessary trust, both in me and in my research objectives. First, my three go-betweens were well-known and highly respected women in the Irish republican movement who had served as members of the organization for several decades, and their introduction proved essential. Multiple interview partners mentioned during the interviews that they only agreed to meet me because of the women that established the initial contact between the narrator and me. They specifically emphasized that “if she trusts you, I know that I can trust you too.” This trust was particularly relevant for my interviews with women from Northern Ireland, where the risk of prosecution was still high.

The second aspect was my appearance and background—in other words, who I was as a researcher. Most of the interview partners had joined the Irish republican movement either before or in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1968. By contrast, I was still a graduate student at the University of Vienna when I first contacted these women. Hence, the age difference was such that some of these women could have been my grandmothers. This circumstance established a generational hierarchy during the interviews. Furthermore, as an outsider to the Irish republican movement, I was rightly considered to be less informed on historical and political events by life-long republican activists. This assumption on the part of the narrators is reflected in the lengthy explanations about the background to the Troubles given in response to some of my questions. Consistent with the typology of Alexander Bogner and Wolfgang Menz, my narrators perceived me as a “layman.”⁵³ This positioning as “interviewer as a layman” enabled me, on the one hand, to gain a high level of trust and, on the other hand, to experience “reverse power relations.”⁵⁴ In other words, a graduate student young enough to be the grandson of most of the interview partners was not likely to be perceived as a potential threat. However, this age difference can also result in a level of paternalism, as exemplified by Joanne McEvoy’s experience interviewing Northern Irish politicians, some of whom treated her as a daughter, referring to her as “love,” “dear,” or “lass.”⁵⁵ This patronizing approach can impact data collection. Valerie Yow notes that awareness of subjectivity “can be used to enhance understanding of the research process,” since “a value-free research process”—Yow’s definition of objectivity—is not possible. She concludes that “liking or not liking, feeling repelled by difference in ideology or attracted by a shared world-view, sensing difference in gender or age or social class or ethnicity, all influence the ways we ask questions and respond to narrators and interpret and evaluate what they say.”⁵⁶ This understanding shaped my research experience and interpretations throughout the interview process and the postinterview interpretations.

My Austrian nationality was another facet that became important in the trust-building process. I will underline this observation with two comments that were made during both postinterview conversations, as recorded in my fieldnotes. The first comment was directed towards my institutional affiliation. Following an interview with Eithne, a member of

Cumann na mBan from West Belfast who joined the Irish republican movement in the early 1970s, she offered me another cup of tea and asked:

Eithne: You said you are studying in Austria?

Me: Yes, at the University of Vienna

Eithne: Mhm . . . [nodding] You know, that's why I gave you an interview. I speak with you because you are coming from Austria. You are from Europe—you make up your own mind. I am not worried because you are from Europe. I am very worried when students from Britain come and say they want to talk to me, you know. I always wonder why they want to interview me. What do they want to know? Why do they come? What are they doing with the interviews? To whom are they giving the interview recordings? Are they handing it over to someone? You never know! I would never do an interview with any student from Oxford or any of these universities, you know, all the spooks are from Oxford. They are training the spooks there, MI5, intelligence service, they are all there.⁵⁷

Soon after joining the Irish republican movement, Eithne was interned and, following her release, held various leading ranks within Cumann na mBan. Despite lacking any knowledge of my social or family background, or my political views on the Northern Ireland conflict, she developed trust in me in large part because I was not from a British institution—and thus not a “spook”—and expressed her assumption about my impartiality by saying “you are from Europe—you make up your own mind.” In Irish republican circles, the term “spook” refers to British citizens working for British security services such as MI5 or Scotland Yard. My affiliation with an Austrian university convinced Eithne that I was nonpartisan and neutral, and not a potential state agent as she perceived researchers from British universities to be.

The anthropologist Jeffrey Sluka encountered similar suspicion towards academics during his field research in the 1980s and 1990s. Sluka made a participatory observation of the PIRA and the Irish National Liberation Army, another paramilitary organization, in the Divis area of West Belfast. Coincidentally, this is precisely where Jean McConville lived before her abduction in 1972. Reviewing his field research some years later, Sluka wrote:

Because the most common suspicion that research participants have about anthropologists is that they are spies, and it is difficult to find an anthropologist who has done fieldwork who has not encountered this suspicion, this danger deserves special mention. Being defined as a spy is inherently dangerous, and the link between anthropology and war-related research has exacerbated this danger.

Sluka continued, noting that “many nations and peoples are therefore justifiably suspicious of anthropologists and will not allow them to do research” because researchers “are actually or potentially dangerous to them.”⁵⁸ While his assertion is true, my experience shows that the researchers' backgrounds can mitigate, as well as increase, this danger, as becomes evident in the second comment that I will discuss.

The second comment reflects on the religious affiliation of the Austrian population. Aoife was a member of Cumann na mBan and its youth wing, Cumann na gCailíní, during the 1970s in Belfast. She later moved to Dundalk, just south of the border. Following our interview in one of her friends' houses in Beechmount, West Belfast, she told me about her planned summer vacation and skiing trips. She then asked me, “By the way, is Austria, actually, a Catholic country?” Surprised by the question, which no other interviewee had

ever asked me, I told her I was indeed from a Catholic country; before I could stress that I was not practicing my religion, she replied, “That’s good, so you understand what I am talking about.”⁵⁹ I added that I was raised Catholic but I did not consider myself a religious person.

This comment highlights that many narrators feel more comfortable during an interview situation when they feel understood by the interviewer. Yvonne McKenna believes a shared background with her narrators allowed them to say things “they would not otherwise have said.”⁶⁰ In my case, the sense of security was reinforced since I come from a Catholic country, and the interview partner was herself Catholic. Interestingly, she did not ask me if I was a practicing Catholic; she simply assumed this to be the case. As I mentioned above, the Northern Ireland conflict is frequently portrayed as a conflict between a pro-British, Protestant majority and a pro-Irish, Catholic minority.⁶¹ My background in a Catholic country led my interview partner to infer that I would understand the predicament of the Catholic minority that led to the Irish republican movement; this became evident in her reply: “You understand what I am talking about.” My experience growing up in a Catholic-majority country during the later decades of the twentieth century is very different from that of belonging to a discriminated Catholic minority in a Protestant-dominated state. Yet these differences seem to be less relevant for my interview partners; Aoife did not ask about the situation of Catholics in Austria or how it compared to that of Northern Ireland. Instead, my Catholic background led her to embrace me as having a shared background. The frequent use of the term “we,” along with phrases such as “we as Catholics,” or “Catholics like us,” emerged in several interviews whenever the narrator included people of her community outside her republican organization *Cumann na mBan* in the narrative. In this context, the word “we” was often accompanied by a gesture that either pointed at me or indicated a circle surrounding the narrator and the interviewer.

The perception that a similar background—albeit imaginary—led to a shared worldview has been observed by several oral historians and social anthropologists, such as Kathleen Blee in her seminal study on women in the Ku Klux Klan. Blee notes that “my own background in Indiana (where I lived from primary school through college) and white skin led informants to assume—lacking spoken evidence to the contrary—that I shared their worldview.”⁶² Similarly, it was my background in a Catholic country, combined with being a non-British outsider and a generation younger, that put me in the position of a layman whom my informants perceived to be trustworthy. McEvoy had similar experiences, “where the respondent assumes the researcher is on their ‘side’.”⁶³

Even though the question of whether Austria is a Catholic country is unusual in a life-story interview in Ireland, upon closer examination it does make sense in the context of Northern Ireland. In recent years, a contrast between the Western, predominantly Christian society and the Muslim “other” has dominated public debates in several Western European countries, including Austria and Ireland.⁶⁴ Although religion is at times a clear dividing line among citizens, in the twenty-first century such debates, with some exceptions, have not focused on the breakdown of Christian denominations, as they did during the Reformation and other periods of religious strife. Hence, while people are faced with questions of Christian or Muslim backgrounds, intra-Christian tension has become less familiar—except in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church, because of its close links with the Putin government. The importance of the Catholic environment becomes even more remarkable, considering the political understanding of the Irish

republican movement. While the Northern Ireland conflict is all too often portrayed as a sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics, Irish republicans reject the label “Catholic defenders.” Instead, they argue, they are fighting a national liberation struggle, and they deny that theirs is a Catholic movement.⁶⁵ My interview partner, Aoife, emphasized in her interview that she is not a practicing Catholic and that she “wouldn’t call [herself] very religious.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Aoife projected her own religious framework on me and, although she is not a practicing Catholic, this projection shaped her answers during the interview.

Claire Mitchell has described this phenomenon—individuals claiming religious affiliation without necessarily practicing or believing in it—as an “ethnic marker” in the Northern Irish context.⁶⁷ For Aoife, our shared Catholic background was indeed an ethnic and cultural marker, rather than a religious one. Aoife’s question might relate to this very point and perhaps has multiple meanings. She could have posed the question in a different form, such as, “Do you understand what it is like to grow up in a Catholic culture?” or “Do we share this similar experience?” Aoife, in the way she phrased the question, did not necessarily presume I was a practicing Catholic. Nonetheless, our shared Catholic background, even if nonpracticing, provided a necessary ethnic marker and cultural background for her to feel she was in a trustworthy interview setting. In other words, despite Irish republican insistence of their nonsectarian religious ideology, the presence of an interviewer with a non-British, Catholic background provided Irish republican narrators a higher sense of security. As a consequence, my own upbringing in a Catholic country not only helped to build trust between the narrator and me, but it also led her to conclude that I—apparently Catholic—would understand well the situation and calamities of the Catholic Irish population, despite the vast differences in the history and politics of Austria and Ireland.

Conclusion

Building trust and securing detailed interviews was immensely important to understanding women’s participation in political violence in Ireland. Cumann na mBan is a clandestine organization and does not issue statements or keep any internal documents in archives or otherwise. With no public records, oral interviews are the only means to research this organization which has played an important yet often overlooked role in the Troubles. For a long time, these women have remained a footnote in the historiography of the conflict. More recently, however, researchers including Theresa O’Keefe, Azrini Wahadin, and Martin Gilmartin have published essential studies detailing the role of Cumann na mBan and other Irish republican women. This is in large part thanks to members’ willingness to be interviewed.⁶⁸ Without oral history, the role of these Irish republican women would remain shrouded in darkness; yet the only way to reach these women and conduct an interview is by winning their trust. This relationship shapes the whole interview process, and as Joana Bornat notes, this makes data emerge “under specific conditions”; it is “a product of a particular moment.”⁶⁹ My perceived background as an impartial Catholic from Europe, combined with my academic background, created certain specific conditions that enabled me to build the trust necessary to conduct interviews with members of an organization classified as terrorist by the British state.

Establishing trust depends on the interviewer as much as on outside influences. As I outlined above, the BC Belfast Project established obstacles for oral historians researching the Northern Ireland Troubles. In my field research, I directly experienced the negative repercussions of the project, notably mistrust. In my most recent round of interviews in 2018 and 2019, several potential interview partners declined my request, citing the BC Belfast Project. Shortly before the BC Belfast Project was discussed widely in Ireland, I had interviewed Cumann na mBan member Roisín in Dublin.⁷⁰ I met her again several years later, at a moment when the first court cases based on the subpoenas issued to Boston College were about to start in Belfast. Our conversation was informal over a cup of tea, and she acknowledged, “I would not do an interview again with you after the Boston College Project. It’s not about you, but you never know what happens to the interview, and if they want to get the interviews, they will get them, and you cannot do anything about it. I also declined other interview requests.”⁷¹ By “they,” Roisín meant the security services on both sides of the Irish border.

My experiences are not unique; John Morrison has shown that trust is a central theme in Irish republicanism. It determines how activists behave within their organizations and in interactions with outsiders.⁷² As I demonstrate in this article, factors such as the impact of the BC Belfast Project and my own appearance as a researcher influenced the trust-building process in my field research. In the oral history setting, the interviewer becomes a projection screen for the narrator’s expectations and fears. An interviewee’s projection determines, among other factors, the level of trust built between narrator and interviewer. In my case study, the level of trust was crucial not only for accessing interview partners but also for obtaining information from the interviews that was suitable for answering my research question, since the organization under study is proscribed as terrorist. Two factors were particularly beneficial for building trust: the reputation of the go-betweens within their own organization, and my background as a young researcher from a Catholic country. While the age aspect established a hierarchy in which I was viewed as a trustworthy layman, my Catholic background provided an imagined understanding of the calamities and struggles of fellow Catholics. Similar to Ben Crewe, who writes that his “masculine identity and personal circumstances shaped the dynamics” of his own research with imprisoned men, my Austrian background unintentionally shaped my own fieldwork with Irish republican women.⁷³

In this case, the projections of the narrator on the interviewer influenced the whole process of the field research, from my first contact with Irish republican women until the conclusion of the last interview. I will not go as far as to claim that this oral history research would have been impossible if I came from another background. However, just as Paul Arthur attributes the success of his interviews with Irish politicians to the trust that his own background helped create, I know that these factors contributed the success of my research.⁷⁴ Based on interview partner Eithne’s comment regarding “British spooks” being trained at the University of Oxford, I am persuaded that my field research would have been very different had I come from another background. While activists of Cumann na mBan emphasize that their political motivation for Irish republican activities is not religiously driven, the women’s Catholic upbringings and these intersubjective experiences shape their answers as well as their attitudes towards the interviewer. In essence, this analysis of my off-the-record notes illustrates that when we consider the value of interviews in postconflict societies, the intersubjective relationship before, during, and after the interview means that oral historians should consider how the narrator perceives the interviewer in order to understand, guide, and interpret the way the interview unfolds.

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Notes

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7. Conversation with Roisín (name changed), Summer 2015, Dublin.
8. Dieter Reinisch, “Frauen in der irisch-republikanischen Bewegung nach 1969: Methodische Überlegungen zu Oral History, sensible Daten und dem Nordirlandkonflikt,” *BIOS* 28, no. 1/2 (2017): 231–49; Dieter Reinisch, *Die Frauen der IRA. Cumann na mBan und der Nordirlandkonflikt, 1968–1986* (Vienna: Promedia, 2017).
9. All interviews for this research project were conducted between January 2010 and May 2011. I approached these interviews as life-story interviews. The narrators were recruited through a snowball process and via gatekeepers in Dublin and Belfast. The interviews lasted between two and three hours and were conducted in the homes of the narrators. I obtained ethical approval from my affiliated institution, the University of Vienna, during the data collection for this research. Each interview partner signed a consent form prior to the interview that stated,

among other things, that they participated voluntarily in the research project and that they had the opportunity to remain anonymous; all interview partners asked for anonymity; hence, in accordance with the consent form, only the real identities of my three gatekeepers in Dublin and Belfast are given, as per the consent forms.

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16. Marie Breen-Smyth, "Interviewing Combatants: Lessons from the Boston College Case," *Contemporary Social Science* 15, no. 2 (2019): 2.
17. Anais Reding et al., *Handling Ethical Problems in Counterterrorism: An Inventory of Methods to Support Ethical Decisionmaking* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014), 5.
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25. Breen-Smyth, "Interviewing Combatants," 7, 9.
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42. Harvey Silvergate, "Boston College Researchers Drink with the IRA, and Academics Everywhere Get the Hangover," *Forbes*, January 25, 2012.
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59. Field notes of interview with Aoife (name changed), February 13, 2010, Belfast.
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