# Chapter B

**B**

## THE CONCEPTUAL DIMENSION OF MEMORY WORK



▲  Photo by Jesús A. Colorado, 2009

# B 1. Socio-political dimensions of memory

## B 1.1 Memories, power and social order

*Let's reflect:*

What is memory? Who does memory belong to?

What is history? Who owns history?

Every social order is maintained by emphasizing particular memories that establish a certain version of history. In these narratives some people are glorified and granted hero status. They usually belong to a certain social class and/or political group, as well as a particular gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, region, religion, caste and language group.

These narratives about the past, while extolling some groups, devalue others by transforming their differences into justifications for discrimination. These versions are either accepted or confronted by the alternative stories produced by the excluded. Memory, therefore, is a field in tension where hierarchies, inequalities and social exclusions are either constructed and reinforced, or challenged and transformed.

Memory is also a field where social and political legitimacies, friendships and enmities are woven. People, on the basis of their memories, evaluate the decisions and strategies of the actors in the conflict, and adopt different attitudes towards the social order, institutions, and political and social actors. Through their memories, for example, people give these actors different degrees of legitimacy or illegitimacy. They identify with some while deeply rejecting others. They raise different complaints in the face of violence and locate themselves differently regarding reparations.

This is why we suggest beginning any memory work exercise by recognizing that building memory is a political act and a social practice.

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*Remember:*

Building memory is a political act and a social practice.

Memory is a field in tension, which can either build and strengthen or challenge and transform hierarchies, inequalities and social exclusions.  It is also a field where political and social legitimacies, friendships and enmities are woven.

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## B 1.2   Social polarization and the ethical horizon of historical memory

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*Let's reflect:*

How does armed conflict affect memories?

What histories do the armed actors tell about the conflict and their actions?

Are there differences between the facts and the histories told by the armed groups?

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In a society in conflict, war produces a certain type of order founded on polarization. This polarization unfolds not only on battlefields, but also leaves its imprint on all spaces of life in society.

The armed actors on either side are looking to install their versions of the past as absolute truths, and present their particular interests as, for example, patriotic or revolutionary-grassroots demands. In this desire to control history and memory, the actors in the conflict manipulate versions of what happened to justify their actions and stigmatize those political and social interpretations that they oppose.

In such a context, an effort to seek justice for victims aims to reject the imposition of a political memory with winners from one group or another that would legitimize the acts committed, even the worst atrocities, by justifying them as done in defence of "the homeland" (Lira, 2001:49) or in fighting for the people.

Even in community and personal arenas, individuals and collectives often choose what should be remembered, aiming to preserve the image of unity, uprightness, and heroism to be transmitted to third parties in a communal history. Uncomfortable memories and facts that confront the group with a more complex past where some of its members have not only been capable of acts of heroism but also petty and vindictive initiatives that put the survival of the community itself at risk are thereby silenced. This self-censorship applies to both communities and individuals and entire societies who stick to discourses that highlight attributes, progress and positive actions, but ignore, silence and evade the shameful episodes of history or their complicities, thus contributing to validation and potentially repetition of these episodes.

For dominant groups the issue becomes how to embrace uncomfortable "unsettling" memories as powerful pedagogical moments, which can potentially heal and transform. The question is whether an initiative to democratically construct the historical memory of the conflict may facilitate the elaboration, re-elaboration and transmission of more complex and plural stories about the war at individual, community, regional and national levels (Theidon, 2007, 2002).

*Remember:*

The exercise of constructing historical memory can aim to be:

*Responsible:* analyzing the facts as a whole, compiling not only those laudable aspects of communities, but also failures and mistakes that were committed.

*Democratic:* recognizing and respecting the diversity of voices and subjectivities

*Ethical:* publicly documenting, evaluating and recognizing the violent acts committed by all of the actors of the conflict, particularly those which violate international humanitarian law or human rights.

The conceptual dimension of memory work

## B 1.3 GENDER, RACE, AND OTHER SOCIAL LOCATION CONSIDERATIONS

*Let's reflect*:

How do gender, race, class, and other social locations affect how people experience and remember the violence and resistance to it?

How do these identities inform memory work?

It is important to recognize differences of gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other social locations that shape both violence and the ways it is remembered. The types of violence suffered often differ by identity and social location. Women, for example, are more likely to suffer sexual violence than men. More subtly, the impacts of the same violent acts are not the same across different people, groups, and communities. The meanings constructed in the face of what happened can be substantially different if they were, for example, suffered by men or women, children or adults. What is important to one may be insignificant to another. The ways different groups of people process and make sense of harm and loss also differ.

Ethnic differences are particularly important, given that culture offers different resources for interpreting and facing what happened. Some violent actions can be devastating when they attack essential aspects of a culture or put into question basic beliefs for certain social groups. It is also essential to understand how racist, classist, sexist, and/or homophobic ideologies intersect and shape acts of mass violence against specific groups. It is also important to recognize differences because armed actors use different repertoires and modes of violence against women, men, sexual minorities, children, ethnic communities, etc. These practices martyr and mark bodies and minds in different ways, and often use languages and symbols aimed explicitly at wounding that which is significant to a particular group. The ability to notice and be sensitive to these differences is a challenge when doing memory work.

Of course none of us has only one social location. A person's identities as both a woman and as indigenous person not only intersect but interlock,

that is, both identities shape each other but systems of domination also tend to *reinforce* each other (Crenshaw 1991; Razack, 2002). This is another reason why it is important to consider social location when doing memory work. Women, racialized groups, and others who have a subordinate role in society have had fewer opportunities to speak, be heard, and analyzed. This is also clearly expressed in the work of remembering and what memories and voices are more often heard and silenced.

*Remember:*

Different forms of violence are experienced by men and women, adults and young people, members of indigenous groups, people of African heritage or other racialized groups, LGBT people, people with disabilities, people living in poverty and those in many other social locations.

Armed actors often target members of certain groups with a type of violence aimed at wounding that which is significant to them.

The impact of the violence suffered, and the meaning it has, also varies across groups, as does how they process harm and loss.

## B 1.4 The battles of memory against exclusion and suppression

*Let's reflect:*

Why are some actors excluded from historical accounts?

What connection is there between the social groups that are excluded and the opportunities (or the lack thereof) for those individuals in society?

How are Indigenous understanding/practices of memory and healing incorporated into the process?

If war polarizes memories, a historical memory project that seeks to be inclusive of plural voices goes in the opposite direction. But to do so requires asking why certain stories are excluded from national history,

and why that history reinforces social and political inequalities and historical injustices.

Although today some may assume that the cries of equality, freedom and solidarity that inspired the democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Latin America, France, and the United States applied to all of their peoples, modern citizenship is actually founded on political inclusions and exclusions. The same can be said for countries with no revolutionary history and/or settler societies[1], such as Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. In most of these countries' constitutions only white, educated, married men with property who were willing to bear arms in defense of the country and able to pay taxes were considered to have 'reason' and declared citizens with full rights.

By contrast, women, children, indigenous people, and black people were defined as "irrational", closer to the world of nature, emotions and impulses than to civilization and, therefore they were attributed the status of "dependent" citizens. Others, those considered "rational," would be called upon to make decisions on their behalf.

Thus the first definitions of citizenship, and the practices associated with them, fulfilled the role of regulating, excluding and discriminating against many voices and collective actors who were relegated to an "outside" of the centers of power and of the newly imagined national community made up of those citizens with full rights (Fraser, 1997; Wills, 2002 and 2007). The excluded, as "dependent citizens", would act in the sphere of the market or in the private sphere, while the public sphere would be reserved exclusively for those with full citizenship. Political exclusion was also accompanied by cultural discrimination, which negatively valued those attributes associated with gender, ethnicity, race, region, religion, caste, sexuality, politics, language, disability, and class difference.

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1 'Settler societies' are societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed in class, ethnic and racial terms (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995).

This policy of exclusion also left its mark in the development of stories about national history that were formalized in school textbooks, museums, monuments and commemorative dates. In these epic tellings, elite men likened themselves to heroic figures as the "great founding fathers of the homeland", i.e. white men of letters or of arms, most of whom were property owners. While their decisions and their participation in history acquired centrality and dignity, the participation of the excluded in social and political processes was marginalized and relegated to oblivion. Neither women, nor blacks, nor indigenous people were given a worthy place in these stories. Gays and lesbians were assigned to sites of disease and prison and were expelled from historical accounts of the construction of the nation.

Memory work can instead serve as a tool for the reaffirmation of those identities that are generally undervalued and persecuted, as a space for dialogue amongst voices that often do not know each other, and also as a sphere for struggle between different versions of the past. The compilation of historical accounts, which has until now largely been a space that has suppressed differences and political dissent, may become, through these processes of dialogue, a space for the recognition and positioning of social and cultural identities that have been devalued.

*Remember:*

Modern citizenship was actually founded on political inclusions and exclusions.

The development of historical accounts, up to now a space for the suppression of differences and political dissent, can be converted into a space for the recognition and positioning of the various social and cultural identities that have been largely devalued.

## B 1.5 From personal memory to collective memory: the role of mediators

*Let's reflect:*

Who tells the story of the country, region, city, town or village?

Who are the outstanding people in that story and what facts seem important and to whom?

Are victims' experiences reflected in this collective memory?
Do our individual memories correspond with this memory?

Memory, even personal memory, is a result of political and social practices, which are a product of the confrontation between actors with varying degrees of power. We are not born with a fixed memory or memories; we build it throughout our lives as we try to make sense of our personal and social history in an ongoing relationship with others and through social learning. This social character of memories becomes more palpable when we recognize that as humans we can remember without necessarily explicitly sharing our memories with others.  Yet those memories, however intimate they might be, respond to experiences that are inscribed in the interpretive frameworks that we use to make sense of them. These frameworks organize meaning and selectivity [what gets remembered] for individual and collective remembrances (Stern, 2005).

In general these frameworks are shaped by our group and institutional memberships: family, church, school, universities, the arts, the press, radio, television, non-governmental organizations, political parties, youth groups; as well as by people in the community who provide leadership and social orientation such as elders, teachers, priests, health officials, or local authorities. Through our daily engagement with these groups, individuals, and settings, we learn certain ways of remembering, selecting and articulating our memories.

The individuals who have a place of honour in their communities and in these institutions serve as mediators who transform a multitude of events into collective memories. This transformation operates through

the construction and dissemination of interpretive frameworks through which groups select what deserves to be remembered, shared and honoured - and distinguish it from what should be kept silent, censored or forgotten in public or collective forums. Thus what memories we learn to judge as innocuous, inappropriate or openly against the interests of the nation, institutions, groups or communities has very little to do with chance, and much to do with political and social construction.

One of the most powerful mechanisms used to distinguish those memories that deserve to be shared from those which should never be verbalized to others is the traditional notion of what is public or communal. This is where asymmetries of power in the construction of collective memories are most clearly reflected. Not all individuals occupy the place from which one, on behalf of a group, can speak with authority and competence about what happened and interpret a collective past.

To the extent that societies become more complex, the spectrum of who can be a mediator is broader and there are more places where there is a struggle to establish the "official" versions. There will be versions of the past that are shared nationally. These are the ones that acquire, for example, a truth value upheld in national museums, holidays and history textbooks. But also (and not necessarily aligned with the former) regional, local, community and even family memories will be woven into these "official truths" or beyond them. At each level, some voices will prevail over others because of the social location they occupy, their competencies, and the resources they control. Even in a case of the same facts, seldom will national, regional, local, community and family memories of those facts or their meanings be uniform (Mallon, 1995).

As well as creating support or disaffection, mediators can instil feelings of shame and establish criteria for what should be said publicly. For example, the saying "don't air dirty laundry" has often been a powerful tool for concealing violent practices that happen at home. But "don't air dirty laundry" is also a tool used in the institutional arena, for example when the *esprit de corps* instilled by regular and irregular armies imposes

silence on its members in the face of criminal and morally reprehensible conduct in particular crimes of sexual violence, so as to protect their "good name".

In the face of these silencing mechanisms, the social opportunity to confront the violent past means recognizing it as an issue that not only belongs to personal biographies and individual histories, but one that also belongs in the social and public sphere, and which can be resignified in rituals of social recognition, in judicial proceedings, and through reparations as appropriate (Lira, 2001). Put another way, a past that is socially shared is never without a private and personal dimension, but when the same social and political events have shaped a set of traumatic experiences for thousands of people, that affects social relations and so these past events need to be confronted at both the private and public level.

*Remember:*

Both individual and collective memories are at the same time political, social, cultural and historical. Which memories we learn to judge as innocuous, inappropriate or openly against the interests of the nation, institutions, groups or communities has very little to do with chance and much to do with political and social construction.

Individuals who hold a place of honour in their communities and institutions serve as mediators who transform a multitude of events into collective memories. As well as support and disaffection, these mediations can instil feelings of shame and determine criteria for what should and can be told in public or in front of the community, and what should remain in silence and be self-censored.

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*Let's reflect:*

What associations come to mind when thinking of the concept of victim?

Do you prefer the term victim or survivor?

Should people who have experienced violence share their life stories?

With whom?, To what ends?

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Beyond the juridical definition of who is or is not a victim, there are sociological, psychosocial, and historical factors to take into account when, in the midst of a conflict, efforts are made to integrate the voices of victims in the documentation of the war.[2]

First of all, it is necessary to make clear that violence has not affected only certain people in an isolated way, but rather has left its imprint on the lives of entire communities and social groups. There is a risk with narratives that privilege individualized histories that privatize and particularize the harm, because the damage cannot be understood without the context in which it was produced. Therefore we do suggest that memory work go beyond those formally acknowledged as victims and consider the totality of the population.

As mentioned in the introduction, some prefer the term "survivor" and avoid the term "victim" when thinking about the impact of violence, given that this term carries a certain stigma and tends to highlight suffering, powerlessness and passivity, ignoring peoples' capacity to confront violence and their many resources for overcoming what happened.

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2 This section contains significant contributions by Pau Pérez

Yet being considered a "victim" can be understood as the recognition of a social role as an affected person with fundamental rights, that is, *a victim as a rights-bearing subject*. In this sense, using the term "victim" can be a form of active resistance undertaken in order to avoid impunity and forgetting. It also acknowledges people not only in their suffering but also in their condition as social actors trying to see justice done, reparation offered, and guarantees that violations will not be repeated. In this context, the idea of victim can become the basis for and an engine of change. Naming oneself as "victim" or survivor thus signifies the possibility of recognition and dignity, since what is not named does not exist or is only recognized with difficulty.

Used in this way, the concept of "victim" can become a tool of strength and avoids the use of the term in a way that conveys an identity rooted in the past and passivity.  That is why we primarily use the term 'victim' in these materials and occasionally the term survivor.

It is also important to understand that there are social groups, such as Indigenous peoples, who see themselves as collective subjects. These groups have been systematically persecuted and made victims of violence for belonging to their group and have struggled to resist the multiple violences to which they have been subjected.

Finally, it is important to consider that there are people who have been victimized, in many cases, for their ideals and community projects. Therefore, it is necessary to combat the social imaginary that sometimes categorizes victims as defeated and passive, erasing all reference to their political projects, struggles and sacrifice. It can also pay particular attention to these actors, their involvement in social projects, and their search for solutions to the problems facing their communities of origin.

In recognizing an individual or a group as victims, it is important to consider and respect ethical protocols, values and ensure full confidentiality of direct testimony. This also calls for the recognition of a diversity of experiences, expectations, and forms of processing the losses and trauma of victims (Sánchez, 2008). Some are direct victims, such as those who have been killed, disappeared, displaced,

robbed, kidnapped, tortured, raped, sexually abused, injured or have suffered the loss of a relative. Others become victims through their role as witnesses to the horrors committed against family, friends and community members.

Only by considering the multitude of ways that the conflict has affected so many people is it possible to look at the different ways in which victims are processing the harm they have suffered, and recognize the many people who are part of this history.

### *Remember:*

Some people prefer to avoid using the term "victim" because they think that it exalts suffering and passivity.

Victims can be indirect (e.g. from having witnessed the violence) or direct (e.g. losing a family member, experiencing violence firsthand). Some groups prefer to avoid this distinction.

Victims may embrace this identity or they may prefer to call themselves survivors or affected persons.

Victims of violence, be they individuals or groups, are not human beings with isolated experiences. The effects of violence affect the entire community. In many cases people become victims because of their ideals and community.

In the construction of historical memory it is essential to recognize and make public the voices of victims as a strategy for active resistance to impunity and forgetting. In this context, the concept of victims as active agents may become a backbone of change. Here we use the concept of "victim" as a tool for strengthening organizing.

Part of the task of the reconstruction of historical memory is to understand, in a broad sense, all of the effects of the armed conflict, and to see the immense group of people who are part of that history, always ensuring the confidentiality of direct testimony.

## B 1.7 Victims as social and political agents with rights in conflict situations

*Let's reflect:*

What is the future of victims in countries with an ongoing conflict?

Is the status of victim permanent or temporary?

The status of victim is transitory, and may coexist with other social roles where the victim is or may be the protagonist. This means that a person who suffered harm is a social agent, a political and rights-bearing person who can also be engaged in social processes and the reconstruction of the community. At the same time this recognition needs to be paired with the consideration that in critical situations of mass violence, people who become victims of violence may have also been perpetrators of violence against others, which raises several issues, as mentioned above in section A 3.4. This is true, for example, in the context of the Canadian history of residential schools where Aboriginal children were separated from their parents, and prohibited to speak their languages and maintain their cultures (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012). Student-to-student abuse often happened in the schools, and victims often became abusers in their communities. This is one of the silences that has yet to be fully disclosed and that calls for a thoughtful and sensitive process of memory and healing.

**Victims or perpetrators? Questions to Consider**

Should perpetrators participate in historical memory work?

Should perpetrators just listen?

Does the participation or listening of perpetrators change the nature of the work?

Is this tied to the reasons why a group is doing memory work?

Should they be pointed out as perpetrators?

If they are both perpetrators and victims, at what point do they take up which role?

Does it matter more how they define themselves, or how others define them?

Mass violence, war, or living under a regime of terror often places ordinary people in critical life and death situations. As they face difficult moral choices some may find themselves sometimes as victims of violence and other times as perpetrators of violence or abuse. In these moments individuals may also be faced with situations in which neighbors, friends, and relatives become acquiescent with repression, are passive agents of violence, or are forcibly recruited or abducted into illegal armies. This calls for the consideration of what Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi referred to as the *grey zone*, a grey and ambiguous space between victims and perpetrators. It also calls for the acknowledgement of the mixed motives and changing locations in which individuals may find themselves in the midst of repression and violence.

### A reflection on victimhood from Liberia

*by Mark Marvey, Naymote, National Youth Movement for Transparent Elections, Liberia*

Defining victimhood can be particularly difficult when dealing with children who were forcefully conscripted into fighting forces against their will, but who themselves can be classified as perpetrators because they caused harm to helpless and unarmed persons. The argument of their innocence and the presumed incomprehensibility of their actions cannot be proffered to absolve them of criminal accountability when they remain engaged in the orchestration of violence after they attained the age of majority (18), thus further blurring the line between victims and perpetrators.

In Liberia for example, some of the child soldiers fighting in Taylor's rag-tag army were as young as nine-years old. But not all were press-ganged into service. Many joined the government militias as volunteers eager to avenge the killing of their parents by rebel fighters, or for survival. Every day, child soldiers could be seen riding around the streets of the capital Monrovia in pick-up trucks proudly toting their automatic rifles, or at the forefront of the fighting. Relief workers in Monrovia testified that on several occasions during the conflict, forces loyal to President Charles Taylor raided schools and camps of displaced people in search of young recruits to fight two rebel movements.

Liberia was wracked by fourteen years of intermittent warfare and chronic government neglect. So with most schools closed and few other job prospects available, picking up an AK-47 rifle and lurching off to the front line in a battered pick-up truck all too easily seem a glamorous prospect. Approximately 5,000 child soldiers participated in the conflicts between 1989 and 1996; but the children's rights group Child Peace Liberia Inc., posited that 20 per cent of all combatants in Liberia's first civil war were under 18-years-old.

The universe of victims is heterogeneous and their ways of addressing the violence or processing losses and damages are varied according to gender, race, age, class or social networks.  Some want to speak and others do not.  Some need language interpretation to do so, and may or may not have that available. Some want to talk in the first-person and others, out of modesty, fear, or because they do not want to exert pressure through their position as victims, prefer third-person narration. Some may be willing to speak only in private and refuse to testify in a more public manner, while others may opt to go public with their experience.

The same victim, at different times, can tell very different versions of the same events, which can sometimes emphasize certain episodes and at other times minimize them. Memory works through analogy, metaphor,

exaggeration, suppression, and minimization - which should not be
evaluated as true or false but as symbolic representations which express
the emotional scars that lived experiences have left on the victims.

*Remember:*

Victims are not defeated and passive subjects, but rather social
and political rights-bearing social agents in conflict situations
who may be involved in social processes and the reconstruction
of the community.

The impact and traces of violence are not only determined
by the violent events, but are also shaped by the personal
characteristics of victims, such as their age, gender, and
networks of support. These factors shape emotions and
behaviour and, therefore, personal tendencies to either speak
or be silent.

Memories are dynamic and convey victim's plural demands and
positions in the political field that cannot be standardized.

Violence has a disarticulating effect that must be overcome
by supplementing the fragmented testimony of victims with
elements of the global context.

**B 1.8 THE RIGHT TO MEMORY AND TO FORGETTING**

*Let's reflect:*

What do we say? What do we silence?

What do we forget? What do we remember?

What is silence? When do we keep silent?

Is it possible to forget the violent events that have happened
to us?

What do we feel when we remember the violence?

In the face of lived horrors, many victims isolate specific memories.
Others produce psychological or unconscious "blocks" of the traumatic
violent events they experienced. Many remember clearly what happened
to them, and even come to discuss it with those close to them, but

decide to remain silent in front of strangers because they do not want to remember or to sink back into suffering with a sense of shame or anger.

For these reasons, it is necessary to recognize and respect the fact that some people choose not to speak, thus freely and independently exercising their right to remain silent, an inalienable right in processes of truth telling and/or historical memory reconstruction.

It is also true that in a situation where historical memory is being recovered while war continues, fear is a powerful incentive to keep quiet. Many people fear that they will again suffer physical, verbal, moral, psychological, economic abuse or other types of harm. The perpetrators may have returned to communities where they engaged in hostilities, or continue to threaten victims who seek reparations or name those responsible. In these cases, fear appears not only in the memories of past violent acts, but is often palpably felt in the present. Because of the threats and the presence of armed networks, state institutions have a duty to ensure the safety of victims and address the security demands of those who want to testify in formal or informal ways.

Memory workers, when working with people who want their voices heard and their versions incorporated into historical accounts, can promote the creation of respectful and safe spaces where they can express their testimonies.  They can also aim to recognize the trajectory of many of these persons, as members of organizations that, in the midst of war, have worked to build new alternatives and social structures.

Despite the efforts made to prevent re-victimization when one reconstructs a violent experience, we must recognize that this danger exists and that carrying out concrete exercises of memory recuperation may revive suppressed or unresolved memories and may thus cause suffering in those who remember. For this reason we include here (in section D) a number of care techniques that seek to support participants and memory workers in appropriate ways.

***Remember:***

Speaking, remaining silent, and blocking memories are all ways that victims use to deal with their experiences of violent situations.

Remaining silent is an inalienable right of those who have been victims of violence, whether it be to avoid suffering, anger, or shame, or out of fear of further harm by active armed networks.

Historical memory interventions can promote the creation of respectful and safe spaces for people who wish to incorporate their stories into historical accounts.



▲   Monument to the victims of the massacre of Trujillo, Valle, Colombia. Photo by Jesús A. Colorado, 2008

## B 2. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF MEMORY:
### UNDERSTANDING MEMORY AS OBJECT, SOURCE AND METHOD

*Let's reflect:*

How does the exercise of building historical memory serve society and the community?

What does the memory of victims offer to the history of the country?

How do individuals and communities respond to state-generated histories of the past?

How do they generate their own narratives about the past?

How do communities repair social relationships and networks that violence so often tears apart?

What makes memory work different from other historical or social research? In historical memory work, memory is understood as a tool with which individuals and societies construct a sense of the past. Oral sources, narratives, and performances of memory serve at the same time as object (focus of study) and source for the construction of historical narrative (Portelli, 1991). Memory, the dynamic processes and related practices of remembering and forgetting, furthermore, constitutes the core element in the methodological approach proposed in this resource material.

The work of historical memory in this sense goes beyond the reconstruction of the facts as data, or the gathering of testimonies which verify a certain version. It looks to the meanings, i.e., how an event is experienced and remembered, and to the ways in which individuals over time make sense and give value to certain experiences, and the ways that these are preserved and transmitted in social memory. Recall that

> (...) meanings are cultural, socially and subjectively constructed, so that what may be significant for one culture may be irrelevant for another. Something which may represent

losses for a man may be considered a gain for a woman, and in any event the valuation and assessment of the facts will reflect the particular experiences of each person (Bello, 2005).

When we remember, consciously or unconsciously, we highlight various facts which leave marks on our lives because they turned out to be significant. Remembering is not passive, nor a purely psychological or natural act, but an act of continuously recreating the past in the present.  It is a social and cultural process where remembering and forgetting, practices that are both opposite and complementary, serve as the two operations that continually renew memory (Portelli, 1990; Riaño, 2006).

The narratives, dramatization, objects, and rituals by which memories are shared and transmitted, are therefore a resource that individuals use to recount their experiences.  It is also a vehicle through which we build a sense of who we are - our identity - on the basis of our experiences, feelings and reminiscences of the past. Individuals and social groups select and reorganize those rememberings and forgettings that allow them to define themselves as both unique and as members of a group. This task of making sense of the past for the present, and for future aspirations, is a strategy of identity construction.

Memory in this sense is responsible not only for our convictions, but for our feelings (Todorov, 1997). These beliefs and feelings are structured in social frameworks and in relation to the memories of others and, therefore, the individual act of remembering positions the remembered events within the frameworks of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992). In short, in the ways in which we remember and forget one can trace both marks and signs of identity and the ways in which individuals construct themselves as subjects and members of groups (Riaño, 1999).

But these practices of remembering are necessarily selective. This means that people remember an event differently, enriching the exercise of memory construction.  What our memories evoke, what they forget, and what they silence is not merely due to an inability to recall certain aspects or details of experience. Rather it is an active selection process that has

to do with the ways in which the individual or group turns to the past to serve the present. It has to do with the ways in which the past - or the story that is built about past events - informs, explains and reaffirms the person and their actions in the present and under specific circumstances.

Memory, as well as being selective, serves an ordering function. It makes sense of events by inserting them into a narrative. Our narratives are not only descriptive (that November event X happened) but also causal. That imperative to understand the reasons why events happen is expressed most heartbreakingly in the phrase repeated again and again by mothers of the disappeared, who cry out to know where the bodies of their children are and to understand what happened to them. "I want them to tell me why they took him," they say, again and again.

Memory work has been done to make visible silenced memories, to document the memories of certain groups and individuals, and extract the meanings (impacts, marks) of certain events in both their individual and collective dimensions. Making collective sense of the past can potentially reconstruct the social fabric and help to reconstruct a sense of purpose as members of a community, as well as help in reconstructing their own life plans. Recognizing one's own history within the history of others is directly linked to the task of rebuilding trust, and then of re-establishing purpose as members of a community. This process creates a 'we', even if only a temporary one. It creates a temporary community of memory, of shared feelings and emotions. Consensus is not required. Even debates and disagreements can be a useful process of shared negotiation of meaning (Riaño, 2008).

Remembering is not simply the act of evoking an event, but rather of being able to form significant narrative sequences (Connerton, 1989). Remembering, therefore, is not an aspect of reproduction, but rather of construction. This points us to the horizon of the functions of memory in individual and social life, and to the ways in which both remembering and forgetting, the two complementary processes and practices of memory, fulfill certain roles and are used by individuals and societies with and for certain purposes.

The box below illustrates some of these functions by recording the reflections of one group of women in Trujillo in the Valle del Cauca region of Colombia, on what functions remembering and forgetting serve in their lives, and in contexts marked by violence. See Appendix 2 for a description of how to run such a discussion.

The functions of remembering and forgetting listed by these two groups signal a relationship between the ways in which events of political violence and traumatic experiences are registered in individual and collective memory, and their ability to repair, serve a symbolic function, and construct memory.

## The functions and uses of historical memory

*Example of group brainstorming from a memory workshop in Trujillo, Valle, Colombia:*

### Why do we remember?

- To not forget
- To reconstruct
- To build a memory that others can read but which also help us to work through our sorrows and grief
- One remembers because one never forgets
- One also remembers to rectify, as a form of teaching
- There are things that should not be remembered; remembering is not always about living
- We also stir up the past to make space for justice
- We also remember so as to have a right to reparations
- To not die of grief and pain.

**Why do we forget?**

- The violence was like being branded. You can't forget it.
- We have the right to forget.  An elaborated forgetting
- There is a difference between silencing and forgetting by choice
- One forgives but does not forget.  The memories remain
- We all have a memory that feels recent; violence is a wound that is renewed every day
- The drama that the violence let loose is an open wound. Every time one comes back to it, it bleeds again.

The marks of violence in individual and collective memories are characterized by:

- The presence of fear as a factor that regulates daily life, lays the foundation for silences and distress, and restricts the possibility of giving testimony, narrating suffering, and mourning.

- The fragmentation of individual memories, as some suffering has not been made public and has not been repaired (Uribe, 2006).

- The difficulty of maintaining distance from memories that are anchored in the literal and unilateral reconstruction of a traumatic event and the feelings of being overburdened, helpless and angry (these elements are further developed below).

- The risks of recalling experiences and situations for the purpose of historical clarification in a context in which violence continues and actively threatens the social fabric.

Another aspect to consider in the construction of historical memory of traumatic events is its potential to contribute to the reconstruction of social networks and to facilitate processes of mourning. The exercise of remembering in a group involves a "face to face" look at the events of the past, and the giving of individual testimony of painful and traumatic

experiences. Building this type of memory in a collective process marked by respect may be one of the tools that facilitates making sense of the past in communities that have been affected by violence, and may also facilitate, through such a recounting, a process of mourning the losses.

The following sections explore in greater depth how these memory construction activities can open doors to a creative process of making sense and meaning of painful events and recognizing their impact on individuals and groups, in particular the feelings and emotions that are repressed (pain, anger, despair, helplessness) and the mechanisms by which they are internalized and can be faced. Likewise, the risks and implications of these processes are explored.

In this section we have considered memory as both a tool of social identity and a source and method for constructing history. In considering memory as a source for historical reconstructions, the meaning that people give to the past is considered an element of the work of history making and truth telling.

The work of historical memory draws on various sources. It has been used to refer to the rigorous reconstruction of data, facts, and their chronologies, through the use of sources such as archives, judicial files, media, oral testimonies, group and individual interviews with eyewitnesses to the events. It also seeks the rigorous reconstruction of memories, how events are remembered, imagined and symbolized with their footprints, marks and fractures, the multiple versions that exist about them, and the reasons for these contradictory tellings or differences in remembering (Uribe, 2005).

These memories will in some cases have the credibility of a deed (i.e., they corroborate the data obtained through other sources), and in other cases will not. The important thing is that both the memories that support the data, as well as the "false" or unsupported ones, are "true" from a psychological and cultural perspective because they speak of the way the event was experienced by the person or how it is interpreted, or even manipulated (Portelli, 1991; Vansina, 1985). In this sense memory

and history are complementary, both for the construction of a historical document as well as for historical clarification.

> **Remember:**
>
> The work of reconstructing historical memory is at once object, source and method for the construction of historical narratives.
>
> *Object* because it seeks to develop a narrative that accounts for the reasons that made possible the emergence and evolution of the conflict or violence, and to give space to the voices of the victims in the historical record.
>
> *Source* because memory becomes the central axis of the historical narrative.
>
> *Method* because the work of historical memory can seek both the rigorous reconstruction of the facts as well as the rigorous reconstruction of memories.
>
> To work in memory reconstruction processes it can be helpful to keep in mind that memory is:
>
> *Selective,* so memory work can go beyond simply studying or recovering the content of memories, but also look at the process and ways by which individuals and groups construct and incorporate these memories, retain certain memories, and organize their individual and collective experience.
>
> *Organizing,* when we remember we aim to highlight certain events and give them meaning and a raison d'être.
>
> *Dynamic,* it is continually renewed through the practices of remembering and forgetting.

## B 3. The psychosocial dimension of memory

> *To remember is to go back by way of our feelings, by way of the heart (…)*
> To remember is to feel again.
> - Ignacio Fernández Mata , 2006

Historical memory reconstruction projects can have a major impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of the people involved in them. These impacts

can be positive, but these projects may also give rise to situations and conflicts which, if not properly cared for, can lead to the deepening of feelings and relationships that are harmful for victims.

It is important to understand that these processes touch on experiences that are generally very painful and which require memory workers to understand the emotional world that is involved, and to have the skills that allow them to work with pain, fear, silence, anger and other feelings that flow from passing traumatic experiences back through words and feelings.

First let us identify the psychosocial value of memory and its contribution to the processes of mourning and to the reconstruction of fragmented families and communities.



▲    Historical Memory Workshop in the Apurimac region of Perú. Photo by Redinfa

## B 3.1 THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING

*Let's reflect:*

Why does it serve people who have been victims of violence to participate in historical memory processes?

What possibilities do historical memory spaces offer to those who want to share their life stories?

What are the advantages for victims in reconstructing and sharing their memories?

Acts of political violence are intentional events caused by other people who pursue specific interests, and are usually sudden extremely painful and frightening events. Most often, these are events which are difficult to attribute any meaning to (i.e., to understand why they happened), and which have the ability to strip the victims of their capacity to control their lives. Most of the time there are very few guarantees for victims to know what exactly happened (who was responsible, how it happened, where their relatives are, etc.). Given the impunity and power of the perpetrators, it is their reasons and justifications that are made public and used to explain what happened.

The lack of respect, the absence of answers that explain why a particular tragedy happened to the person, along with the perpetrators' statements of justification ("we killed them because they were guerrillas", "she was the girlfriend of a paramilitary") generate in victims deep feelings of guilt, humiliation, and shame that cause great suffering, and lead to feelings of revenge, despair and a great deterioration of self-esteem. In fact, many families regret not having done things that in their opinion would have prevented what happened. The stories of sexually abused women reveal how many recriminate themselves for their behaviours, bearing the burden of guilt that should fall on the perpetrators.

This is why reconstructing the history of the events and allowing different voices to describe and explain what happened is such a valuable resource that can help to identify responsibilities for the

facts: *who did what, how, and why*. Identifying those responsible not only contributes to understanding what happened and denounces and prevents violence - it also helps decrease or eliminate possible feelings of guilt. Knowing the reasons why something happened can help to give a certain meaning to it.  It can help victims to understand that what happened was not due to chance or bad luck.  Above all it offers clarity that the fault lies not in the actions or omissions of victims ('if I had said', 'if I had gone', 'if I had accompanied him', etc.), but rests with the perpetrators.

Reconstructing the history makes it possible to specify the damages and losses that violent acts produce.  It also provides an opportunity to identify situations and changes that were triggered by human losses as well as the loss of valuable and significant property. In specifying the losses it is also possible to talk about feelings that were experienced and still persist (sadness, anger, discouragement, irritation), as well as identify possibilities for carrying out actions that may have been left undone (paying tribute to the victims, expressing solidarity to someone, etc.).

Reconstructing the history also allows for the recuperation of the biographies of the dead and the rescue of their dignity (often affected by the discourses of the perpetrators who dishonour the good name of the dead to justify their actions). Restoring the dignity of victims has a profound healing effect because, on the one hand, it helps the family to seek and demand justice with greater security, and on the other, it can allow for some easing of their sense of owing a debt to their family members, and even to themselves.

To talk about what happened, when victims want or feel the need to do so, helps to raise awareness that they are subjects made vulnerable by the actions of others. This awareness is essential for generating feelings of outrage (this should not have happened!) and for motivating actions which seek justice on the basis of knowing themselves to be individuals with rights, and not as people seeking the goodwill or charity of others.

To remember and to listen to different versions that contribute to expanding and completing the historical narrative also helps victims to know that there are other people who experience similar situations. It allows therefore for understanding that the responses that a violation of human rights provokes (such as anger, insomnia, hopelessness, discouragement, the consumption of alcohol or psychoactive drugs, the loss of or drastic change in beliefs) do not have to do with personality problems of the victim (being weak, spiteful, intolerant), but instead are usually normal reactions to events that should not happen to any human being. The deep personal, family and community crises triggered by violence are in fact impacts of, and defence mechanisms deployed to try to deal with, facts and experiences that are not normal.

Recognizing a common foundation of emotions and experiences changes the way individuals see, give new meaning to their experience, establishes new connections between past and present, and allows them to position themselves as surviving witnesses. It allows them to situate their own history within a broader frame of collective suffering and build a different relationship to the past.

Talking about what happened and the feelings it provokes, in particular cultural contexts and for some people, can relieve the heavy burden that silence implies. The truth is that it is hard to forget violent events, and although many people who opt for silence try to forget them, what actually happens is that the memory bursts through like a nightmare, as indescribable and unspeakable distress, as a symptom in the body. Many experience that the exercise of narrating painful events can produce true relief. Indeed, some experts say that forgetting will be possible only once the event has been remembered.

> (...) to forget painful experiences often requires first being able to remember and accept it in one's current life. Only after owning these experiences can they be the object of healthy forgetting. For it is the case that what has been rejected and excluded from life experience has remained submerged and silenced, but continues to live and create pressure through symptoms. (Gómez and Castillo, 2005)

*Remember:*

Memory reconstruction processes are exercises that help both society and the victims. They help society to undertake searches for justice, and thereby contribute to the changes that are required for reconstructing and democratizing the social order(s).

For the victims themselves these exercises can be of great emotional and spiritual value. They represent an exercise of elaboration, understanding, socialization and validation of their experience that helps to free them from the harmful effects produced by feelings of guilt. They allow them to freely express to others who will listen respectfully and potentially share their own pain. Exercises of memory work may help them to understand their feelings and emotions. They allow them to recognize support resources and to identify their own abilities and attributes. They help them not to feel so alone and to dignify their demands for justice.

The main contributions of the reconstruction of historical memory to psychosocial wellbeing are:

- Identification of those responsible for the events.

- Specification of the damage and loss of human life and of valuable and significant property.

- Retrieval of the biographies of those killed or missing, rescuing their dignity.

- Generation of awareness that victims are rights-bearing subjects whose rights have been violated by the actions of others.

- Exchange with people who have had similar experiences and the understanding that the responses provoked by a violation of human rights are generally normal reactions to events that should not happen to any human being.

- Relief of the burden of silence, contributing to the unfolding of processes of mourning and forgetting.

### B 3.2 RISKS OF REMEMBERING AND TALKING ABOUT THE PAIN

*Let's Reflect:*

Why might some victims choose not to speak about the events they experienced?

What are the risks faced by victims as they reconstruct and share their memories?

What reactions could be generated by the reconstruction of historical memory in the groups involved in this work?

What about in communities outside of the process of historical memory reconstruction?

What about in political organizations? What about in armed groups?

So far we have emphasized the value of the processes of memory reconstruction for the psychosocial well-being of victims. However, we caution that these processes also involve risks and negative impacts, particularly in contexts where armed conflict persists. These should be considered so as to establish the means and resources to prevent and deal with them.

*Risks of secondary victimization.* Some social and institutional responses can contribute to people reliving their situation as victims and strip them of their abilities to deal with the situations caused by the violence. Their identities can then remain anchored and reduced to their violent experience, highlighting only their features as hurt and suffering persons. To remember and publicly express painful and traumatic events involves a high risk of secondary victimization whenever people relive situations that put them in a state of extreme vulnerability and helplessness. This can lead to what Portocarrero has called a 'wounded memory', that is to say, a prison of melancholy where, immersed in our own pain, we cannot see others. It is a memory that does not permit us

to face our hates and tears.  In it we actually remain engrossed in grief without end, in an eternal repetition of the pain (Portocarrero, 2004).

*Producing victimizing narratives.* It is important to prevent narratives that emphasize disempowered victimized and suffering identities. Instead the narratives produced may highlight mechanisms of survival and coping, the resources and efforts of individuals and the multiple ways, open and subtle or even hidden, in which they respond to and resist violence. This also may strengthen victims' capacity for agency.

*Risks of reinciting or exacerbating family or community conflicts.* It is known that actions of violence may divide communities, sow mistrust among people and cause shame and silence. As such it is necessary to anticipate that after violent and painful events family and community conflicts will appear or get worse, and that these may be expressed in the spaces where collective memory is being reconstructed.  Often contradictory and even conflicting versions are presented, and these must be anticipated and faced.

In the face of these risks it is necessary to state firmly and clearly that the "guilt" of the violent acts lies always with the perpetrators, and that it is they who should be held responsible. Similarly, it can be made clear that violent actions are also purposefully enacted so as to divide, fragment and tear apart. This clarity is not at odds with the possibility that communities critically review their past and present, but it does make it possible to deactivate the self-censorship and guilt mentioned above.

*Risks of revictimization.* In the context of impunity and the persistence of armed conflict, the exercises for reconstruction of memory often lead to processes of reporting or demanding justice. These actions may again put victims at risk of harm by those implicated as responsible. People should understand these risks and those organizations that accompany them should foster actions for their psychological and physical protection.

*Risks of social stigmatization and isolation.* In a context of high social polarization, powerful political, military and social sectors may demand silence and forgetting.  As such, exercises for the reconstruction of memory and history are sometimes classified and condemned as impediments to peace, and are vilified as spiteful and vindictive actions. This can lead to victims being singled out and delegitimized.

In this sense it is important to consider actions that strengthen victims, both individually and collectively. Victims should be recognized for the value of their testimony to society and their contribution to overcoming impunity and to the construction of a more inclusive and equitable society. This recognition should be explicit and public.

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***Remember:***

The processes of reconstruction of collective memory also involve risks and negative impacts, particularly in contexts where armed conflict persists, that should be anticipated so as to establish the means and resources to prevent and deal with them. These risks include:

- Secondary victimization: reliving the role of victims and becoming stuck in an eternal repetition of pain.

- The aggravation of family or community conflicts.

- Revictimization: those who participate in complaint processes or demand justice may again become victims of the armed actors.

- Stigmatization and social isolation by political, military and social sectors that demand silence and forgetting.

Section D provides specific tools to address these risks and considers the psychosocial dimensions of memory work.

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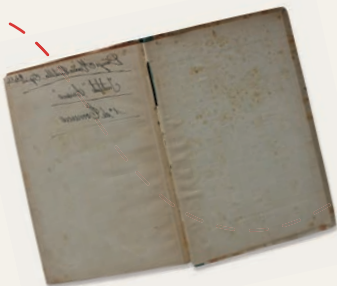
**Kachkaniraqkum allin wiñay Q'espichinaykupaq: "In spite of everything, we are still here to construct a better future" - Methodological proposal for the elaboration of historical memory in rural communities**

*By Rosa Lía Chauca, Network for Children and Families of Peru (Redinfa, Red para la Infancia y la Familia - Peru)*

The Final Report of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2003), systematized nearly 17,000 testimonies that allowed them to estimate that 69,280 people died during the internal armed conflict. The Commission found that *campesinos* (small farmer and farmworkers) were the main victims of the violence, that 79 per cent of victims lived in rural areas, and 75 percent of those killed spoke Quechua or another indigenous language as their first language. In contrast, only 16 percent of the Peruvian population falls into this category, according to the national census of 1993. In the three most affected departments the proportion of people who spoke Quechua or another indigenous language is even greater amongst the deaths reported to the TRC. It also found that approximately 440 rural communities were destroyed.

In this experience we, in the Network for Children and Families of Peru, worked with the support of two local institutions, the Association for Family Development of Apurimena (ADIFA, Asociación para el Desarrollo de la Familia Apurimeña) and the Center for Human Development (CHD, Centro para el Desarrollo Humano) in four communities of the Apurímac Region in the southern part of the country that were deeply affected by the internal armed conflict.

The acts of political violence experienced by these communities left painful marks of destruction and death on individuals and communities. For that reason we nurtured spaces of individual emotional recovery and social reconstruction through memory work. This was a delicate task which required a relatively long time. We established bonds of trust with the communities, based on mutual respect, and valuing the customs, everyday life and culture of this social group. Our mission was to little by little reconstruct the confidence and the spaces of dialogue that were broken by the violence and the constant forgetting.

In this memory work we initiated the recovery and valuation of their knowledge, customs, and the wisdom of their culture that, for reasons of violence, victimization, and vulnerability had been forgotten. Our team had mixed ages and genders, which allowed us to respond to situations where it was necessary to discriminate in a positive way, such as when we worked with a group of women who shared their experiences of sexual violence. Speaking indigenous languages and respecting and following the ways of life and customs of the community were important in this process.

*Emotional support and accompaniment* - During the process of elaborating historical memory we nurtured spaces where people could express their experiences and feelings, seeking to take them out of the private sphere so that they could share their experience and thus contribute to psycho-social recovery. In this process the reflections that were made allowed for understanding what happened in the context of the social and political origins of the violence.

It was important to be prepared to support the people we worked with. As facilitators we did not force expressions of pain, they came out of the groups' own processes, and from each person who expressed themselves when they felt the need to do so. At that moment, we received their expressions of pain, and then gave back to the person and the group a reflection, always linking it to an action (in the past, in the present, and the future).

Self-care - Throughout this process the facilitators were also impacted by the pain expressed, which connected us to our own experiences, and in many cases with feelings of helplessness and frustration. For that reason, we also had spaces for emotional support. In these spaces each member of the team reflected regarding their position in the face of the political violence and their social and political reading of the process as they experienced it. This allowed us to focus our intervention on going beyond charity and the victimization of the population.

**Stages of the intervention:**

We proposed five phases for the intervention, which were not rigid, since one phase often feeds back to another and there are times when you have to return to the previous one to strengthen the advances that have been achieved.

*Diagnostic* - get to know the community, issues, and resources; understand the internal and organizational dynamics, and redesign the following phases.

*Compiling the stories* - where we seek to support the community to build its history through the memory of different groups in the community, which were defined with the members of the Coordination Committee which was appointed in each community to accompany the process. The groups formed were: elderly, young adults, adults, groups of returnees (people who were displaced and then returned to the community when the conditions of safety improved), and resistant people (people who remained in the community to face the conflict there). Each of them has their own view and interpretation of history. Information-gathering workshops were held with each of these groups.

*Systematization* - when the story collecting workshops were done, the Network's team organized the information from these, based on the criteria established by the community groups. For this phase a systematization card that was used in the Recovery of Historical Memory project (REHMI by its acronym in Spanish) in Guatemala was very useful for us.

*Return* - The systematized stories were organized to "return" them to the different groups of the communities in workshops, so that different groups could analyse if what they expressed was there, and if it was the story that they had wanted to build. We also held community assemblies where we collected their appreciations and opinions.

*Articulation of memory with the process of local development* - This was an important stage for analyzing and collecting what the communities had learned through this process and the responsibilities they assume regarding their history, development plans, and future life projects.