

Chapter E

E

THE ETHICAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF MEMORY PROCESSES

As already mentioned, work on memory involves various aspects that can compromise the wellbeing of persons and affect the relations amongst those who make up the group or collective, as well as the relations they have with their surroundings.

Historical memory reconstruction projects can have a major impact on the psychosocial well being 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.

This section reflects on the ethical and psychosocial dimensions of memory work and provides suggestions for addressing ethical, safety and emotional risks in the work. It concludes with several observations about group processes in memory work.



▲ Memory Workshop, Cartagena, Colombia 2009. Photo by Jesús A. Colorado

E 1. ETHICAL AND SAFETY FRAMEWORKS FOR MEMORY WORK

How do we do this work safely?
How do we do this work ethically?

It is important to establish ethical standards that allow the processes to be regulated and managed such that the integrity, centrality of, and respect for victims is prioritized.

In this vein, we offer here suggestions of considerations that can guide memory workers in the design, implementation, and evaluation of memory workshops and/or activities.

Those involved in memory reconstruction processes need to know and assume the principles established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Respect for fundamental rights, dignity, the worth of all people, and non-discrimination principles must be respected, as well as the

right of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, self-determination and autonomy.

In regards to autonomy and freedom, it must be ensured that information about the memory work is properly disseminated beforehand and that this is complete and explains the purpose, objectives, relevance of the project, as well as risks that persons may incur by participating in the work. In this way the participant is allowed to make the decision to participate or not, according to their needs, values and preferences.

Interaction between people requires trust, confidentiality, openness, cooperation and mutual responsibility - in this case, among the participants who are asked to participate. It may not be possible to establish a direct relationship of this kind with some of those that are key to the construction of memory. In such an event an attempt can be made to make contact with a person close to and accepted by them, who could serve as a bridge or link. Historical memory processes can be seen as an issue of public health and should promote healing of the social fabric and more connection in communities, not less.

During group and individual memory work it is necessary to start by establishing some basic agreements amongst participants, and between them and the memory workers and researchers to ensure respect for these principles. It must be made clear that participation is voluntary and that participants have the right to suspend both their participation in the session and in general in the process of historical memory at any time.

A critical ethical issue to be clear about is the risks that survivors and memory workers face and ways to mitigate these. For example, stories and personal documents kept in archives can be anonymized for safety. In ongoing conflicts or in authoritarian forms of government there is a danger of materials being confiscated and victims criminalized with false charges.

What people say or narrate in the processes of memory work should be maintained confidential, unless the person who is telling the story and providing the information explicitly authorizes its public use.

E 2. SOME BASIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEMORY WORKERS

An invitation to remember can often serve as an outlet for feelings and words that have been repressed. It is essential that memory workers learn to recognize the emotions and behaviours that can arise when violent and very painful events are remembered. For many people it may serve as a space for speaking after many years of silence. It can serve as a reencounter with a pain that some describe as “asleep”. For others it may even be an experience that makes it possible to know facts that were unknown. This may relieve, or on occasion add to, suffering.

Although various experiences have shown that most victims respond to memory work with excitement, in some cases they may show signs of anxiety or pain that require special treatment. For example, they might be invited to leave the group for a while and be offered individual support by counsellors on site until they feel better.

In any case, it should be noted that reactions are always different and, as mentioned, not everyone gives equal weight and meaning to the events, nor feel the losses in the same way, nor express the same form and intensity of suffering.

The following considerations based on the work of the Network for Children and Families of Peru (see Chauca, 2007 and Redinfa, 2004) can allow for a better handling of the situations that tend to arise:³²

Human beings are unique individuals. Although there are common behaviours and responses to a violent event, every situation is unique. The impact that a violent event generates depends on many circumstances such as age, gender, family and social support, and previous life experiences. Therefore it is very important not to generalize or predict

³² See, Chauca, Rosa Lía. 2007.

impacts and personal reactions. Neither can we assess the situation of others based on our own experiences. Although these allow us a greater understanding of situations, our own experience is also unique.

It can help when memory workers are from inside a community and understand its 'language' in all senses. The gender and age of memory workers also makes a difference. Who can you encourage to serve as a memory worker? Youth will remember differently than elders. You may want to think about how to best facilitate the passage of memory from one generation to another. Youth can be taught and mentored as memory workers, which can make the stories personal for them.

People and communities go through different processes. Some have not had the opportunity to be heard in a respectful manner. This proposed reconstruction of history may be their first opportunity to talk about experiences that have been silenced. In other cases communities have been the object of many and varied interventions. As such their stories may be "hypernarrated", to the point that retelling them is something like returning to a script that has been repeated many times, and for that very reason somewhat separated from feelings.

A safe space should be fostered. We suggest that rules and recommendations be set which invite speaking, and which, especially, invite listening without judgment, without naming or judging the actions and feelings of others. It is important to avoid comments that minimize the pain, ("it's not that bad, don't worry") or that magnify it ("that's terrible!", "how have you not gone crazy?"). Relationships of warmth and confidence can be fostered so that words can flow without inhibition or coercion. These sessions should not be turned into interrogations to meet the needs and curiosities of the memory worker facilitating the group. Neither should narratives be stopped because of a sense that they are not on-topic. While memory workers play an important role as guides and facilitators in this space, they should be clear that the needs of victims come first. For some it will be necessary to talk and repeat their experience and their pain several times. Others will instead prefer to remain silent.

The privacy of individuals should be respected. One should avoid exploring those aspects that transgress victim's privacy and expose them to the prejudice and judgments of others. In this regard, for example, it is necessary to evaluate beforehand the appropriateness of having a mixed space (men and women, children and adults) and the importance of having separate spaces.

Memory workers should avoid becoming "counsellors". "You should do this or that." Instead they can help to identify and facilitate access to the personal, family, community and institutional resources which people can turn to.

Techniques for expressing emotions should be thought through in advance. They should be applied without affecting in major ways the relations of the group and the emotional integrity of the participants.³³ The use of symbolic acts through which one can express feelings of rage (e.g., through writing of situations, experiences and harmful feelings and then burning them) is one way of doing this. In this regard, experiential techniques are particularly relevant.

Full emotional expression should be allowed. People should be able to express their emotions, to cry or to shout. Emotions should not be repressed, but rather listened to with eye contact, speaking softly. If it is appropriate in the cultural context one can hold a hand, or offer a hug.

Demonstrations of emotion should not be controlled. It is not uncommon for memory workers to attempt to control demonstrations of emotion (such as tears, anger or despair) by promising things that cannot be ensured (this will pass soon, it will never happen again, tomorrow you will be better), or by offering resources that are not available to them. These responses should be avoided so as not to generate false expectations and the deterioration of the relations of trust that has been built.

33 A very useful resource in Spanish is Red para la Infancia y la Familia, REDINFA. 2004.

The memory worker should know how to use some preventative techniques. When faced with signs of physical discomfort it is important for memory workers to know the use of some techniques, such as breathing and relaxation exercises designed to prevent the tension. Without abruptly breaking the workflow, times for relaxation and rest should be anticipated to allow for responding to stress.

The needs of participants should be taken into account. It is important to take careful note of the demands of those present, their needs and support requirements, and, when safe and appropriate, to file them with the relevant authorities. It is particularly important to address demands for psychological support, and there should be spaces that allow for providing specialized attention.

Different experiences show that memory processes allow some participants to become aware of their need for psychological accompaniment and support. Ideally the team of memory workers should be able to provide participants with relevant resources, but one of the issues to consider is that these will not always be available.

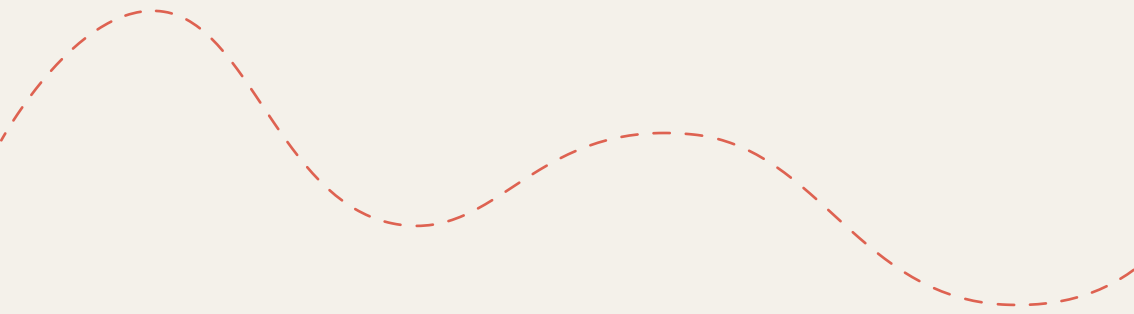
The above statements are based on the assumption that to identify and help mitigate the impacts of political violence, we must recognize that the interpretations, meanings and individual and collective actions that address the violence are constructed in dense and complex networks and patterns that give rise to particular ways of being in and perceiving the world. As such it is assumed that the harm (why they suffer and how they suffer, what is lost) and way in which it is faced (what is done, why, how, and with whom), cannot be established a priori, nor measured according to universal standards, nor inferred by reference to another event in another place, or to other people.

A violent event does not automatically result in processes of traumatisation or mental illness, as is sometimes supposed. The responses, as well as the harms and transformations, in the lives of people and communities do not have to do only with the characteristics of the violent event. They are also shaped by the characteristics of those who experience it, their history, and even their personal and

collective processes (both internal and external) of dealing with the violent act (Bello, et al., 2006).

E 3. PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF MEMORY WORK

In order to recognize the psychosocial aspects in the processes of memory reconstruction the following aspects and their respective guiding questions should be considered as part of the work:

- Identification, recognition and measurement of the losses and damages caused by violent acts.
 - Reflection on the emotions, behaviours and reactions triggered by the violent events: sadness, anger, isolation, passivity, scepticism, distrust, and loss and change of beliefs, amongst others.
 - Reflection on the context in which the events occurred in order to clarify the interests and relationships that made the violent events possible.
 - Identification of the perpetrators, their motivations and intentions. Establish the ethical differences and distances between victims and victimizers.
 - Reflection on the personal, family, and community resources that have been activated after the violent events and which have allowed people to face the lived events with dignity.
 - Recognition and valuation of the leadership, organizing, actions of resistance and the efforts that are maintained despite the violence.
 - Stimulation of the construction of proposals of cultural, symbolic and ritual acts that strengthen the processes of mourning and make “closure” possible through the process of doing memory work.
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E 4. PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

Psychological first aid is psychological intervention in a critical moment. It is brief and immediate support offered to a person so as to restore their emotional stability and provide the conditions for continued personal equilibrium. It aims to restore equilibrium, offer support for self-control, offer emotional support, reduce the risk of death, and connect the person in crisis with social support resources.

Critical behaviors and emotions that call for psychological first aid:

1. Reaction of paralysis
2. Reaction of hyperactivity
3. Bodily reactions: shaking, nausea, vomiting, rapid heartbeat

DO'S

Develop a responsible listening ear. Listen carefully, briefly summarizing back the feelings of the affected person. Make them feel that you understand what they are going through - this is empathy.

Be polite, honest and transparent: earn the trust and cooperation of the affected person.

Be realistic and objective.

Promote dignity and freedom so that victims can work on their problems.

Promote trust and security.

Be alert to opportunities to emphasize the qualities and strengths of the person.

Accept the right of those affected to feel that way.

Ask healthy and effective questions.

Ask for feedback to see if you understand correctly.

Be understanding of religious beliefs and spiritual practices.

Refer them to professionals (psychologists) as appropriate

DON'TS

Do not offer something you cannot follow through on.

Do not be afraid of silence, offer time to think and feel.

Do not feel useless and frustrated. You are important and what you are doing is worthwhile.

Do not show anxiety, because it can be easily transmitted to those affected.

Do not give answers, but rather facilitate reflection.

Do not allow the anger or hostility of the person to affect you.

Do not pressure them to talk.

Do not be afraid to admit that the affected person needs more help than you can provide.

Do not allow people to focus only on negative aspects of the situation.

Do not show pity or paternalism. Do not express yourself in an authoritarian or imposing manner.

Do not expect the victim to function normally immediately.

Do not confront a person in crisis if they are going to feel threatened.

E 5. SOME TECHNIQUES FOR WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

Based on the proposal for the development of historical memory in rural communities put forward by the Redinfa in Peru (Network for Children and Families) (Chauca and Bustamante, 2004), and based on work in the Colombian context, techniques are listed below which can encourage participation and the expression of, and coping with, emotions related to violence generated in the very exercise of remembering.

Memory workshops rely on so-called experiential techniques. These are techniques that motivate people to express feelings and role-play on the basis of their recollection of specific events. These techniques seek to work out hypothetical scenarios in which people play an active role and relive the situation in their own way.

Experiential techniques include particularly:

- Disinhibition, which allows people to loosen up and get ready for the work.
- Integration and trust, aimed at building a climate of safety and protection in the group so that participants feel supported and encouraged to offer mutual support.
- Free expression, which makes it possible to channel experiences and feelings through nonverbal activities (dance, modeling, drawing, etc.).
- Group wellbeing, whose aim is to make participants feel welcomed by the group.
- Relaxation, which seeks to close the workshop such that people leave relaxed and with feelings of well-being (Chauca and Bustamante, 2004:30-34).

E 6. CARING FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MEMORY WORKERS: PREVENTING EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

Working with victims, being repeatedly exposed to stories of pain and suffering, listening to the horror, and even experiencing the fear and danger all generate mental health impacts on memory workers.

Identifying these impacts, recognizing them, and activating mechanisms to prevent and deal with them is the responsibility of the memory workers. They must strive for the care and integrity of those doing the memory work.

It should also be noted that if a team is “burnt out” or emotionally affected this will have a negative effect on the exercises done with the victims.

People who work with victims accumulate feelings of fear, helplessness, rage, and hopelessness that arise from their identification with the victims, from sharing situations of risk with them, and also from the difficulty of seeing the positive impacts and changes that come about

as a result of their work (what good do we do?). They have few spaces to express these emotions.

So-called emotional burnout is often the result of the tensions caused by the ethical dilemmas that are faced, an excessive dedication to the work (an absence of spaces of play and rest), and the overestimation of personal responsibility for the changes that are needed (feeling indispensable to people or communities).

This burn-out manifests in various ways:

- Physical ailments: muscle aches, insomnia, gastritis, etc.
- Scepticism: the sense that nothing changes, and will not change despite what one does or stops doing.
- Underestimation or overestimation of risk: difficulty in establishing and appropriately assessing threats to their own safety.
- Irritability and difficulty in interpersonal relationships at work and at home.
- Mechanization or dehumanization: insensitive responses to pain, due to an over-familiarity with it.
- Addictions and dependencies: consumption of liquor, cigarettes and psychoactive substances. These situations not only affect the health of the person, but may significantly deteriorate relations between team members and reduce their ability to work effectively.

Being aware and alert to the risk of burn-out in memory workers is therefore particularly important. Routines and spaces should be established which allow for:

- Memory workers to debrief and express the emotions that come up in their work and the situations that they face.
- Teams to have spaces for rest and recreation.
- Reviewing the goals and scope of work, so as not to take on situations that are beyond their capacity to act.

- For teams to analyze the contexts of their work, identify risks and the resources to address them and make personal and group safety plans.

To prevent burnout, the Avre Organization in Colombia (Corporación Avre) suggests holding regular workshops amongst memory workers themselves, with the following objectives (Camilo, 2001):

- Provide an opportunity for people to check if they are showing emotional or physical manifestations and changes in behaviour that are a sign of emotional burn-out.
- Allow memory workers to be aware of the impact generated by the context in their personal life, family, and in organizations.
- Offer a space for emotional expression of how these situations are affecting personal spaces, family, and the organization.
- Encourage a review of the dynamics of the context, the organization, and personal attitudes towards work that both facilitate and hinder the work, and which generate or prevent the onset of emotional exhaustion.

But psychosocial support for memory workers should happen not only in these regular workshops, but can also be an ongoing daily part of the work. Rituals can play a role as it can be chanting, playing music, breathing, dancing, shaking it out (to move energy through), or nightly journaling. Whatever it is, some daily space and/or ritual can be an important support.

Memory work is hard. Know that you are not alone. People around the world are doing memory work in contexts of ongoing conflict and messy 'post-conflict' contexts. The groups listed here, [internal link to directory of participants](#), are doing work that can offer ideas and practices to work under these circumstances.

