

“Understanding memory construction as an ongoing process”

Dylan Herrera

As humankind has been evolving in its understanding of the complexity of conflicts, memory work has been gaining more and more relevance as an integral part of transition for post-conflict societies. Memory gains importance when it is linked to reparation and reconciliation - and for that there needs to be an understanding of what happened.

As memory workers we see the process of constructing memory precisely as a process, one which has seen substantial methodological contributions in the last 30 years - so that the State of the Art in memory work is constantly being updated. However, the core of my reflection is that although we understand memory as a process, we don't understand our target constituencies as people who are undergoing processes themselves.

We produce memory work today informed by very important questions such as: How will we narrate the conflict to today's kids and to future generations? How do we create a common narrative that joins former perpetrators and victims in a new reconciliation perspective? We see our constituencies as constant, victims as victims, perpetrators as perpetrators, kids as kids, and so on, but we don't think of what will happen when they change in nature or don't identify themselves as such anymore: will those narratives still work? Will they be enough?

Although we talk about processes like reconciliation as long-term dynamics that can take many generations to consolidate or actually never fully take place, we tend to see memory work as something more short-term. We make a great effort during a transition period, to construct memory, to gather sources, narratives, and other elements ... **BUT TO DO IT NOW.** Therefore, we have specific interests around what we want to set as the priority, what narratives will be more helpful for what we intend, what information we want or need to categorize and gather. And consequently we don't think about gathering all we can, even if we don't know what to do with such material, and let that be evidence and sources for future generations to build upon and update the memory work to the needs of their time.

We can create a narrative for today's kids, but these kids will grow and become teenagers then adults and will want different forms and modes of feedback than today's teenagers or adults. Because their processes were different, because they had a narrative that others at their age didn't have, when they become teenagers and adults their needs for understanding and explanations of what happened will be different, the current available resources might not be sufficient or appropriate. What I am saying is that we tend to see memory work as a process that takes place as a part of a transition but we fail to see that it has to become an ongoing process of constant upgrading and construction, where we as the memory workers at the time must gather narratives and other resources that might be constructive for the time but which we might not know what to do with or how to process at the time. Especially because many of those sources, stories, testimonies and other resources might

not be available anymore after some years, and then we will have lost the opportunity to gather them for others in the future to use them and construct new processes based on that.

We tend to foster dialogues now without seeing that they might enlighten future dialogues, that dialogues can be across generations and time, and that it is our responsibility to gather all the resources for those processes to take place, and allow others to learn lessons from the processes and material we gather. Reconciliation takes time, but so also does memory, and it will take generations too, sometimes, to have such discussions and encounters. So: how to provide them all with tools to nurture their dialogues based on memory? How to make such an inclusive gathering of material that minimizes our imprint on it and the dangers of polarizing future memory work and reflections?

That is why as memory workers we need to see our work as a tool of long duration, where all narratives have validity, where all elements can eventually be useful, where technical memory work has to find a way of staying away from political polarizations, and where methodological framing that excludes elements that can be useful in the future is avoided. How many tools, evidence and other elements have been lost because for someone they were irrelevant at the time? How many gaps have we had to fill because we didn't have a comprehensive context of the situations, of how life was, of the beliefs, of the narratives, etc., and then we end up inferring in order to construct our visions of past situations and understandings of our present?

Building bridges across time and people means preparing bricks for paths and walkers we have not yet foreseen.

About the author:

Dylan Herrera is a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) practitioner who has been working with excombatants and host communities and advising governments in Colombia, the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo.