



Qualitative Sociology Review

Volume VII, Issue 3 – December 2011

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Narrating Memory: Weighing up the Testimony

Abstract

Memory is the ability to store, maintain and recall information and experiences. Although predominantly an individual attribute, memory coincides with the life-world, with consciousness and with the ability to define reality – all of which are shared with others. When analysing narratives the sociologist needs to situate individual memory within its broader context. The article follows the argument that individuals acquire their memories within a broader social context. They also recall and localise their memories within a broader social context. This article interprets a remarkable testimony: the story of a former political prisoner who circumcised a large number of young fellow inmates in the notorious prison on Robben Island, South Africa, during the period of Nelson Mandela's incarceration.

The article relates the narrative in question to the life-world of the narrator and to his experiences whilst serving his 18-year prison sentence. It reflects on the epistemological questions regarding memories. Memory as recollection, as reconstruction of events and information, and as process of re-membering come under the spotlight. Narratives that are often repeated start taking on a life of their own – particularly in the case of trauma memories. When analysing these narratives, the sociologist needs to distinguish between objective markers and subjective interpretation. Memory does not constitute pure recall by the individual. The article illustrates the effect of intersubjective and collective factors on the process of remembering. It calls for a reflexive process to identify, re-interpret and unpack the process of remembering.

Keywords

Memory; Experience; Consciousness; Life-world; Re-membering; Intersubjectivity; African National Congress; Circumcision; Robben Island.

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Memory: experience, consciousness and the life-world

Memory refers to our ability to store, maintain and recall information that we encounter. It also refers to our ability to store, maintain and recall reflections on experiences that we had. Our experiences and the knowledge that we absorb make up our world. It constitutes the life-world of every individual – the world in which we live that provides the basis of our existence. Mary Rogers (1983:50) refers to this life-world as a “paramount reality” – a necessary stock of knowledge to deal with new experiences and activities. Our experience of our life-world begins at birth and the biography of each one of us is a story of our relations with others and with our world.

Our life-world is predominantly social; it involves other people. As a result of our involvement with and experience of other people, ‘the world’ gradually becomes ‘our/my world.’ The world of knowledge and actions that exists outside of the individual slowly becomes internalised in the child’s own consciousness.

Only by internalising the voices of others can we speak to ourselves. If no one had significantly addressed us from the outside, there would have been silence within ourselves as well. It is only through others that we can come to discover ourselves. Even more specifically, it is only through significant others that we can develop a significant relationship to ourselves. (Berger and Berger 1972:58)

As we learn to become members of society we gain more and more information on and experience of living together with other people. We take large parts of our life-world for granted and seldom question the ways in which we add to our knowledge and experience of this world. We also seldom question the ways in which our life-worlds expand. Because we assume that we’re familiar with our experiences, we have little doubt that our memories truly reflect what happened in the past. It is natural to suspend doubts about the existence of our life-world and about the presumed objective nature of everything connected to this life-world.

The world as we know it and as we experience it is our world because it coincides with our consciousness. “We cannot know reality independently of reality – to do so would be to meet the one and the other in isolation, which is an impossibility. We meet consciousness only as consciousness of something; and we meet reality only as a reality of which we are conscious” (Lauer 1965:5). William Lijpen (1966:33) phrases this principle somewhat differently when he states that: “[w]e cannot escape the simple truth that without human consciousness there is no world.” Consciousness and experience go hand in hand. We bestow meaning to our life-world and our concrete lived experiences become recorded in the internal consciousness of our world. These recordings constitute our memory.

Our consciousness is also directly related to our definition of reality. As individuals, we participate in social situations. We define what those situations mean. Although it is not always a structured and premeditated process, these definitions of reality provide a broader context within which we further experience the social world. In this way we start at an early age to attribute meaning to our life and to our experiences and to participate in this broader context known as social reality. An important implication of this process is that our lives are the culmination of a continuous dialectical relationship between the control elements constituted by the context within which we live and the creativity vested in ourselves. In terms of this dialectic, we often act against or resist our context, but even more often participate in it and collaborate with it.

The link between our consciousness and our ability to define our situation has been long held in sociology. In the early part of the twentieth century, W. I. Thomas already came up with the 'Thomas theorem' in terms of which he proclaimed that if somebody defines a situation as real, it is real to her in its consequences. Thomas (together with Znaniecki) was one of the first sociologists to define human attitude as "...the process of awareness determining the individual's possible or actual activity in the social world" (as quoted in Podgórecki and Łoś 1979:150). This "awareness" refers to consciousness and encapsulates the entire spectrum of memories held by the individual. Memory is a practice and not an objective entity. It is produced out of experience and in turn reshapes experiences.

The context of this narrative

Narrative research has acquired a very prominent place in sociologists' endeavours to understand social reality. This article focuses particularly on the narrative study of lives within the broader context of phenomenological and interpretative sociological analysis. I am not particularly concerned here with discourse analysis, but rather want to make some epistemological remarks about the use of narratives. These remarks need to be seen against the background of the conceptual map presented earlier, namely the linkages between experience, consciousness and the life-world.

The narrative on which this article is based is directly linked to the experience of one individual. The narrator was among those who defied the Apartheid system in South Africa during the height of this oppressive regime. Johnson Malcomess Mgabela was a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (literally "The Spear of the Nation" and often referred to as MK) since its inception and later became Commander of MK in the Border region of the Eastern Cape. When MK started to carry out attacks against government installations he was organising the cells of the then banned African National Congress (ANC), was teaching his people, was recruiting mainly young men from the border area to go for military training in African countries such as Tanzania, and was actively involved in deeds of sabotage.

In July of 1963, he was captured and kept in detention for almost a year before being tried in Queenstown and later in Grahamstown. In April 1964, he started his 18-year sentence on Robben Island, one of the world's most notorious penal institutions. He was one of several hundred who, unlike their leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki and Walter Sisulu, were imprisoned in the anonymous general cells of the island prison. Here, in the communal cells a large number of men – up to 70 in a cell of hardly 140 square meters – were thrown together with only a sleeping mat and a blanket. Early in the morning the bell would ring and everyone had to clear his bed and rush to the few facilities of the small ablution block of the cell. After a rushed breakfast, had whilst sitting in the open in regimented rows, with no tables or chairs, they would go out to work in the stone quarry or elsewhere on the island. Back in the cells by late afternoon they would eat their food and wash themselves before being locked up in the communal cells for a 12 hour stint with their comrades.

The ANC Disciplinary Committee (DC) tried to avoid a situation where people were simply hanging around in the cells and the leaders helped to create a situation whereby the prisoners were involved in studies and political discussions. These discussion periods were taken seriously: the political prisoners appointed study officers from among themselves. The role of the study officers was to declare the

study and discussion periods and to close it afterwards. In the book *Fallen Walls: Prisoners of Conscience in South Africa and Czechoslovakia* (Coetzee, Gilfillan and Hulec 2004), I deal with this issue, describing how the Disciplinary Committee controlled life in the cells. They constantly emphasised that in prison the food of the politician is discussion – political, cultural and social issues were endlessly debated.

Every prisoner of conscience was made aware that he had an obligation to teach others. There even were societies such as a science society and a literature society. They discussed any topic imaginable. Is there such a thing as a flying saucer? What does it mean to have ‘flu?’ And after newspaper reports on sex-change operations: how can a man be changed to become a woman? Joseph Faniso Mati arrived on Robben Island at the same time as Johnson Malcomess Mgabela. They were tried together and both of them started their prison terms in 1964 (the same year their renowned leader, Nelson Mandela, started his long imprisonment). Mati shared for long periods a communal cell with Mgabela and other political prisoners. Having gone through so many things together (the same trial under The Sabotage Act, the same journey from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town in the back of large trucks of the Department of Prison Services, the same trip by ferry to Robben Island and the same treatment at the hands of the prison warders), Mati is in a good position to summarise life on Robben Island. His description of the everyday reality in the island prison gives a background against which we can read Johnson Malcomess Mgabela’s story:

[i]f you were not constructively busy in prison, it was very dangerous, because you could become mentally deranged. You were sentenced, maybe to sixteen or twenty years, and it was no use thinking about your wife, or your girlfriend, or your children. There was nothing that you could do. So, in order to stay sane and to avoid worrying about your loved ones, you had to get busy in studies, in discussions, in sport, in reading...But, the one activity that dominated our stay on the island was the political discussions. No-one who spent time on the island can say that he hadn’t been strengthened politically. It was as if we couldn’t get enough. There were those who wanted to discuss politics every day. They discussed politics at lunch hour in the quarry, they discussed politics in the evening...

Although politics dominated our discussions, it was only natural that we thought about our people outside. Sometimes, you know, that thing of being a man, longing for your wife and especially because most of us were still young, we felt: Hey! I am getting old here. Certain things I cannot enjoy because of my stay in prison...But then, through discussions with some of the others, we encouraged each other. When you fight for freedom these things have got to happen. Thinking and talking about our feelings and experiences...

Around the 1976 Soweto uprising, a new generation of political prisoners added to the flood of information. For some of us the days got longer and longer. It wasn’t possible anymore to absorb and debate issues as they became available. In a way we missed the order and the discipline of our initial search to be in touch with the world on the mainland.

Talking about the younger generation of prisoners who joined us towards the middle ‘70s reminds me of the need to introduce circumcision for some of them. It was all done clandestinely. We did not know when it would happen and the ANC pretended as if they did not know about it. There were no celebrations afterwards and we would only discover it the following day when we were going to play soccer and found that most of the youngsters were not there.

They had been circumcised by Mgabela – in small groups together. They would stay in the cell the following day or two – no water, their wounds being dressed by Mgabela, sometimes suffering from severe pain. All of this was done with the connivance of the person in charge of the hospital. (Coetzee et al. 2004:39-47)

The emphasis above is on on-going discussions among the prisoners of conscience over the entire period of three decades of political incarceration. It underlines the fact that any major event or happening on the island would have been discussed within the confined areas of the communal cells. Every political prisoner would have known about the circumcisions. The physical presence of the circumcised men, recovering from their wounds, inevitably lead to analyses, explanations and justifications. It speaks for itself that Johnson Malcomess Mgabela, who was the official *ingcibi* (the person who performs traditional male circumcision), would have been an active discussant with reference to this age-old rite to full manhood. He undoubtedly narrated at numerous occasions the way in which it had been performed as well as the deeper meanings of this tradition.

The narrative

The following is an exact transcription of a part of the life story of Johnson Malcomess Mgabela as related to me in East London, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa in January 1995. In this section Mr. Mgabela told me about the circumcisions that he performed on 361 young political prisoners on Robben Island. Circumcision forms part of traditional rites among many African communities. It marks the advent of adulthood and formalises the position of men within the power structures of adult society. A man who remains uncircumcised does not fall within the jurisdiction of adult authority. He can only be censored as a non-adult. Once circumcised, the man is regarded as an adult and has to abide by the disciplinary code set for adults. In the light of this, it was important for the Disciplinary Committee of the ANC that young, uncircumcised prisoners of conscience be circumcised. The South African Prison Services benefitted from the performance of this traditional rite – the impeccable way in which the DC kept order in the communal cells was widely accepted and praised.

It is not the purpose of this article to debate the significance and meaning of the requests for circumcision by young political prisoners of conscience on Robben Island. It might be that the young men merely desired a continuation of the traditional practice. It seems from Mr. Mgabela's account as if there is more to this: a desire to be fully integrated into what was proudly regarded as the group of political prisoners. The purpose of this article is to illustrate that memory is related to the thought processes of a particular individual, but cannot only be analysed as an individual act. Memory is also related to how minds work together and how their operations are structured by social factors. The account that follows is the memory of an individual, but needs to be read in its collective context.

When the life story of Johnson Malcomess Mgabela was published in *Plain Tales from Robben Island* (Coetzee 2000) it contained the first written account of the circumcision on Robben Island. It is therefore of extreme importance as a historical document. Raymond Suttner (2005:86) wrote that no former Robben Island prisoner with whom he has spoken "...appears to have been unaware of this practice." Those who shared a communal cell with Mr. Mgabela would undoubtedly have recognised his narrative:

JKC: No, how many did you circumcise?

JMM: Three hundred and sixty one.

JKC: Three hundred and sixty one, altogether?

JMM: Total number. Now the last – I said: “No, I am going to stop now because I am going out now.” These people were flocking here in 1976 – you see, all these school boys were arrested. They said they want to go and be circumcised by that old man. When they asked Mr. Hattingh, the Head of the jail, he said: “Look we can send you to hospital”. They said: “No, no.” He said: “Okay, I will change you this side – to there – you won’t tell us tomorrow who has cut you.”

JKC: So during all these years – did the prison authorities know that it was you?

JMM: They didn’t know that it was me, till late 1981. But, they suspected. The only chap that knew was Schoeman.

JKC: So did Schoeman know?

JMM: Schoeman knew this because he said: “Mgabela stop this thing because there was a leak somewhere. I heard these boys discussing somebody.” I said: “Stop.” But, Schoeman is a very, very kind somebody and he said: “Stop that nonsense. *Luister hierso, ek gaan jou donder, sommer nou.*” [Listen here, I’m gonna bash you right now.]

JKC: Did Schoeman say that to you?

JMM: I know him – he told all those warders there. Some of the warders would get information. They would discuss this in front of Schoeman. [There is somebody there who will cut – circumcise.] Schoeman said: “*Luister hierso, fok jou man.*” [Listen here, fuck you man.]

JKC: Schoeman told the other warders?

JMM: Yeah, the warders, he told them: “Stop that nonsense. You have got nothing to do with that. I am working in the hospital.” And then it was quiet because Schoeman is good this side. Then they stopped it. Schoeman came to me he said: “Hey! you must be careful. Somebody told the warders there is circumcision and they suspect you.” But, nobody could come and say: “You did this.” Yeah. So all that stuff came out because of this man. I helped him. The warder said [Mr. Hattingh is the Head]: “Well you must write down the report.” I started writing that report. Yeah, I made a political statement then in my report. Now in the morning, I met Captain Hattingh [he is the Head of the prison]. He said: “*Kom saam.*” [Come along.] He took me to the corner – where nobody was seeing me. He said: “Look, I wish – I want to see Pretoria penetrate your report.” That was the first day that I had seen him in a long time. “I will never penetrate your report.”

JKC: What did he mean by that?

JMM: He said: “You are not supposed to cut anybody in jail.” But, I saw trouble between prisoners and warders where the warder was carrying the gun and he wanted to shoot the prisoner. I know what the purpose of that was because this young boy never reported to anybody because he was supposed to be circumcised before time. It is the time now when he is supposed to be a man. By a certain time [when a boy reaches eighteen] he must be circumcised.

JKC: And if he is not circumcised?

JMM: He can’t think correctly.

JKC: So then he is not a man yet, not an adult, he can’t act like a grown up?

JMM: Correct.

JKC: And you pointed that out in your report?

JMM: I pointed that out in my report. The way it was heading I wanted that point to penetrate to Pretoria, but I wrote an accompanying report.

I said to him: “I know in jail there is only one committee to discipline the people. What I notice, parliament can’t stop this thing. It is our custom. Secondly, Pretoria is in trouble, when a warder is shooting people all over the world where South Africa is wrong in this and this and this, whereas I myself can secure this danger in time. That is why today, I said: «Let me circumcise these boys here to put them into the correct line. Because government can’t put them in the correct line because they don’t know that it is a question of circumcision.»”

The interpretation of the data contained in this narrative, will be related to the life-world of the narrator as well as to his experiences. These lived experiences became part of the narrator’s consciousness and played a role in the way reality is interpreted. The narrative that we’ll take as a point of departure in this article relates both to the experience of external social circumstances and to the way in which these external circumstances were internalised, and stored as personal and individual memory. Memory is not purely individual reflection – it is mostly shaped by a broader context and by other people. The article thus touches on memory as an intersubjectively constructed issue (cf. Coetzee and Rau 2009) and not merely as the reflection on a personally internalised matter.

The narrative referred to in this article was undoubtedly shaped by larger social, political and cultural narratives. It is not only an individualised, personal experience, but displays broader experiential richness and reflectiveness. Even though this is the case, it remains an incomplete story – experience, consciousness and subjectivity cannot be expressed in a final and perfect way. Having said that, it remains that language is the most important medium through which we bring forth our reflections on the past. The narrative study of lives and its continuous dependence on the recall of memory, is done through language. Memory does not bring forth an automatic and exact reproduction of events and experiences. The narrative account of events and experiences are negotiated and produced by language. Narrating memory coincides very closely with the ability to express oneself in language. And the ability to employ words, concepts and denominators will expand in proportion to the number of opportunities for recall – the more you relate a particular event, the easier it becomes to describe it in detail.

We can accept that the narrative above, conveyed to me by Johnson Malcomess Mgabela, was not merely an *impromptu* series of utterances, inspired by the moment. It is most likely that the narrative had grown and that it got its shape over time. A similar account as the one given to me undoubtedly had been repeated, discussed and elaborated on at numerous occasions. The very nature of the issue under discussion, namely the story of the involvement of the performer of the traditional rite that most of those arrested, tried, sentenced and incarcerated under the same charge went through, must have lead to forthright and frequent discussions. And, as pointed out above, the ethos of the Robben Island imprisonment invariably invited elaborate discussions.

Constructing the text and constructing meaning

In January 1995, shortly after the first democratically elected government came into power under the leadership of fellow former political prisoner Nelson Mandela, Johnson Malcomess Mgabela agreed to tell me his life story. At that point, his remarkable narrative of the circumcisions on Robben Island hadn’t been documented – and he might even have been regarded as an unlikely author in the history of his

country. Writing up his narrative is, however, a clear example of the democratisation of knowledge – particularly through the medium of oral history. The narrative study of lives allows for individual stories to be told, each with its own experience of reality, each portraying a unique profile of everyday life. Through the narrative study of lives an individual contributes a separate strand that can find its place in the broad tapestry of everyday life. Mr. Mgabela's story was recorded and subsequently transcribed. Although the aural sounds were turned into words on a page, without the same tone, volume and rhythm of speech as the original narration, a window into the history of a period of repression was opened. This window might not be clear, but it opens the possibility for us to extract meaning and to make sense of his life experiences as well as the experiences of others.

Daniel Schacter argues that it is a myth that memories are snapshots of past life events, "...literally and passively recorded" (1996:5). Memories are not stored in our minds and therefore retrievable like exact data sets on a computer. Remembering is hardly ever a literal and exact reproduction of events or ideas. By recording the account of the eye-witness, the participant, the one who experienced the particular moment, we still only offer a partial rendering, a subjective portrait from a particular angle of vision (Pachter 1981:91). Yes, the aim is "...interviewing the eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction" (Perks and Thompson 1998:x), but in reality, our reconstruction reflects the principle of selectivity inevitably present in both narrator and biographer. Cross-examining during legal court procedures often reveals that people tend to forget the context, exact features, exact words and exact factual surroundings. We mostly remember the gist of events and even when it comes to the gist of what we remember it may be that there is little coincidence in what different people would regard as the gist of a shared experience.

What people tell us in their narratives does not constitute an exact replication. So-called "objective," factual elements of past experiences are often forgotten or re-arranged in our memories, or assessed in different ways at different times, or put aside, or ignored, or actively repressed; how much more will it happen in as far as those memories which have been closely mixed with ideology and political involvement. Some memories, in particular those that have been frequently repeated, do seem to obtain stability. The question remains, however: Should memories be accepted as true and accurate simply because they appear to be vivid and clear and often repeated?

Re-membering

From the above it is clear that memory consists of the recall and representation of information, events and experiences. Memory is therefore an attempt at recollection – literally an attempt at putting together bits of information. Memory as recollection implies a reconstruction of events and of information about events. It is in this sense that the verb 'to remember' is employed when we analyse the narrative above. John Malcomess Mgabela's narrative re-members the shards of the past and put them together into a body of information and reconstructed events. When telling me about the circumcisions on Robben Island he takes the pieces of what happened and the bits of information available and he integrates them into a recollection or reconstruction of events. Although he is the main actor in his narrative, it is not his story (cf. history) only. Not only does an individual have a memory, his narrative is part of history. In addition to his memory of the information and experiences, there is

also a collective memory of Robben Island. It forms part of the culture of repression and the culture of liberation of South Africa. When Mr. Mgabela told me his life story he narrated and re-membered a part of the history of Robben Island and of South Africa.

The narrative above is therefore related to loyalty, to ideology and to culture. The way in which we evaluate events plays a role in our recollections. Johnson Malcomess Mgabela was exposed to, and carried the scars of powerful historical forces. Embedded in his story are broader socio-political struggles; a life dedicated to an ideal. Any greater sacrifice is hardly to be imagined: forced to leave school at the age of 12, humiliated by an unjust system, leading by example in various defiance campaigns, a liberation fighter and underground military commander enthusiastically hunted by the Security Police and 18 years incarcerated on an island 1000 kilometres from home (Coetzee et al. 2004:51-59). When, shortly after the long fought for political victory of 1994, he re-membered and re-collected the circumcisions of 361 young political prisoners on Robben Island, it is not possible to expect an objective reproduction of facts on events and experiences. Re-membering and re-collecting these events and experiences coincide with joy and sadness, sacrifice and victory, anger and reconciliation, forgiveness and revenge. Trauma memories bring forth a complex mixture of emotions. Trauma memories are likewise linked to various motives: rationalising and justifying one's own choices and actions are not least of these.

When memory is closely linked to shared and collective experiences, it is not a single reflective process. The fact that it is shared contributes to the discourse on what is re-membered and how it is recollected. The close-knit society on Robben Island and the enforced sharing of even the most mundane happenings lead to a particular way of remembering. Johnson Malcomess Mgabela undoubtedly told his story of circumcision on Robben Island to very many before sitting down with me for our various meetings during the early part of 1995. It is the kind of story that cries out to be heard at any gathering where the experience of 18 years of incarceration on the notorious prison island was brought up. Jerome Bruner (1987:31) refers to this kind of narrative when he writes: "I believe that the ways of telling stories and the ways of conceptualising that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory..." The Durkheimian sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs (1992:43), talks about social frameworks for life stories, which help to organise these stories and make them more accessible. It is not as if a narrative develops or evolves that is "disconnected from actual thought processes of any particular person" (Fentress and Wickham 1992:1). But, one has to account for "...the different ways in which the ideas of individuals are influenced by the groups to which they belong" (Burke 1989:98). Jeffrey K. Olick (1999:334) also refers to the work of Halbwachs who goes as far as saying that it is impossible for individuals to remember coherently and persistently outside of their group contexts. Václav Havel describes in a similar way how the collective dimension of memory has an impact on the individual level when people recall life experiences:

[t]wenty or thirty years ago, in the army, we had a lot of obscure adventures, and years later we tell them at parties, and suddenly we realise that those two very difficult years of our lives have become lumped together into a few episodes that have lodged in our memory in a standardised form, and are always told in a standardised way, in the same words. But, in fact, that lump of memories has nothing whatsoever to do with our experience of those two years in the army and what it has made of us. (1990:43)

Given these ideas on the structuring of narrative, we can accept that it is no different in the case of J.M. Mgabela. After all those years, he related part of the story as a dialogue between him and Schoeman, the warder in charge of the hospital and between him and Hattingh, the Head of the prison. Part of his narrative was in the form of a dialogue during which he said: "Pretoria is in trouble, when a warder is shooting people...whereas I myself can secure this danger in time." After having repeated his story (or, for that matter, history) a few times, recipes for structuring the narrative, for re-membering information and experiences, are constructed. Particular events are selected and these events start taking on a life of their own. The autobiographical dimension of his memory relates to those events that he experienced himself (the 361 circumcisions performed within the concrete environment of the Robben Island prison). But, the autobiographical part becomes entangled with the collective representations of the collective experiences gained through political discussions, strong solidarity and shared views on repression and liberation. The selected events consist of real people, real experiences, real occurrences, a real world – factually correct features. These objective facts are mapped and charted in the narrative and their validity can be tested.

When Johnson Malcomess Mgabela tells me that he circumcised 361 young political prisoners on Robben Island I accept that as a fact. When he tells me that the circumcision puts "these boys here...into the correct line," he refers to an opinion that comes from his assessment (an assessment that might have been shared by other leaders). Therefore, he adds a layer of meaning to the fact/truth of his narrative. His group membership (mainly based on political loyalty) provides an additional set of materials for memory, prodding him to include pronouncements and judgments that might not have been experienced in that specific way (cf. Olick 1999:335). As a sociologist using the biographical method, I strive to give the real and objective details of this real, objective person (J.M. Mgabela) as I'm presenting him as the author in the text. I have to work with both layers of meaning – the objective and the subjective. By presenting this person as the author of the narrative, I'm referring the readers to a real person in terms of words that also relate to other dimensions of reality and therefore to other levels of truth and fact. The dividing line between objective markers and subjective interpretation is most of the time blurred. This is the case because when someone tells me their story, they dig over the past, they re-collect and re-member, they make sense of their past. Their life story is embedded in a broad environment of assumptions, experiences, structures and beliefs. Pierre Bourdieu refers to this broad environment as his *habitus* "...the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations" (1977:72).

Something happens to experiences on their way to becoming memory. Memory does not constitute pure recall. When J.M. Mgabela recalls the events during which the circumcisions were performed his memory is refracted, or gradually being added to, through layer upon layer of personal experiences, shared realities, ideologies and political developments. It is unlikely that he would have had the discussion with the Head of the Prison (Hattingh) in the way he described it. But, it takes nothing away from his narrative and from the fact that the circumcisions took place and contributed to the maintenance of discipline among the predominantly ANC aligned political prisoners and contributed to order between the prison authorities and prisoners.

Conclusion

The narrative discussed in this article illustrates the effect of intersubjective and collective factors on the process of remembering. The intersubjective dimensions refer to the patterns of meaning that developed between the prisoners of conscience on Robben Island. They shared political convictions, were experiencing similar deprivations and developed a collective discourse of liberation and moral victory. The example of memory that I used in this article is an individual's account of events and experiences. But, it is at the same time based on a collective consciousness and a shared reality. The work of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2006) illustrates how the politics of commemoration comes about. When trauma is experienced collectively it becomes a socially mediated attribution. An individual's memory of the shared trauma is seldom a representation in individual terms – it contains significant elements of collective consciousness.

The very close contact between these former Robben Island political prisoners provided opportunities to exchange ideas and to relish their loyalty to a shared cause, a shared culture and the belief that they actively contributed to the liberation of their people. The close contact between them over such a long period of time brought about that their memories of the years spent together can not only be a personal recollection. Memory also exists through what has been shared with others. When claimed by individuals as their own, shared memories become integrated into their personal narratives. Yes, each individual will remember in a unique way, but in remembering "...we are re-fashioning the same past differently, making it to be different in its very self-sameness" (Radstone 2000:13).

In the unique memory of each individual are shared influences that we, as researchers, need to identify, re-interpret and unpack. In this regard this article supports an approach to research on memory where links are made between the particularities and the generalities of each context within which memory takes place. This idea is elaborated on in a book edited by Jeffrey K. Olick (2003). As researchers, we should not underestimate the role of social context. Neither the researcher nor the research subject are entirely objective in the research process. The text at our disposal is not an exact copy reflecting information and knowledge. An important way in which we can improve the quality of qualitative research is by employing the principle of reflexivity.

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Citation

Coetzee, Jan K. 2011. "Narrating Memory: Weighing up the Testimony." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. VII Issue 3. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php).