

“TALKING AND LISTENING ABOUT SUFFERING”: TOOLKIT FOR INTERVIEWERS

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I left the apartment of my narrator and started to breathe heavily. After a relatively short interview, I felt exhausted and empty. That conversation took me, a recently graduated sociologist and young interviewer, many intellectual and emotional resources. I was trained to behave appropriately: listen, respect, empathize, support, and do my best to create a situation where the narrator feels better after the interview; then, he or she felt before it. At the same time, I was not prepared to experience the limits of my psychological investment. I called my partner and cried; I do not remember how I got home that evening. The first thing I did was to take a shower. Then I went out to see my friends and have a beer. Almost a decade later, when I recalled this situation during the workshop “Talking and Listening About Suffering,” I understand that so many things in my practice are done subconsciously to restore and preserve psychological health. And so many things could be done better when we know about them and prepare in advance.

The idea of the mentioned workshop was born during one of Warsaw’s meetings, organized by Anna Wylegała within a frame of a research project “Social Anthropology of Filling the Void: Poland and Ukraine After the Second World War.” Participants of the meeting, practicing interviewers, discussed several situations from their fieldwork and admitted that as we are collecting stories about violence and death, we often need support from each other – in the form of debriefing right after the interviews. As a peer group, we reflect on these experiences from a longer perspective. As psychotherapists have their supervisors

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and are required to attend the peer sessions regularly, oral historians also need this kind of support. Because they help other people reconcile with their past (often at the cost of their resources) through creating an environment similar to therapy – storytelling could have a healing effect. Each of us copes differently and builds unique mechanisms to distance and recover psychologically; however, we could rely on the well-developed psychotherapy apparatus and use its tools to help ourselves.

The workshop “Talking and Listening About Suffering” was organized by the Center for Urban History (Lviv, Ukraine) within the series of seminars “(Re) making a Story.” We invited participants to reflect on the challenges faced by researchers dealing with the conflicting past with the oral history method’s help. The main focus of this discussion was on psychological wellbeing and how it could be maintained and secured. We assumed the imaginable traumatization of a person whose work is to record and analyze stories about violence – and in the case of an oral history of World War II, ethnic cleansings, post-war forced migrations, and political prosecutions, it is precisely the case. Therefore, we invited to moderation a person with experience in helping the veterans of the ongoing war in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine and supervising psychotherapists. The group was facilitated by Oksana Nakonechna – a trauma therapist and coordinator of the Lviv Crisis Psychological Service. She works within the frame of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), a psychotherapy treatment that was initially designed to alleviate the distress associated with traumatic memories (definition according to EMDR Institute, Inc.), and chairs the Board EMDR Ukraine. This essay is not exactly a review of this workshop – it is a brief introduction of several instructions and techniques, which (I confidence) could be helpful for interviewers working in the field of oral history and recording life narratives related to the topics of suffering.

Even when we discussed the issue of trauma, it is essential to emphasize that not everybody is traumatized – both from the cohort of people who experienced intense distress and the ones who are listening about it. The possibility to cope with traumatic memories depends on a lot of issues. Among them the character of the event itself, on individual limitations and psychological resources of a specific person, and on the level of support from the social environment (from family and friends to more general circles, for instance, the ways of media-representation of specific events and people who suffered because of them, recognition of these experiences by the state, etc.). Considering this, we can discuss the ways of maintaining the psychological stability of interviewers in more detail.

Before any fieldwork, it is essential to check if we have enough resources to engage in deep, empathic conversations. There is no need to say that it is highly non-recommended to conduct interviews during a personal crisis. People who

are studying specific periods generally know what they might hear in life stories. However, introductory training for interviewers involved in the recording could still be beneficial. Their team could discuss different strategies and possible reactions and share contacts if somebody needed immediate help (still, you can call your partner, as I did, but it is too good to have a number of a specialist).

We might hear something that provokes our fears or anxieties; thus, detailed self-reflection is crucial. Knowing what might trigger emotional reactions contributes to the establishment of a coping mechanism. Also, it is necessary to remember the interviewer's role and keep in mind the purpose of the dialogue. In terms of time, space, and aims, framing the conversation helps develop a safe distance and not be influenced (or manipulated) by our storytellers' emotions in our academic and private lives. Crying while talking with the narrator and providing him or her with emotional support is normal unless part of the interview situation. As oral historians, we have a duty not to harm, but we are also limited in our possibilities to help – our toolkit includes active listening and empathy. Sometimes interviewers have a feeling of guilt before the narrators because they wanted to give them more. Sometimes narrators could be manipulative and take up control over the conversation. Therefore, setting up a frame for ourselves and our storytellers could protect our emotional wellbeing.

There are specific techniques that involve our bodies to reduce stress during the interview. When triggered by some episodes or become emotionally broken, we can practice grounding – return to the situation here-and-now, with its smells, colors, tactile feelings. It diminishes us from the past story and focuses on the current conversation. Deep, slow, and focused breathing also helps to calm down. During the break or after the interview, when the interviewer is left alone, he or she can use "the Butterfly Hug." It is a method for quick self-administered bilateral stimulation, therapeutic intervention in the situation of stress developed by Lucina Artigas during her work with the survivors of Hurricane Pauline in Mexico in 1998. The number of video instructions is available on YouTube.

After the long day of interviewing is over and we feel overwhelmed with emotions, it is good to have the so-called "Extreme suitcase" – individually tested and proven-to-be-effective activities to quickly recover our psychological resources. I intuitively pulled something out of this suitcase in the situation described initially – support from a loved one, shower, and pint of beer with friends. After several self-observations, I know that a long walk or swimming is also beneficial (during the workshop, Oksana Nakonechna explained how it worked on the level of brain processes and how it was related to bilateral stimulation). Listening to music, drawing, reading fiction, playing with kids, watching TV series, meditation, embroidering, dancing, cooking, eating something special, and shopping are various possibilities. It is good to know in advance

what could help. And last but not least, after the fieldwork, it is helpful to make a self-examination questionnaire (PTSS-10). And, if necessary, your symptoms should be consulted with a psychologist or psychotherapist.

From a long-time perspective, we can reduce anxiety and other adverse effects from constant emotional involvement into listening about suffering from applying the multidimensional model «Basic PH.» According to it, there are six channels of coping with the crisis: belief (in God, a miracle, ourselves), affect (overcoming the stress through positive emotions), social (role of communication and support from others), imagination (creativity), cognition (understanding the crisis, its logical explanation and finding a way out), and physical (the activity of the body, appeal to the senses – touch, taste, smell, sight, hearing). Different people use different resources to find inner stability, and after self-reflection, the interviewer can see the strategy which is the best suitable for them. To be empathic and not harm our storytellers, we have to be healthy and preserve our emotional wellbeing.