

A framework for receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma

By David Denborough

David Denborough works as staff writer at Dulwich Centre Publications. He is the author and editor of a number of books including: *Beyond the Prison: Gathering dreams of freedom* (Dulwich Centre Publications, 1995).

This paper seeks to provide a framework for receiving and documenting the testimonies of those who have been subjected to trauma, violence and abuse. It is a framework designed to make it possible to receive and document testimonies in ways that are not re-traumatising and that, in fact, contribute to redressing the effects of trauma in a person's life. The testimonies that are created can then be used for broader purposes.

Keywords: testimony, abuse, trauma, violence, documentation

There are many different contexts in which testimonies of trauma are received and documented. Therapists may invite those who consult with them to re-tell the stories of abuse or trauma that they have been subjected to, and these may be recorded in case files and/or in therapeutic letters or documents. The legal system requires the 'taking of testimonies' from those seeking legal redress and these are documented in particular ways. And in different parts of the world, especially those where human rights violations are widespread, various organisations are documenting the testimonies of those who seek counselling assistance¹. They are doing so in the hope that this will provide some relief to the person's experience of the trauma, and also so that these testimonies can be used for broader purposes – to raise awareness of human rights violations at the United Nations, or in the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

Over the past few years, I have spoken with a wide range of people involved in each of these different domains – with therapists and lawyers, and with workers in trauma and torture centres and women's rights centres, in Bangladesh, Lebanon, South Africa, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Australia, and elsewhere. The conversations we have shared about receiving and documenting testimonies have been startling. A number of human rights organisations have stopped taking testimonies entirely because they realised that they had been inadvertently re-traumatising the very people they were seeking to assist. And a range of therapists told alarming stories of how their work with a particular person (often women) was derailed through the person's involvement in a legal proceeding. The act of publicly re-telling their story of trauma in particular ways had led to a significant resurgence of despair and hopelessness in these people's lives. This paper has been written in response to these conversations.

It has also been written in the context of my work as staff writer at Dulwich Centre Publications. Part of this work involves interviewing and documenting the stories of individuals and communities who have experienced significant trauma. Significantly, we do more than only document the experience of trauma. We also document the ways in which these individuals and communities have responded to this trauma, their

initiatives, their acts and skills of resistance and healing, their hopes and values, and the histories of these hopes and values. As a result, the testimonies that are created can be understood to be 'double-storied testimonies'².

Mostly this work involves documenting stories in the written word. But on various occasions we work in collaboration with people who have been subjected to considerable abuse in order for them to be able to re-tell their experiences in public settings, such as international conferences, in ways that will involve the sharing of their particular knowledge and skills³. Sometimes testimonies can also be documented in song⁴.

This paper seeks to provide a possible framework for receiving and documenting the testimonies of those who have been subjected to trauma, violence and abuse. It's my hope that this framework will assist others to receive and document testimonies in ways that are not re-traumatising and that, in fact, contribute to redressing the effects of trauma in the person's life. The documents that are created can then be used for broader purposes including:

- to share with others who have been through similar experiences;
- to educate professionals about the skills and knowledge of those who have survived traumatic experiences;
- to raise community awareness about the effects of trauma and violence in order to play a part in reducing the likelihood of further abuses;
- to facilitate broader political/community action;
- to seek forms of individual or social acknowledgement;
- to seek formal redress/justice.

It is my experience that it is possible to create contexts in which the receiving and documentation of testimonies can provide significant relief and comfort to the individual or community concerned, and at the same time produce powerful documentation which can be used for all the purposes listed above.

AN EASY-TO-USE FRAMEWORK

In the following pages I have deliberately tried to describe a very easy-to-use framework⁵. In visiting various human rights centres in different parts of the

world, I have come to realise that the people who are taking these testimonies have often received no formal training in this area. Significantly, they bring with them their own knowledge and experience of trauma and surviving trauma. They bring with them a profound commitment to the people who walk in the doors to meet with them. It is my sincere hope that the framework provided below might be of relevance to their work. It is a framework that can be followed through in only three meetings because I have been told that this is sometimes the maximum length of time that is available.

Four key hopes have guided the development of this framework for receiving and documenting testimonies related to experiences of trauma. Firstly, to create a process of documenting people's testimonies that can be understood to be both political action and a contribution to therapeutic and community work. Secondly, to avoid re-traumatisation. Thirdly, to create a process of receiving and documenting testimonies that contributes to healing. Fourthly, to create richly described testimonies that can serve many purposes.

It is possible to create testimonies that document the abuse/torture/trauma that a person has been subject to, and also the ways in which they have resisted these abuses, held onto hopes, and reclaimed their lives from the effects of the trauma. These dual or double storied testimonies can be of significant benefit to the person who gives the testimony. They can also be shared with others who have been through similar experiences, used in training contexts, and used to raise awareness as forms of broader social and political action⁶.

A FRAMEWORK FOR RECEIVING TESTIMONIES IN RELATION TO EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA

I will now outline a step-by-step process in relation to receiving testimonies in relation to experiences of trauma. This process consists of:

- Preparing the person for the interview.
- Setting a context of care at the beginning of the interview.
- A three part interviewing process.
- Offering an acknowledgement / reflection at the end of the interview.

- Writing up the testimony.
- A second meeting with the person who gave the testimony.
- Follow-up.

Each of these steps will now be considered.

PREPARING THE PERSON FOR THE INTERVIEW

Preparing the person who is to give their testimony is significant in itself. Prior to someone giving their testimony they can be asked where and how would be best for them to be interviewed. They can be asked if they would like to bring with them a friend, family member, and/or therapist. Where possible, a written invitation can be provided that describes the purpose of creating the testimony, why it will be significant, how it will contribute to the lives of others.

If the work is taking place in a context in which many of the people who give their testimonies will have been interrogated in the past, it can be significant for them to know prior to the interview who they will be meeting with and even to receive some of the questions beforehand. This can assist people to familiarise themselves with the kinds of questions to be asked, and how these differ radically from the questioning techniques associated with interrogation.

It is important for the person to know that, if there are any questions they do not wish to answer that this is completely okay, they can decide not to answer them, they can decide to take a break, or even stop the process entirely at any time. It can also be significant for them to receive detailed information about who will hear their testimony, who will read it, and how confidentiality will be maintained. If formal consent forms need to be considered, this is the time to do so. It is also relevant at this point to outline what follow-up, if any, will be provided⁷.

SETTING A CONTEXT OF CARE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INTERVIEW

When the actual interview begins, there are a number of practices of care that can make a significant difference to how the process is experienced by the person giving their testimony. For

instance, at the outset it can be acknowledged that this testimony will make a difference to others: that it will raise awareness; assist others who have been through similar experiences; and so on.

It can be acknowledged before the interview begins that the person who is about to give their testimony has been through traumatic experiences but also that they have survived the experience. It can be explained that this process of receiving testimonies involves speaking about both the effects of the trauma that they experienced, and also how they have been able to survive it – the skills and knowledge they have developed that they can pass onto others.

It can also be acknowledged that giving testimony like this is a very significant thing to do, that the conversation to be shared will touch upon different stories of the person's life. The person who is about to give their testimony can be consulted about how they could know if the conversation was getting to be too much, how they could let the interviewer know if this was the case, and what would be most helpful if this occurred. Certain options can be suggested, such as: taking a short break; having a cup of tea; having a smoke; taking a walk; having a moment's quiet; stopping for the time being and coming back another day; stopping altogether and not going through with the process; and so on. Collaboratively, the interviewer and the person who is to give their testimony can pre-empt any difficulties and develop some proposals as to ways to respond to these.

As part of this process, the interviewer can mention that they will regularly check-in with the person about how they are experiencing the interview, about whether it is going okay, whether it would be good to pause for a moment, or to continue, and so on.

A THREE PART INTERVIEWING PROCESS

I have often been asked to develop a standard interviewing format that could be used to receive testimonies from those who have experienced trauma. This can be important in order to be transparent about the process (and to gain acceptance amongst legal circles), and it is also reassuring to those who are new to receiving and documenting testimonies. I have outlined here the sorts of questions that can be included within a three part interview format.

Part One (setting a context)

- Can you share with us some of your hopes in giving this testimony today? Why have you decided to do this?
- What does this say about what is important to you, about what you care about and value in life?
- Have these things always been important to you? What is the history of this?
- Who would be least surprised to know that you have decided to give testimony today? Why? What do they know about you that would mean they wouldn't be surprised to see you here today?

Part Two (documenting the abuse/torture and its effects)

- Can you tell us about the trauma/torture that you were subject to? Did these abuses take different forms?
- During the time when you were being subjected to this injustice, how did you try to endure this? What did you try to think about? Were there any memories you tried to hold onto? Any dreams? What sustained you through these most awful times?
- Were there different ways that you tried to endure the different forms of torture/trauma?
- Why it is important to you for other people to know about this?
- What were the effects of these forms of trauma/torture in your life? What were the effects on you? On your relationships? On your family? On your community?
- What were some of the most difficult effects for you? Why were these the most difficult?
- Are there any ongoing effects of this trauma/torture in your life?

Part Three (eliciting stories of survival/resistance)

- At the beginning of this interview you spoke about those things that are important to you in your life (repeat whatever these were). How have you been able to keep in touch with these values, these hopes for your life, despite the abuses that you were subjected to?
- Have there been ways in which you have been able to reduce the effects of the traumas in your life? If so, how have you done this?

Are these ways of reducing the effects of trauma newly developed? Or have they been around in your life for some time? What is their history?

- Have there been particular people who have made a difference? If so, what is it that they have done or said that has been significant to you? Why was this significant to you?
- If someone else went through similar experiences to you, what suggestions would you offer them? What stories could you tell them that would convey some of the steps you have taken to reclaim your life from the effects of this trauma?

OFFERING AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT / REFLECTION AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

It makes a considerable difference to people who give testimony if, at the end of telling the stories of their experience, they receive a significant response from the interviewer⁸. This response can focus on the contribution that the person's testimony will make to others; how it has taught the interviewer something; how the ideas and knowledge the person has shared will be of assistance to others. This acknowledgement/reflection can focus on the skills that the person has described and the stories of how they have reclaimed aspects of their life⁹. If the interviewer is able to re-tell some of the key aspects of the testimony that were most significant to them; why these particular aspects resonated; what these aspects of the story of survival indicated to them about the values and beliefs of the person whose testimony has been described; and how hearing this testimony has in some way influenced them; how it will bring about some change in their own life, work or way of seeing the world; then this can make a significant difference to the experience of the person who has offered the testimony. Such reflections, which are also known as outsider-witness responses, can reinforce for the person who has offered their testimony that the experience of trauma was 'not for nothing' and, as well, that giving the testimony has been worthwhile and honourably received.

WRITING UP THE TESTIMONY

In writing up the testimony, it is important to keep in mind that the person who told their stories

will be offered an opportunity to read the document. In taking this into account, it makes a real difference if the documentation of the testimony balances the story of the torture/trauma with the story of the person's resistance/survival/healing. It is significant if these can have an equal focus.

In documenting the stories of trauma there are three key aspects to be included:

1. The events themselves, what the person was subject to.
2. The effects of these events. These effects can be traced in terms of the effects on the person and their sense of identity, the effects on their relationships, and the effects on the wider community.
3. The person's responses to the trauma and what these indicate in relation to the person's hopes, values and wishes for their life.

Even throughout the first half of the testimony, where the experiences of trauma are discussed, it is necessary to include the person's responses to the trauma. For instance, when someone has been imprisoned, there will have been ways in which they acted when in prison to try to keep up their spirits, or assist others, or memories they will have held onto, etc. Where it is appropriate, considerations of how they held onto hope and didn't give up on their lives can be included. Recording these responses to the trauma throughout the testimony is a significant part of the process of 'dual testimony'. This rich description of the person's practices of resistance and survival can then be extended in the second part of the documented testimony.

The second half of the written testimony is to contain stories of the skills and knowledge of the person about how they coped with the trauma, how they responded, what has been significant in reclaiming their life, what is significant to them now, and how they are taking steps to live the sort of life they want to live.

Creating written testimonies that can be used in a range of contexts (so the person themselves can read it; so that they can be sent to United Nations; so that other people and communities who have been through trauma find them helpful; so that they can be used to train professionals, etc.) can be challenging. However, when testimonies are created with only a professional or judicial audience in mind, this alters

the entire process of receiving and responding to testimony. It also alters the language that is used in the documentation. There are ways of writing up the effects of trauma that describe these vividly and powerfully, while not using psychiatric terms. Often this means that non-experts will engage more with the testimonies. Often it also means that the written testimony becomes increasingly meaningful to the person themselves. Formal documents can be created while still including, and staying true to, the actual words used by the person whose story is being told.

SECOND MEETING WITH THE PERSON WHO GAVE THE TESTIMONY

Once the testimony has been documented, it is then appropriate to arrange a second meeting with the person. In this second meeting the written testimony is shared with the person. She or he can be asked if the written document is accurate, and they can make any changes or additions in order for it to be finalised. They can also be asked for feedback on the process, whether it was a good process to give the testimony and to read the document, and if they have any suggestions that could make it better. They can be asked if there is anything they would like to pass on to others who are considering taking the step of giving testimony, that might help these people decide and/or prepare for the experience. The person can then be given a copy of their testimony and a certificate of acknowledgement¹⁰. This formal certificate explicitly acknowledges the person's actions and their contribution, through providing their testimony, to the lives of others. Where appropriate, a formal ceremony can be held in which the final version of testimony is read aloud in front of a group of key supportive figures and the certificate is presented.

FOLLOW-UP

Whatever follow-up has been arranged and described at the outset of the process needs to then be put in place. As mentioned earlier, it is of great importance that any commitment to follow-up that has been promised does take place.

REFLECTIONS ON THIS FRAMEWORK

The structure I have outlined here is only one possible framework for receiving and documenting

testimonies. It is a framework that would need to be adjusted depending upon the local cultural context. It does however, I believe, provide some helpful pointers as to ways of eliciting and recording testimonies of experiences of trauma that minimise the risk of re-traumatisation.

The process outlined above involves: preparing people for the interview in certain ways; asking certain questions; responding to the person's testimony in particular ways; and creating the document with attention to particular matters. Significantly, this process involves taking the document back to the person who has given the testimony and checking that it accurately records their experience. The process is completed by a ceremony of social acknowledgement for the person who has given their testimony. We have found that all these factors can create a context in which the documentation of a person's testimony can be profoundly healing.

BROADER CONSIDERATIONS

By no means do I wish to suggest that the task of revising the ways in which people's testimonies are sought and received will be easy. Within legal circles, there are powerful traditions and assumptions about what can constitute 'uncontaminated' testimony, about how some processes of questioning are 'neutral' while others are 'leading'. There are powerful conventions as to what sorts of testimonies are 'acceptable' and 'valid'. There are also conventions that encourage the telling and re-telling (and even the escalation) of stories of 'personal damage' incurred by trauma as the degree of 'damage' that has been done to a person routinely corresponds to the compensation that is then dispensed¹¹. All these conventions influence how testimonies are elicited and documented. All these conventions have real effects on the lives and identities of those who offer their testimonies.

There are also influential conventions within the therapy world in general, and the trauma field more particularly, that regularly invite people to recount their experiences in ways that re-traumatise, or that contribute to identity conclusions of damage, pathology or fragility. I am sure that readers of this journal are more than familiar with these conventions and so I will not further describe these here.

What I will mention, however, are a number of alternative voices appearing within the trauma field that may make it more likely for 'double-storied' testimonies to gain greater acceptance. The work of Summerfield (1995) and Becker (1995) for instance are drawing attention to the limitations of individualised western psychiatric knowledge in the field of trauma, are questioning the effects of victimology, and are inviting greater attention and respect to be paid to cultural meanings of both trauma and survival. Practitioners from non-western perspectives are also questioning psychological approaches to trauma work (see Arulampalam et al. 2005). At the same time, some feminist psychologists are rigorously questioning the ways in which women's stories/testimonies are attended to and re-told. While acknowledging the very real effects of violence and abuse, Sharon Lamb (1999) eloquently attempts to disrupt descriptions that locate women as passive victims, and to move discussions of abuse out from the realm of individual mental health and back into a political and social-cultural realm. She writes: 'In changing the focus, we would also no longer be interested merely in women telling their stories of abuse but rather would encourage their stories of everyday resistance.' (p.33)

Significantly, there are voices within the legal realm that are also seeking alternative ways forward. Indigenous communities here in Australia, in Canada and elsewhere, continue to propose alternatives to mainstream legal systems (see Behrendt 1995, 2002; Gatensky 1996; Kelly 2002). Within these alternatives there is room for a different sort of sharing of stories and testimonies. At the same time, feminist lawyers, writers and activists continue to draw attention to the real effects of certain legal and trial processes for women who have been subjected to abuse and violence¹². And in response to these sorts of experiences, some feminist psychologists and lawyers are examining the possibilities and hazards of alternative community-based forms of justice in relation to crimes of violence against women. Two invigorating examples of such feminist explorations include Koss (2000) and Rubin (2003).

It is my hope that providing this alternative framework for receiving and documenting testimonies can contribute in some small way to these continuing attempts to find alternative ways of

responding to experiences of trauma and violence. I hope that this framework may provide a basis for practitioners, whether therapists, community workers, lawyers, or activists, to develop their own ways of receiving and documenting testimonies that do not re-traumatise those whose stories are being shared, that instead honour the richness of these 'dual testimonies', and that enable these testimonies to be shared widely.

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NOTES

- ¹ Some of this work has been influenced by the work of Chilean psychologists Cienfuegos & Monelli (1983) and the work of Agger & Jensen (1990) and Herman (1992). Other testimonies are being documented according to strict legal frameworks provided by the United Nations or International Criminal Court in the Hague.
- ² See the work of Michael White (2004) for explanations of the significance of eliciting double-stories in relation to experiences of trauma.
- ³ At the end of this paper a list is provided of examples of these double-storied testimonies in relation to experiences of trauma.
- ⁴ See Denborough (2002).
- ⁵ In order to ensure that this framework is easy to engage with, I have not included within it some of the other key narrative therapy concepts that can be highly relevant in this area of trauma work. For instance, I have not included descriptions of the use of the notion of the 'absent but implicit' (see White 2000). I have also written this framework as if it is to be used with individuals. The same framework, however, can be used to document the testimonies of groups or communities.
- ⁶ Significantly, these sorts of dual testimonies are much more engaging for readers than single-storied accounts of trauma. Whereas outside audiences are likely to only read a small number of testimonies that only tell the story of the trauma, if double stories can be told, the testimonies often begin to have a life of their own and

are much more widely distributed. The influence of the testimonies in creating broader change is therefore much greater.

- ⁷ What is of critical importance is that the process is transparent and that no promises are made that will not be able to be kept. Raising expectations beyond that which will be able to be delivered is very unhelpful.
- ⁸ In some circumstances it might be easier or more appropriate for a third person or persons to offer this reflection when the giving of testimony is complete. Involving others who have been through similar traumatic experiences in this role can be significant.
- ⁹ There is a wealth of literature about these sorts of outsider-witness responses and what makes it more likely for these to resonate and be experienced as acknowledging by the person who has given the testimony. For further information about these sorts of acknowledging responses see Michael White's descriptions of outsider-witness responses (1999).
- ¹⁰ In some circumstances, it may not be safe for people to possess a certificate that acknowledges their testimony to an official organisation. If this is the case, an alternative form of acknowledgement can be created, one that does not explicitly refer to the fact that the person has given testimony but instead acknowledges certain attributes and contributions that the person has made.
- ¹¹ Basing compensation on degrees of damage done to a person is only one possible configuration of justice. Alternative methods could include linking compensation payments to categories of injustice done, rather than damage done. While the development of such categories of injustice would be complex and fraught, it could provide an antidote to people needing to prove the degree of damage they have sustained in order to receive compensation which runs the risk of escalating distress and prioritising the re-telling of single-storied accounts of trauma.
- ¹² For instance, here in Australia, the Department for Women has drawn attention to the distress caused to women by sexual assault trial processes:

In 65% of trials there were, on average, two interruptions to evidence because of the distress suffered by complainants. This occurred more often for complainants with disabilities and complainants from Aboriginal communities. (1996, p.4)

More recently, Dr Mary Heath (2005) has illustrated the continuing very real effects of certain legal processes on the lives of women who have been sexually assaulted:

The very systems that Australia has implemented to respond to criminal conduct are still judged inappropriate or unusable by many people who are sexually assaulted yet never report their experiences to the police ... Those who do use the criminal justice system continue to find it traumatising, humiliating and distressing ... The process does not adequately recognise and respect the community service that complainant witnesses provide in reporting offences and participating in trials ... (p.31)

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EXAMPLES OF DOUBLE-STORIED TESTIMONIES

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