



# Working with victims of police brutality: Conducting and documenting multistoried interviews

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## Abstract

It can be difficult to find opportunities to tell and reconsider stories of police or state violence. Speaking out can pose a risk to the person, particularly if the story might connect them to protests or persecuted groups. When a person does tell a story of police brutality, it is likely that they will more richly describe the violence they have experienced than the ways they responded and continue to respond to that violence. This paper reflects on particular considerations when working with people who have experienced or been affected by police brutality. It offers a structured series of questions for inviting double-storied testimonies that attend to both the violence and the person's responses to the violence. One of the effects of state violence is to separate people from movements, so this paper has a particular focus on how people maintain connection to values that are important to them, and to social movements that seek to further these values.

**Key words:** *police; violence; protest; social movements; narrative practice; documentation; testimony*

I moved to Australia at the beginning of 2020, just a few months after the social uprising of October 2019 in Chile. I found myself talking with colleagues from different backgrounds about the events that had been occurring in Chile, and to my surprise, there were clear resonances between our stories and experiences. After hearing stories from colleagues and friends from Australia, Hong Kong, Palestine and elsewhere, I came to the idea of developing a self-published magazine containing testimonies of people affected by police or state violence. In this article I describe how I conducted and documented double-storied interviews with people who had been subject to police brutality to produce this magazine, focusing on my interview with Ailin as an example.

## Inviting participants

People who had been affected by police brutality were invited through several online platforms to participate in an interview over a video-call service. In some territories, having an online conversation could pose a threat or lead to being targeted by the police, so people were also offered the option of writing their own story. People taking this option were offered the following narrative-informed questions:

- A. First, would you tell us something about yourself? How would you like to be introduced? Is there anything about you that you would like the readers of this story to know? Remember that all the information you provide will be anonymous, and you can provide as much or little information as you want and/or consider to be safe.
- B. Why have you decided to share your story?
- C. What does the reason for deciding to tell your story say about what is important to you? Has anyone informed these reasons?
- D. Do you think that anyone would be surprised that you have chosen to share your story today? Why?
- E. Have you or your community experienced a situation of police brutality?
- F. Is there a story that you would like to share about police brutality? Where did it happen? How did it happen?

- G. What were you thinking while this was happening? How did you respond or react to that situation?
- H. What effects did those actions have? In what ways do you think these actions were trying to protect what was important to you at that moment?
- I. In your first answers, you mentioned things relevant to you in life. Could you describe how it has been possible for you to keep a connection with these hopes and values, despite the police brutality?
- J. In what ways has this episode affected your community (or friends and family)? In what ways have you responded to that situation?
- K. If other people were to go through a similar experience to yours, is there any suggestion you would give to them?

Question A invites people to begin their storytelling from a preferred territory of identity. Question B provides an opportunity to name and take a stance on social injustice. With question C, people are invited to revise the membership of their association of life in relation to that social injustice. Questions C and D are inspired by re-membering conversations (White, 2007).

The questions were presented in this order so that people could begin their storytelling from their preferred territory of identity, and so they could invite significant figures in their lives to accompany them through the narration. Questions G and H invite focus and slow time on the moments in which the person experienced police brutality and cast some light into their responses and what they were trying to protect. A similar pattern of questions was used with people who chose to be interviewed.

## Welcoming with a context of care

For those choosing to be interviewed, I began our conversations by setting a context of care. This was inspired by Barbara Wingard's ideas about the difference that practices of welcome can make, and the ways that these practices can invite collaboration (in Wingard & Lee, 2013). It was also informed by David Denborough's (2005) ideas on the ways we can create a context of care. I began by thanking the person for participating in this project, despite the pain that talking about the experience of

police brutality may bring. I also acknowledged and invited the person to honour all the victims of police brutality or state repression of any kind by speaking up and offering a glimpse of police violence to those who have not experienced it, as well as contributing to others who may be going through a similar situation.

A context of care is something that was important to maintain throughout the interviews and not just at the beginning. I checked every once in a while with the person to see how they were feeling. For example, I would ask: How are we going so far? How is this conversation going for you? Would it be okay if I keep asking questions? Would you like to take a break from this conversation? Is there something I have not asked that you think is relevant for me to know? Is this interesting for you? Is there something that you would rather we focus on? These questions also follow the narrative principle of collaboration. As the person conducting the interview, the questions I asked became like small steppingstones on the path we were tracing together. Each question could open new possibilities for the conversation but close others, so it was important to check the preferences of the person who was being interviewed to make sure I was following their interests (Morgan, 2000; White, 2003).

## Interviewing Ailin

Ailin was a 27-year-old Chilean woman who contacted me to be a part of this project. We met up using a video-call service. At the beginning of the conversation with Ailin, we discussed some of the risks of being part of this project. Ailin decided that she did not want to be anonymous because censorship has taken up too much space in her family for too long. I then asked Ailin how she would like to be introduced. She responded that she would define herself as 'a woman who is in love with community work, and the spaces that seek to promote social justice as a political act'. She said she was 'a follower of the feminist movement, with an important family history regarding police brutality during the 1973 dictatorship in Chile'. Ailin also described herself as a 'psychologist who considers that personal fights are a part of our social identity that are always striving for human dignity'.

## Beginning the storytelling from a preferred territory of identity

As Ailin began telling me about her family's history, she also spoke about the self-censorship that many of us inherited from the dictatorship. During the dictatorship, talking about these kinds of experiences invoked a huge risk, because the Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional (Dina)<sup>1</sup> had secret agents throughout the country who were willing to incarcerate, torture and murder those who opposed the dictatorship. Ailin also mentioned that her mother's husband had been detained during the dictatorship in Chile. Her mother's two brothers had also been disappeared for a long time – one had been taken to a detention centre; the other had escaped just as he was about to be executed and had fled into exile to France. For Ailin's family, talking about their experiences posed a real threat. Like Sue Mitchel (2005), I was interested in providing space to re-tell such stories from a safer ground – from a territory of identity different from the one that was evoked by the history of her family.

**Nicolás:** Why did you decide to be a part of this project? What moved you to defy censorship?

**Ailin:** I feel that it is important to generate these kinds of spaces to talk about this. Inside my family [censorship] has had a lot of power, so I feel that this story will also honour my family ... I am trying to keep history alive, not only the pretty part, but also those situations that were unpleasant, of how they happened, and how brave we were to face them ... I think that this is really valuable because it would not have been possible in other moments of history. In those times, my family would not have dared to do this.

**Nicolás:** What do you think making efforts towards honouring your family and keeping history alive says about you? Do you think anyone would be surprised?

**Ailin:** This is not the first time that I have worried about the value that my family's history has, and how much this history has impacted my life since everything began last year until today. I feel that I have always tried to talk about this, to write about this, to take photos ... I feel that it has a huge weight – the fact that I'm here, that I contacted you

– because I questioned whether I should or not. I think it shows bravery ... I imagine my uncle looking at me, being proud and happy, saying ‘that’s my niece!’ My mum would also be proud and happy. I think that she would say it softer though, because she is one of those people who, since the dictatorship, were left with fear when it comes to political conversations. She always says, ‘please be careful’ if I’m going to speak about anything related to being transparent when it comes to my worldview.

## *Inviting significant figures into the conversation*

At this early point in the conversation, Ailin was already recognising the ways that she was honouring her family’s history and could even invite her uncles and mother into the conversation. Inviting others can be of significance during difficult conversations. As narrative practitioners, we understand that identity is built in association with others, so in these first questions, the interviewees could invite chosen others to become part of their association of life and accompany them during the conversation. These questions were inspired by the idea of re-membling conversations (White, 2007).

**Nicolás:** Could you tell me about that history that you are trying to keep alive?

**Ailin:** When my uncles from my mum’s family were university students, one of them was incarcerated at the national stadium for several months. We sometimes talk about this, but he does not go into too much detail. He has told me that he suffered different forms of torture, and a lot of violence, and that he had to hear people dying. He is still alive, but that was a time that really marked him.

My other uncle was a communist activist, so he was on a blacklist, not for people who were going to be detained, but people who were going to be sent to a concentration camp and executed. He was lucky in a way and got listed last when they were going to execute them. They took him on a bus, and as they were going to execute them in the city, they were being called by their name, one by one. And while this was happening,

he managed to get so far behind this line that, for a second, he was out of the soldiers’ sight. And so he thought, ‘well they are going to kill me anyway’, so he started running without them noticing him. He ended up running away from the country. He fled through the north to Peru, then Bolivia and then France. He formed a life there and never came back. He was separated from the rest of the family for a long time.

During that time, my mum was pregnant and her husband was also incarcerated, so she was also an actively defiant woman. While she was pregnant, she went and screamed at the military people and the police, asking them to let her husband go. And even the police would tell her: ‘woman, go away or you will end up dead.’ My mum was eight-months pregnant, and she screamed and she begged with all her strength and rage. And she had a baby in this situation. Both her brothers had been detained, and for months she did not know if they were alive or not. Her husband was released eventually but her brothers were held for a long time. So, she doesn’t like to talk about that, because she suffered too much during that period, and having a baby in a period of war was too hard.

Hearing this story, I was interested in getting to know more about this association between Ailin’s life and her mother’s life.

**Nicolás:** That is a powerful image, your mum raising her voice, just like you are doing now. Do you think there is a connection between you and your mum’s memory, and the way she raised her voice while pregnant when her brothers and husband were detained?

**Ailin:** I believe that my mum was incredibly brave during that time, probably more than me now, because of the context. Back then it was not the same. But yes, I feel a connection with that strength. She had a baby inside her, and she has told me several times that at the moment she did not care if she was killed, she did not care if she was beaten or detained, all she knew was that she needed to fight and do anything she could to set her husband and brothers free, to reunite her family. So yes, I feel a strong connection.

## The event of police brutality

Now that Ailin had identified the significance of sharing her story and had invited her mum and uncles into the conversation with us, I enquired about the event of police brutality she wanted to share.

**Nicolás:** Have you or your community experienced a situation of police brutality? Could you tell that story? Where did it happen?

**Ailin:** Just thinking about the social uprising, many different sensations and emotions are coming to me. I feel them in my chest and stomach. It is even hard to separate what I lived back then and these days, because it was intense. I feel that I have never set aside what my family lived, and what we, the younger generation, are living. I know that they are different situations, but I feel like they are connected as well.

Since the very first day of the uprising, on October eighteenth, I went out to the subway station to protest with my brothers and nephew. It was my brother's birthday that day, and it was a really important gesture to go out as a family. But that was also the day I started fearing the police. After that I went to protests for a whole month, every day ... I saw hard things as well. It was gratifying but exhausting at the same time.

**Nicolás:** Could you tell me a story about that? About those gratifying but exhausting times?

**Ailin:** Well, one day I was at a protest near the national library, close to Santa Lucia Hill. That day I had gone alone to the protests, and from the beginning, I could feel the tension. It did not feel safe. I remember I could see the cops about a block away from us. They had the teargas-throwing trucks parked, and a lot of cars ... Near me a guy was taking photos with a professional camera. Suddenly, I do not know how, this guy received a gunshot to his head, near his eye, and fell on my legs. I do not really remember how it happened ... I do remember seeing his huge camera and his head bleeding on my legs. There was so much blood. I remember the exact moment where I had him on my legs and I was thinking 'I'm a psychologist, I'm not a nurse,

I don't know what to do!' ... Some people started to come to where I was, I was on the floor and had him on my arms and legs now. I was trying to put pressure on his head to stop the bleeding ... I could see that he was in a pretty bad shape. I started screaming for the red cross, and I was trying to move him up the stairs of the national library, trying to get him as far as possible from the police ... The cops kept throwing teargas at us. I felt anguish, anger, rage and I couldn't breathe.

Hearing a story like this one can be challenging for a counsellor. As a person who was active during those times, I could easily relate as I had experienced similar situations. There are a couple of ideas that I try to keep close when I hear a story like this one. The first is the idea that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1976, p. 125). If we understand policing as an exercise of power, therefore there must be some form of resistance. The other one is the well-known Michael White quote about working with people who have endured traumatic experiences:

No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps to try to prevent the trauma, and, even if avoiding the trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some small way or to modify its effects on their lives, or they take steps in efforts to preserve what is precious to them. Even in the face of overwhelming trauma, people take steps to protect and preserve what they give value to. (White, 2004, p. 47)

## Double listening to the responses

I could already hear some of Ailin's responses to what had happened and, inspired by the idea that people always respond by protecting what is important to them, sought to get a more detailed description of Ailin's responses so that the conversation could then move from those actions to what was absent but implicit in them: what Ailin was trying to protect.

**Nicolás:** What were you thinking while this was happening? How did you respond or react?

**Ailin:** At that moment I thought that we needed to give him water, because he was losing consciousness, and I needed to cover his

wound. I needed to do useful things quickly ... I remember all the screaming. It was like a thousand screams – swearing at the cops, telling them to stop. But it was a deep scream, it was not like the way we usually scream at them, it was really from the inside ... ‘Please!’ with anger ... I remember feeling a mix of agony and desperation, but at the same time I felt a lot of strength, even though I was not using too much physical strength, I screamed with strength.

## Tracing the story of what it is valued

At this point in the conversation, Ailin had already narrated how speaking today was a way of honouring her family. She knew that her uncles and her mother were there with her as she told the story. She had described her experience with police brutality, the ways that she had responded to that episode, and what was absent but implicit in those actions; that is, what she valued in life and was trying to protect. I was feeling curious about how dignity had become so important for Ailin that she was willing to put her body on the line to protect it. I invited Ailin to tell me a story about dignity. My hope was to invite Ailin to develop the storyline of dignity in her life.

**Nicolás:** Can you tell me more about the story of dignity? Or about the role that dignity has played in your life?

**Ailin:** I think it has an origin in my childhood. Ever since I was a kid, accepting each other, understanding our differences and understanding that everyone deserves to be respected and understood has been really important.

**Nicolás:** Oh, so dignity has been there with you since your childhood. Could you tell me a story about dignity in your childhood?

**Ailin:** I remember when I was in primary school, I had a classmate who was a victim of bullying by a group of adult women who worked at the school ... I remember I saw how much power adults could exercise over her ... Until there was one day where I could not accept that. I reacted by screaming at them, defending my classmate, trying to stop that aggression ... Now that I think about it, that rage and desire to seek justice is something I have felt throughout my life, in different situations, and there have been people who have helped me to channel that. Like my mum, who taught me how to feel worthy and how to live in dignity ... Also my uncle who was in exile.

## Giving meaning to the responses to police brutality

Ailin was now richly describing the actions she had taken after the police had shot this man right in front of her. At this moment, I was interested in moving from actions to intentional states: to what was absent but implicit in Ailin’s reaction. I have found that in this transition from actions to intentions, there is a space where we can generate a sense of personal agency. I asked Ailin about the actions that had caught my attention.

**Nicolás:** That action of screaming, the strength you felt, what do you think they were trying to protect?

**Ailin:** I think all of those actions were a response that was trying to protect ourselves, and everything that was behind us – the ideals we stood for.

**Nicolás:** Can you try to describe those ideas you were trying to protect as you were protecting that man?

**Ailin:** There is a word that was constantly in my head: dignity. Dignity always moved me, since the first day of protests. It moved me to go out to the streets, to have a dignified life, to get real answers, to move myself and move together to generate changes. For me, respect for differences, for different realities and social expressions, have been really valuable.

## Keeping a connection with that which is valued

It is not rare for people who have experienced police brutality to feel a disconnection with social movements that they have been part of, and through which they experienced police brutality. I wanted to invite people to explore how they had been able to keep a connection with what they valued and that police brutality was trying to take away from them. I asked Ailin about this, with the intention of thickening the storyline of dignity in her life.

**Nicolás:** How have you been able to keep a connection with dignity despite what you have experienced?

**Ailin:** Sometimes it is hard. I am not going to lie. Sometimes it feels like pain and rage have a lot of power in my life ... I knew that the gunshot could have hit me. So that was a moment where I said 'okay, I can't keep going [to protests] everyday'. I was affected by it ... I have tried to create more intimate spaces, keeping a connection in a different way, allowing people to share their experiences with me.

**Nicolás:** Can you tell me more about those spaces, and how you are able to keep a distance from pain and rage?

**Ailin:** Yes, I started going to neighbourhood associations, and I started being a part of workshops for the elderly. I guess I was trying to find less aggressive spaces. I could not handle that level of violence anymore.

**Nicolás:** What effect have these workshops had on the way you are keeping connected with dignity?

**Ailin:** They have been great, because I have found a way of keeping a connection with the same things, but also finding connections with people. I have joined different groups. For example, I joined a feminist group in my neighbourhood that I had never been a part of. It has been an interesting and diverse experience. I kept a connection in a different way.

Now Ailin had described this storyline of dignity and the ways that she kept herself connected with dignity and took actions that could lead others to live in dignity.

## Offering this knowledge to others

It is not too often that people who have endured hardship in their lives are invited to contribute to the lives of others by sharing their insider knowledge, especially when it comes to victims of police brutality who can be often criminalised and shamed for their actions. Many people who have experienced police brutality also experience a feeling of disconnection with social movements because of their experiences. They may feel guilt for not participating actively anymore, going to the protests or rallies, or they may feel that they are not contributing to the lives of others anymore. That is one of the clear intentions of state repression or police brutality, so my intention at this point of the interview was to make that connection clear, to avoid the person's relationship with the social movement breaking.

The experience of making a contribution to the lives of others can be a catalyst to reduce the effects (or transform the nature) of the suffering in the person's life. When the hard-won knowledge they have gained through adversity contributes to someone else, who is in the midst of a similar struggle, this can bring a sense that their suffering has not been for nothing. (Denborough, 2008, p. 3)

For this reason, I invited the interviewees to share some of the knowledge that they had gained through their experiences:

**Nicolás:** If other people were to experience something similar, is there anything that you could offer to them? Or are there maybe some ideas that you can share?

**Ailin:** Yes, about this message of 'no fear'. This is something I have discussed with other friends, and the truth is that, when we face police brutality, we feel fear. When you see the way they act, you see there is no humanity in them. And I would say to people that it is normal to feel fear, but fear can also give you more strength to keep going – you do not need to hide from fear. I think we need to embrace it and keep it as an ally in the fight for social justice. If we experience fear, it means that we are fighting for something that is worth fighting for.

**Nicolás:** Can you share with me how you find more strength when you are experiencing and witnessing this lack of humanity?

**Ailin:** Well, it gives me more strength. For example, when this person was bleeding on my legs and I was feeling fear, it was also giving me more strength to scream, to scream louder. Now that I think about it, I have had this experience a couple of times – experiencing fear, but the fear also convincing me to be there, to stand our ground. Fear does not erase bravery. I feel fear when I see no humanity, therefore I am convinced that I am at the place I need to be.

## *Additional ideas that have supported this project*

### ***Re-engaging with stories of police brutality through double listening***

As narrative practitioners, we believe that we understand and live our lives through stories. These stories are created through the linking of certain 'events together in a particular sequence across a time period and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them' (Morgan, 2000, p. 5; see also White & Epston, 1990). People have many different stories of their lives, like the story of being a good friend, or the story about loneliness, or the story about being brave. We link certain events, through time, following such plots.

When people have experienced significant trauma, this may present a single-storied account of their life (Denborough, 2008). This means that a single story may become dominant in their lives. The event of police brutality may be linked to other events, like that time when, after experiencing police brutality, they decided to avoid large groups of people, or the time when they got into a discussion and were not able to explain themselves. This may be the story of insecurity in their life, the story of how they decided not to be an activist anymore, or the story of how they lost their hopes or dreams.

Linking events in such storylines may have implications in the present, and may also limit future actions. For example, it is less likely that I will stand up for myself in an unfair situation if I believe that I am worthless. It is less likely that I will fight for social change if I believe that I do not deserve to be a part of those movements.

In response, we can seek to re-engage with history

through multi-storied conversations rather than single-storied ones. I have found that re-engaging with history can allow us to bring forth multi-storied experiences, exploring skills and knowledge in relation to the way people have resisted police brutality and its effects. When we are having conversations with victims of police brutality, it is tempting to 're-frame' the event as 'a glass half full' rather than 'a glass half empty'; however, this can lead to a new totalisation of the story (White, 2000).

When a person narrates a story of police brutality, it is likely that they will more richly describe the violence they experience than the ways they responded and have continued to respond to that violence. These stories are less often told or re-told as sharing them can pose a big risk for the person if they position them as being connected to some form of 'illegal' protest or action.

Double listening can attend to the story of trauma and the responses the person made to the violence they experienced. This links to what Michael White called the 'absent but implicit':

It is also in the space that is provided by double- or multi-storied conversations that people have an opportunity to step into alternative identity conclusions that challenge those negative accounts of identity that have been constructed in the context of disqualification, trauma, subjugation and marginalisation, and to explore some of the knowledges and skills of living that are associated with these alternative identity conclusions. (White, 2000, p. 41)

### ***Following the principle of collaboration***

When I am first invited to interview someone from a context different from my own, I approach that invitation with as much respect as possible, understanding that my knowledge and preferred ways of conducting interviews may not be resonant for the communities I am engaging with, that the questions may not be appropriate, or that even my use of language may be problematic (White, 2003). Therefore, before conducting an interview, I usually set up a meeting with a member of the community. During this first meeting, we begin by discussing some of the community's concerns and predicaments. We discuss how getting involved with the project might contribute to their cause. We discuss the possible implications of publishing stories the way I normally do, and the risks associated with making them public. Most of the time, this person



has an interest in sharing their story as well, so they can be interviewed for the project. At other times, this initial meeting might be with a narrative practitioner who knows people who might be interested in being part of the project.

In many territories in which police brutality is common, there is risk associated with making stories public. People may experience public shaming or legal consequences. They may be identified and targeted by police or state agents and can even put their lives at risk. This can be the case in territories with strong online surveillance like Hong Kong. It is important to be aware of this and to discuss the possible implications with community leaders who can advise on how viable it is to conduct individual interviews in their communities. People who are going to be interviewed must also be made aware of the risks of getting involved with the project. Here I follow what Michael White called the principle of transparency (White, 1993).

Another important aspect to explore is how culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive the questions I normally ask are, or if there is something that they think is important to consider for the interviews. This allows me to create a context of care.

At the beginning of each interview, I always begin by informing the person who has insider knowledge about experiencing or witnessing police brutality that the conversation we are about to have is going to inform all my other interviews. I also let them know that I would be grateful if they could tell me if there is a question they dislike, or one they prefer not to answer, or if there are other questions they would suggest I add, as their insider knowledge can improve my capacity to respectfully conduct and record these interviews.

### ***Moving from the individual to the collective***

When I work with people who have experienced police brutality, I have found that it is important to connect people's experiences to their political contexts. Without diminishing the person's experiences, I seek to make connections to some form of collective oppression, and back to the particular effect that the violence has had on them, and then to share their experiences and insights with other groups or collectives. You can see this in the interview with Ailin. We began on her safe ground and with her family's history. We made links to the historic socio-political context in which that story developed and the ways that affected her and pushed her to participate in the interview. This movement from the individual to

collective and from the collective to the individual is used to create a sense of connection with the collective without having the person's experience diminished or made invisible by a sense of community. This is what is referred to as 'communitas' (Turner, 1969). My added intention here is to prevent the person's relationship with the social movement from breaking.

## *Final considerations*

When we have narrative conversations with victims of police brutality, we are constantly moving from the individual to collective, and from collective to the individual. We move from their experiences to some form of collective oppression, and back to the effects it has had in their lives, analysing their responses to share with other groups. If the aim of police brutality is to disconnect people from social movements, our work must therefore focus on preventing this disconnection.

I have found that it is important to connect the person's experience to their political context. At the same time, it is important not to diminish the person's individual experience. This could be seen in the story of Ailin: we began our interview talking about her action of contacting me to be a part of the project, then we moved to her family's story, and the socio-political context of the dictatorship, and then back to the story of the episode of police brutality and how she had responded. My hope is that Ailin's story may invite hope and courage in the lives of others who have experienced similar situations and can keep them connected with the possibility of social change – to move from a language of fatalism to the language of change – as well as inviting my colleagues to move from a therapy of thingification to a therapy of desire that involves 'people's political dreams, political wishes, and political desires'.

## *Note*

- <sup>1</sup> The National intelligence directorate was Dictator's Augusto Pinochet secret police, also known as the Pinochet's Gestapo (Montes, 2015).

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