

Presentation: About the Biographical Narrative and Oral History

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The memory of the Second World War has preoccupied *oral history* and *biographical social psychology*, while simultaneously the interdisciplinary fields of *cultural studies* and *memory studies* have developed. Lately, a surge of such biographical researches and documentaries has been observed in Europe, 70 years have passed since the end of The War and the eye-witnesses -elders now- tend to disappear, as researchers hasten to utilise the testimonies of the last survivors of The War. Within the 'Bridging Generations' project's framework we are interested in biographical documentaries with life stories of the Second World War told in the present, thus placing the cinematic narrative and the biographical social psychology approach in discussion.

Human experience is normally expressed through our narrations, that is to say, through the stories where we talk about our experiences. Everyone tells stories; stories about their history. When we use the expression 'life narrative' and 'life story' in the biographical approach's and oral histories' framework we refer to a narration by a person that organises their life experiences on their own. For example, when an adult talks about their teenage life they probably will organise their narrative around their school experiences, parents and their relationship with them and their peers.

When we research the past, distant or recent, we look for supporting evidence for the research of the human experience at a given period. When researching the recent past we rely also on

oral narrations, stories, that is, that people who have experienced this past and are still alive can recount. For example, if we wish to study the Holocaust we rely on various relevant information plus on information given to us via survivors' narratives. When a very old person talks today of their experience as a child during the Second World War, they most likely organise their narrative around various traumatic incidents that relate to their foiled and traumatised childhood during The War. These stories, together with further sources, comprise part of the raw material that assists us create a version of the past.

During these approaches we are interested in the reconstruction of the historical past. Mainly though we are interested in the subjective 'truth', the reconstruction of each person's lived experience, in order to trace the identities and images of the self. This 'truth' of the narration of the lived experience is a form of self-portraying by the narrator inside specific historical contexts that each person perceives in their own unique way.

Normally we choose to record the narrations of the lived experience and of the recollections and dress them with further sources, such as documents, photographs, other personal documents, newspapers or the narrations of other people. We are aware that the aforementioned sources are often conflicting, inaccurate or even partial. The recollection of past events is not easy, specifically so when we narrate painful memories. There are incidents in the lives of people about which they are not willing to talk. Furthermore, there is the possibility that the people might not want to give information they fear might upset someone or that refer to a 'familial' or 'personal case'. The same difficulty occurs in relation to issues that can directly or indirectly lead to political consequences in the present and the future.

Oral narratives, especially those referring to difficult and traumatic periods that are beyond the normalcy of everyday life, like a war, feel like a lie especially to those that don't have similar experiences or relatable influences, such as the very young. Nevertheless, they still represent an, albeit subjective, 'truth'. Memory, regardless of how private it is, is always part of a social context. Every memory, written, oral, effector etc. is on the one hand private and personal, but on the other hand it is also social exactly because it is always constituted and reconstituted within a social and political, thus historic, framework.

The autobiographical memory is generally composed of pleasant facts that assist the positive self-image and self-promotion of the person and also of the team it includes itself in (e.g. the narrative about liberation day).

The autobiographical 'oblivion' though is generally composed of traumatic incidents that create stress even to this day. An undertaking of ostracising and concealment from the memory's narrative is observed there. Despite their traumatic character though, they remain there, in the past of the experience, and here today, in the reality of the reviving of the trauma.

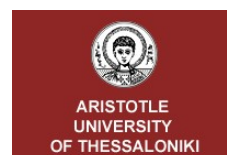
The narratives that relate to The War are of particular interest when deepening in the problematic of the experience of war and its memory. The memory of The War is most certainly traumatic. War disrupts violently and unpredictably the everyday life, it has opposing sides and also creates mnemonic camps, more so in the case of civil conflicts. That is true for both the individual subjects and the micro-social collectives in which they integrate themselves. War comes to an end and then powerful historical myths are weaved around the winners and the losers that constitute the current national war narration. Subsequent life narrations about a war don't necessarily validate the dominant national narrative. Occasionally they overturn it, occasionally they bring well-hidden secrets to life or are entrenched in silence.

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