

Doing memory work with Syrian activists: An autoethnography Self-reflections on repression, injustice, war trauma, and the struggle for freedom

by: Mariangela Sglavo

Objectives of the project and research questions

In order to collect the memories of activists from Syria, it was necessary to also summon up my own memories so as to prepare myself for interviewing the research participants. Furthermore, my own memories represented the framework for the empirical research findings that I explored in my master thesis work, and are based on my experience having lived in Syria for some months in 2005 and in 2010.

In addition to that, working as a social worker in close contact with people affected by war trauma, or victimized by torture and social injustice, exerted a measure of influence on the autoethnographic research. Autoethnography was also an important tool for self-reflection that I used after each workday in the accommodation centre for asylum seekers.

I collected my personal notes in the form of a diary. The data analysis aims to explore the emotions that arose while doing research. Moreover, in different moments, I had to question my position of privilege vis-à-vis my interlocutors. The acknowledgment of my position was a memento every time I approached an interviewee.

As a result, my research questions were formulated as follows:

- How do my memory and personal story influence the research topic?
- To which extent are social workers by listening to the stories of people, victims of war trauma, or those who experienced first-hand, or through other relatives/close persons the repression of a dictatorship, imprisonments, torture, and death? Are there risks of depression or burnout for social workers?
- How can autoethnographic research be an instrument of emotional healing for social workers, activists, volunteers that engage in anti-war activism and deal with other people's traumas? How do they empower themselves to be able to support the people, and continue the struggle for social change?

Throughout this research report, I reference my personal experiences and aim to raise questions on how to develop strategies to face the difficulties implied in the work with this or similarly afflicted groups of people.