

Epilogue: An assured disclosure of uncertainty

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This article is part of the special issue Micro-Memories, edited by Thomas Van de Putte and William Hirst. Readers are advised to read the introduction to the special issue first to understand the exercise individual contributors were asked to conduct.

“An assured disclosure of uncertainty” was a phrase that stood out during the data-session organised in Trento where we first discussed this excerpt. It was meant to represent how the interviewee claimed over and over that she “didn’t know”, while it appeared to external viewers that she held enough pieces of the puzzle to see the bigger picture. But this sentence also reflects the state of the different authors of this special issue — including me — when it came to completing the exercise. Even though we applied the tools and expertise at our disposal to analyse this short segment, we could only do it with an “assured disclosure of uncertainty”. After all, this was an exercise of decontextualisation, of looking at a fragment of a story that was originally embedded within a research context and was selected among many others as “worthy” of analysis in such a data session as described by Thomas Van de Putte and Bill Hirst in the introduction (this issue). During the initial workshop in Trento, as the data-bringer, my role was to remain silent throughout the discussion. I was asked to come back at the end to reflect on the thoughts and hypotheses provided by my colleagues, as well as answer their many questions. This is what I wish to do here so that you, reader of this special issue, can also finally receive some context and clarification.

In this epilogue, I thus intend to slightly lift the veil of uncertainty and re-contextualise the excerpt by providing an overview of the research project for which this data was collected, as well as some of the back story collected during the rest of the interview. I will then reflect on what exercises like the one organised in Trento (and that led to this special issue) taught me as the data-bringer. As this epilogue was written before I had access to the other articles of this special issue, it should be read as a reflection of the initial exercise rather than a response to the papers presented here.

The research context

This interview was conducted in 2019, as part of a two-year research project called Transmemo.¹ Transmemo was an interdisciplinary and interinstitutional project, including historians, cognitive psychologists, social psychologists and a political scientist, coming from a French-speaking university (UCLouvain), a Dutch-speaking university (UGent) and the Study and Documentation Centre for War and Contemporary Society (CEGESOMA). The aim of the project was to investigate how and which memories of the resistance against, and of the collaboration with the German occupiers during the Second World War (WWII) in Belgium were discussed and transmitted to the next generations within families. In this context, we met with children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people who had been on the “right side” or the “wrong side” of history. Before the interview, participants received a booklet including a participant and family questionnaire designed by the

¹ The project was officially called “Transmemo: The Sorrows of Belgium: Family historical memories of WWII memories and family transmission”.

historians of the project as well as a questionnaire about attitudes, beliefs and social identity designed by the psychologists. Then, we met participants in their home for a face-to-face interview that usually lasted about two hours and was tape-recorded. There were four main subsections to the semi-structured interview: (1) family relationships, (2) family historical knowledge and memory, (3) sources of knowledge and memory, and (4) conclusion. The structure of the interview had been created in an interdisciplinary mindset, using a mixed approach from oral history, cognitive psychology, social psychology and political sciences. Thus it included both open-ended and close-ended questions, evaluations on numeric scales and a small empirical design created to measure the level of transmission of an anecdote across generations.

This excerpt comes from an interview with a participant recruited by one of my master's students, who was also present during the interview. In the contact phase, the participant had indicated knowing very little about her father's collaborative past. She did not know what type of collaboration it was (i.e. military, political, economic, or denunciation), answering she thought it was a "family collaboration". She added there was much silence and taboo around that topic, but not only ; there was a lot she did not know about her father. We agreed to meet with her and set up an appointment.

The interview context

The excerpt is situated just one hour into the interview, which lasted a total of two hours and fifteen minutes. At the beginning, we explore her relationship with her family, and more specifically her father. She describes him as secretive, strict, and authoritarian. In other words: they did not have a good relationship. She proceeds to provide a few examples of these traits, with the first one being significant for the topic at hand. She recalls the first time she was eligible to vote, feeling proud to exercise her democratic duty as a young and engaged woman. On voting day, her father tells her that "there is no point in voting, it's all crap". Surprised by his remark, she replies that she thought he was always the first one to vote, to which he responds, "no, I was pretending," vaguely attributing it to the war without further elaboration. Later on, she comes back to this instance, disclosing in anger that he had also added "people who went to prison were good people" and that Belgium made some "wrong choices". She indicates that she did not understand what he meant but that she was scared to press him further, and maybe also scared to learn more than she wishes.

She then recounts a second anecdote. When she was newly engaged, her father told her that "there is no point in getting married". Initially assuming he refers to her mother and their relationship, she starts defending her mother, but quickly learns he was talking about a previous marriage she had never heard of. According to the participant, she received no further explanation from her father, nor did she seek one.

Throughout the interview, she shares numerous stories about her father, often delivered at a fast-talking speed, transitioning seamlessly from one to the next, and often without allowing us an opportunity to interject or ask for clarification. Many of these anecdotes or details are presented as proof of her father's hidden life, recurrent lies, and silences. While some are unrelated to the war — such as a concealed first marriage and the possibility that

she has half-siblings from that union — others provide clues about his opinions and actions during the war. For instance, we learn that her father had lost part of his shoulder, but she had never inquired about the circumstances surrounding this accident. We also learn that he was receiving a pension from Germany. Apparently, discussions about "the Jewish question" were commonplace at home, with her father disputing the claim of mass Jewish extermination during WWII. He also displayed a reverence for Germany, even supporting their football team over Belgium's, and expressed disappointment that his daughter could not speak German, as he believed it would have been beneficial for her to read *Mein Kampf*. Instead, he suggested she read a book by Léon Degrelle, the leader of the Rex party, a right-wing movement of Belgium that collaborated with the Germans during WWII. During the interview, she ponders whether his suggestion was intended to "provoke" her, though she does not believe so, concluding the segment with yet another "I don't know."

The excerpt analysed in this special issue is situated right after this passage. Despite the myriad of clues about her father's wartime stance during WWII, she repeatedly asserts her uncertainty, affirming "I don't know" nearly 50 times. By that stage, as the interviewer, I want to attempt to reach certain conclusions based on what I learnt and relying on factual details. This is how I start asking about when and where he was imprisoned.

The data-session

This data-session occurred in April 2021 in Trento. Around the table sat the following people: Bernardo Armanni, Anastasya Astapova, Lauren Cantillon, Aline Cordonnier, Till Hilmar, William Hirst, Olivier Luminet, Mario Panico, Giorgia Proietti, Ben Rampton, Brian Schiff, Thomas Van de Putte, and Patrizia Violi. As the "data bringer", the session in Trento felt akin to watching detectives unravel a case, while I withheld crucial clues by remaining silent as requested. Nevertheless, the evolution of the discussion proved both fascinating and enlightening to me for multiple reasons. Drawing from a recording of the data-session and my notes, I aim to review here some of the main points that emerged from the debate.

Overall, the central theme of the discussion revolved around epistemology. We found ourselves in a situation reminiscent of the movie *Inception*, with multiple epistemic realms embedded within one another. At the core of the discussion lay the epistemic realm of the participant. My colleagues attempted to grasp what the participant knew or did not know, repeatedly highlighting her reluctance to confront her knowledge by casting doubts on the veracity of her assertions. This sparked a debate concerning the surrounding epistemic realms. While her father's knowledge was of significance, so too were her brother's and the broader family's. Some researchers proposed the possibility of epistemic exclusion, suggesting she may have been denied access to family memory, while others leaned towards viewing it as a case of epistemic uncertainty, wherein the knowledge existed but could not be trusted. However, many pondered why she appeared to have never asked more questions to her family or why she seemed unwilling to connect the dots of the information she possessed. They subsequently posited that while she debated her brother's and father's "provocative stance," her own stance embodied an "assured disclosure of uncertainty," underscoring her strategic positioning within this intricate epistemic landscape.

The second epistemic realm discussed was my own, as an interviewer with particular intentions. My colleagues remarked that they felt I was doing the "difficult reconstruction work", unravelling the participant's father's story and getting her to confirm it. They observed that I was the one formulating the "bad words", such as 'collaboration' or 'siding with the German army', akin to a "sympathetic lawyer," exercising caution not to inadvertently trigger the participant. These reflections about my stance provided me with an interesting insight into how I conducted my interviews. One of the main reasons I had initially chosen this excerpt stemmed from my active involvement in reconstructing the participant's family history. Consequently, I was curious to see how my colleagues would perceive my role within this dynamic. Indeed, they speculated on my existing knowledge, given our hour-long conversation leading up to this point. They expressed surprise that, despite the study's focus on the intergenerational transmission of family memories regarding WWII collaboration, the revelation of the participant's father as a collaborator seemed to emerge only at that juncture, almost as if it were a newfound discovery. Some even questioned whether I possessed additional information on the matter, perhaps from sources other than the interview itself. Thus, they were curious about what I knew that the participant knew about her father's past.

From my own perspective, observing my colleagues participate in this unusual analysis prompted me to consider their own epistemic realm. For instance, they encountered some difficulties in differentiating central from peripheral information, like the story of the half-sister, which I knew from earlier context had nothing to do with the collaborative past of the father. Yet, they debated this piece of information alongside the participant's relationship with her brother for a while. More importantly, they discussed what it meant to be a "collaborator" in this context, what actions would result in the loss of civil rights, or who is entitled to a war pension. This general knowledge, which I possessed but some of my colleagues understandably did not, can significantly alter the dynamics of such an interview. It underscored once again the active role interviewers can take depending on their own epistemic realm.

Other parts of the discussion during the data-session brought forth new analytical insights. For me, some of the most fascinating discussions revolved around analysing the speech itself rather than the content. For instance, my colleagues debated the significance of the repetitions of certain words within the narrative. Did they represent a state of nervousness? Was she stuttering or impersonating her father? Or were they linguistic markers specific to French? My colleagues then compared this to another instance with minimal grammatical elaboration where the main facts were simply listed one after the other, without any hesitation.

The use of tenses, particularly as she transitioned from the past to the present, was also intriguing. They noted its occurrence alongside reported speech, potentially indicative of a specific narrative style. They observed the participant's shifts between an analytical voice and a performative voice. There were also instances of where the volume of her voice shifted, with a certain softness at times contrasted by more rapid and loud speech at others. This analysis of more subtle clues provided me with a deeper understanding of the situation.

In conclusion, the data-session provided me with valuable insights from an external and interdisciplinary perspective. While it may not be feasible to apply such methods to multiple long interviews like the ones I conduct, it demonstrated that significant understanding can be gleaned even from brief interactions. Ben Rampton and Thomas Van de Putte have previously described these data sessions as a “fertile ground for ‘abductive’ reasoning, theorising and imagining” (2024: 17). The concept of “abductive reasoning”, distinct from deductive or inductive reasoning, begins with the premise that reality is complex and that surprising evidence can inspire new hypotheses and theories (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). In this case, the removal of data from its original context allowed surprising evidence to emerge, prompting data-session participants to apply their theories and concepts flexibly. The presence of academics from different research fields also introduced themes and methodologies that I was not familiar with but will be valuable in future analyses.

Moreover, the exercise sometimes provoked a meta-cognitive reflection on the concept of memory. As we delved into the intergenerational transmission of family historical memories, we grappled with questions about where to find memory, how reliable it is depending on the source, and the complexities of reconstructing personal narratives from external and interpersonal accounts. For instance, an interesting discussion arose regarding the capacity of physical objects to act as memory carriers. One data-session participant argued that "she has the story, it is written on the dad's body," while later, someone else asked, "does it make sense to doubt the wound itself?" At another point, a discussion emerged around how one talks about the "black sheep" in the family, bringing up the question of how to share memories of a dark or difficult past within the sanctity of the family, particularly in light of the broader political and social landscape surrounding such topics. Finally, the session ended on a note about how tone and voice volume could provide evidence of attitudes or emotions toward such memories. Overall, each discipline brought its own perspective and knowledge, allowing me to consider memory from broader angles.

Finally, it also highlighted the importance of contextualisation and the limitations of one's knowledge within the scope of the study, especially with regards to memory. After all, we should always be assured to disclose that there is and always will be some uncertainty.

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