

# Remembering in times of misery: can older people in South Africa ‘get through’?

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports a study of the situations of disadvantaged older people in contemporary South African townships. It draws from their own accounts that were collected through ethnographic research in day centres and care homes. Most of the informants had experienced a succession of serious material, psychological, social and cultural losses. Their lives had been characterised by violence, inequality, disruption and poverty. A dominant theme in their accounts is that they can hardly ‘get through’ their lives. Their thankless, even alienated, situations are not only a function of personal losses but also have much to do with the recent political and social history of South Africa. The colonial and Apartheid eras have by and large been excluded from the country’s collective memory, with the result that older people’s experiences of those times are not valued as affirmational reminiscence or for shaping a kin group’s common identity. Expressed recollections have acquired a different function, of being a means of articulating moral judgements on the present. The result is that memories, rather than bringing the generations together, have the opposite effect and widen the gap in understanding between the older and younger generations. This in turn has serious effects on older people’s wellbeing. The silencing of memories reflects the society’s radical break with the past, which has made it difficult for younger people to mourn or sympathise with older people’s losses. While far from helpless victims, many of the older township residents lack meaningful frames by which to locate themselves in contemporary South African society.

**KEY WORDS** – South Africa, older people, remembering, loss, misery, suffering, coping.

## **Introduction**

This paper argues that it is almost impossible for many older people in South Africa to remember their lives and locate themselves as actors in processes of change and social memory, and that this gives ‘memories’ a

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special meaning. Drawing on ethnographic data, the paper shows that, at least among disadvantaged older people, remembering does not have the positive values normally ascribed to reminiscence, an activity that older people in less fraught situations use to integrate the past with the present and as a means to age and die well (Meyerhoff 1978: 222). Rather, memory becomes a moral commentary on society's desire for a radical break with the past, and an encumbrance that excludes older people from the contemporary 'social fabric' (Lambek 1996). The 'radical break' with the past, that is such a powerful undercurrent in the country, causes much suffering in older people's lives and leads many to feel deep personal loss and many sorrows about the 'new South Africa'.

There is growing evidence that 'older people in Africa are at increasing risk of abuse and violence' (Gorman 2000: 33). In South Africa, Keikelame and Ferreira (2004) reported their informants' view that the most common forms and causes of elder abuse were poverty, the lack of respect shown by adult children, alcohol-related behaviour, the presence of beer halls and taverns in the townships, drug taking, unemployment, beliefs in witchcraft, and the marginalisation of older people by government. The most frequently reported abuse occurred in 'the context of social disorganisation, specifically domestic violence, exacerbated by crime, alcohol and drugs' (Keikelama and Ferreira 2000: 10).

More positively, many older people have important household tasks, especially in the care of grandchildren and orphans. My own interviews revealed that while a state pension helps to sustain an older person's household (Sagner and Mtati 1999), it also makes them vulnerable to 'false friendships', abuse, robbery and burglary. Social and cultural ruptures, insecure positions and many other hardships have harmed inter-generational relations, to the extent that many older people have lost contact with their children and neighbours as well as their respect and care. The history and effects of colonialism and Apartheid have been a contributory cause, and continue to influence older people's lives and their wellbeing and self-esteem.

The paper focuses on the themes of loss and of tensions between older and younger people in the biographical accounts of older Xhosa residents of an old-age home. They had had to leave their households and families for reasons of frailty, problems with their children and grandchildren, and fear of neglect or violence. The second section of the paper places their individual accounts in the South African social and political contexts, and the third section focuses on the loss of the family home, because this loss has deep symbolic meanings, and usually brings a deep rupture in the person's social and cultural life. The final section is a synthetic interpretation of the stories around the theme of 'getting through' old age.

## **The ethnographic research**

The paper is based on more than 50 life stories from the residents of an African (Xhosa) old-age home in a township near Cape Town, South Africa. The home accommodated 135 residents, and their ages ranged from 60 to 90 years. There were roughly as many men as women. The home is surrounded by a fence, and a security guard was at the gate every 24 hours. The residents who were independent in the 'activities of daily living' lived in a wing with one-or two-person rooms, and those with serious physical and mental ailments lived in other wings. Men and women were not allowed to visit each other in their rooms.

The biographical accounts were collected as part of a larger study of older people of different ethnic groups in the Western Cape Province. They were collected during several periods of anthropological fieldwork in 2001–03. The life stories were assembled over several conversations, and all were taped and transcribed. In addition, I participated extensively in the daily life of the home and talked with nurses, carers, managers and family members. The aim was to study how the memories of older people contributed to 'social memory' and the formation and affirmation of identity in South African society, and how the residents were coping with their past and present traumatic experiences.

Until recently it was uncommon in South Africa for older Africans to enter an old-age home when they became frail and unable to take care of themselves and their households. Old-age homes have been established only since the 1970s in African (Xhosa) communities. They were built because the situation of frail older people in the community and in their households deteriorated, poverty being the main reason. This is not to suggest that these circumstances afflict all older people in South Africa. Outside the old-age homes, many Xhosa older people pursue positive roles. I have met older people who organised meetings to discuss important issues in their community, such as violence, crime or HIV. Some have set up projects for very young children, to protect them from violence, neglect and abuse, and many contribute to their family households through their pensions and work (Van Dongen 2002). Many children still take care of frail parents in their own homes.

The reason for studying this very disadvantaged group was that, until recently, little published writing dealt with the situation of older Africans who had been uprooted from the usual cultural and family settings, or had examined their adjustment to western-type residential care. The stories of the residents must be understood in the broader socio-cultural, economic and national contexts. This account begins, however, with selections from the individual accounts.

**Stories of loss**

Abie's life story illustrates very well the intimately associated themes of memory and loss. When I first met him in the old-age home, Abie, then aged 88 years, was sitting on his bed with Elsie, his wife aged 74 years. The room had no furniture apart from two beds and a small cupboard. Some old photos stood on the windowsill, and an old poster hung on the wall. Abie talked about his life. He began with a few simple sentences, but they captured its disruption:

I was born in Cape Town, at 29 Long Street. Now, they take us from there to bring us to G. We are here now. And our house, our own house, NY 6 number 23. But now, we are here now. We stay here.

The expression of misery on Abie's face and the non-verbal communication communicated the depth of his and Elsie's suffering. Of course Abie said more, from which I learned a story of multiple losses, but the essence was in these first sentences. Following the *Group Areas Act* of 1950, he lost his house in Cape Town during the 1960s when the residents of District Six in the centre of Cape Town were displaced to the Cape Flats. Much later, when he and Elsie could no longer take care of themselves and had lost contact with and the respect of their children, they lost their house in G. Now Abie complains that since being in the old-age home, he has lost money, clothes and other possessions and, more hurtfully, his dignity.

Grace told another impressive story of losses of material possessions, social relationships, respect and power, one which shows that such losses have different meanings and significance. When Grace told me her story, she was 78 years old. She was born in Port Elisabeth to a Christian family. Three years after finishing school she married a minister with whom she had six children. She had also worked as a matron at a police station for 25 years. One can hardly imagine the impact on her wellbeing of the losses that she experienced. Her husband had died of diabetes, but when I asked if he was a nice man she said, 'No, I have had it with him. He's dead now'. She had two brothers and two sisters; all but one brother had died. Three of her children had died of high fever, and a son had been beaten to death in the streets. Grace said, 'When he died, I was at a meeting, and when I got back he had already died. I never saw him again'.

The two surviving children migrated to Cape Town, leaving their mother behind in East London. After many years, her children invited Grace to visit them in K, another township near Cape Town, which she did. Shortly after her arrival, Grace had a stroke, was totally paralysed and could not speak. The children took her to a hospital where she stayed for eight months. When she was discharged, the children took Grace to the

old-age home in G, and that was the last time she saw her son and daughter. When I met her, she was very sad and almost without clothes. After our conversation, she asked me to give her some underpants and said 'I feel naked without (my pants)'. Grace felt ashamed to sit without underwear. All her possessions were left behind in East London. The loss of contact with her children was her worst loss, and she was left alone in the old-age home in a suburb that she did not know. Her lament continued:

My two children, I have a daughter, but they never come and see me here. (Els: What do you think about that?) I don't know what I think, but I think and think and think and then get sad. They said, 'Mother, come from East London to see us', so I went. But they never came back again. I went to see them. I don't know this place; I don't know Cape Town. (Els: Your children brought you to the old-age home?) Yes, and I don't want to be here; I want to go back home. (Els: Why didn't they take you back to East London when you left hospital?) I cannot go back there. (Els: Where do you want to go?) I want to go to K. (Els: You want to go to your children?) No, because they say, 'Don't come'. They don't come here. I don't know why; what is the reason? ... They stay together, no more worries about their mother.

Such stories are harrowing but not rare. They tell of the loss of material possessions, relationships, psychological wellbeing and self-esteem, and of how older people cope with the past and the present, which is often harsh and almost incomprehensible to outsiders. Many of the older people who gave me their stories originated from the Eastern Cape Province, an area plagued by violence, poverty and diseases. After the *Group Areas Act* was passed in 1950, many were coerced into move to the Western Cape Flats townships near Cape Town, where at least there was some hope of employment and a better life (Ferreira 2004).<sup>1</sup> Grace was one of many who not only grappled with the consequences of Apartheid in the Eastern Cape, but also endured poverty, hardship, economic insecurity and the death of children in the province (*cf.* Crais 2002: 147–8; Dawood 1994). Although she was not entirely clear about why her children had abandoned her, it was later discovered that they lacked the financial means to take care of her, and that the relationship was not good.

Another informant, John, told a more complex story, not only about his children but also about the past and present politico-economic situations. When I met him, he was 64 years old and looked strong, although both of his legs had been amputated because of diabetes. We talked several times at the entrance of the care home, where John habitually sat in a wheelchair. He had nothing else to do but look at the cars and pedestrians passing the iron gate of the home. John came from Transkei and had been a lorry driver; he had worked for the 'white people'. When he remembered that time, he got very angry and frustrated, and he shouted, 'Why

did I work so hard? I worked for nothing, for nothing! There were those white people I worked for and they paid me only 1,000 Rand (US\$172). One thousand Rand for a couple of years!’ John said that ‘the whites’ had taken everything and that Apartheid was a terrible time: ‘You had to carry a pass and if you didn’t or if you went into an area that was for whites, the police would come and put you into custody and you would have to pay’.

John was involved in the freedom fights and had been imprisoned 20 times. Immediately after this revelation in our conversation, John talked about his children. He said that they would not visit him and were ‘very bad, drinking and smoking *daga*’. If his sons did come, they only wanted money. He said, ‘How can I give them money? We used to take care of our parents and grandparents; now they want money. But I don’t have money’. He gave his opinion about the younger generation: ‘Children don’t want to go to school. They go to the *shebeen* (beer hall) and drink. They also drink at school. They have weapons and they shoot. When I was young, there were no weapons ... when I was young, I took care of the cattle, the goats and cows. That was a good time and children obeyed their parents.’

Reflecting upon John’s story, one grasps the complexity of the situation of black people in the new South Africa, especially of many older people. John voiced the pain of many of his generation. Having migrated from Transkei, a poor rural area, to Cape Town, he had no alternative but to work for ‘the whites’ for a low wage. The social malaise and structural chaos of the time had direct effects on John (and many others). His miseries accumulated: Apartheid, low wages, discrimination, disrupted family relations, violence, sickness and physical handicaps. One can hardly imagine the frustration and anger of a man who had worked hard and struggled for his human rights, but ended up in an old-age home with a disability.

### **Contextualising the stories of loss**

In connecting the memories of different episodes of his life, John not only gave a moral assessment of the behaviour of others and of his relationships with others, but also a commentary on the wider past and present social and political contexts. His sequence of losses started long ago. Many older people in my research had moved from the Eastern Cape to Cape Town, either to find a job or to join their family, but through the *Group Areas Act* and the *Pass Laws* of 1952, which restricted the movements of black people, they lost their freedom to move. Wives and children were often not allowed to join their husbands and fathers, and families fell apart. The

draconian government regulations shaped the daily lives of black Africans. All black workers in Cape Town were one-year contract labourers, which made it impossible for them to gain enduring employment or residence rights. Those who were classified as ‘coloured’ were given preference because they originated in the Cape Town area, which affected the self-esteem of the black population. Raids by the police were common in the camps where the black workers lived, and shantytowns were regularly dismantled.

It is understandable that when Apartheid came to an end in 1994, people had ‘ecstatic’ hopes for the future of their children, but after several years of the democratic government, people felt disillusioned and thought that they had been denied ‘justice’ (Western 1996). They were still poor, and unemployment remained high. Moreover, many children seemed to have no interest in older people’s past experiences but only in their state pension and houses. In the eyes of many older people, the situation deteriorated after Apartheid. As one Xhosa woman said, ‘We – the blacks – used to fight against the whites; now the blacks fight among each other’.

The stories of personal loss resonate with the effects of historical processes and structural abuses, discrimination, racism and poverty. They also contain normative evaluations of the present and the past, and reveal the politics behind the contemporary annihilation of and amnesia about the past (Sturm 1998: 211). Denying aspects of the past has become a process that destroys the value of the lives of disadvantaged older people, but they desperately seek affirmation of their identity. The stories and memories reveal a painful historical irony: older people participated in a political struggle for freedom but things have not turned out in the way that they hoped (*cf.* Marx 1972: 120). John’s story strongly expressed the frustration.

The South African media make much of the present-day ‘crime epidemic’ and the ‘culture of violence’. The violence, crime and abuse are invariably associated with the Blacks and Coloureds, but can be seen as having an ideological purpose, to sustain the *status quo* of inequality and discrimination. This is not to deny that there is serious violence, but to argue for full consciousness of the historical roots of inequality and societal ruptures. To achieve a full understanding, the stories of older people could be helpful, because they connect the past with the present. Their stories are, however, a serious indictment of a violent state system that continues to work against the poor.

Such views are not, however, acceptable in the collective or social memory of South Africans, in contrast to the stories told at the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC), which focus on the violence of the

Apartheid era and the struggle for freedom. These are the acceptable stories that are written into the 'national memory' and that strive to establish a break with the past (*cf.* Andrews 2003). No stories comparable to those of the older people in my research were heard at the TRC, which has concentrated on the victims of more direct physical and legal assaults. Neither unexceptional older people nor those resident in care-homes were invited to its sessions, where their views might not have been welcome.

Many of my informants told me that they 'didn't know what it (the struggle) was about'. One man said, 'If you struggle you must know against what or whom you struggle'. Another referred to the divisions between the freedom fighters, for example between the *African National Congress* and *Inkatha*, and said, 'If you fight, all noses have to be in the same direction; this was not the case'. Others said that they had not wanted to be involved in the struggle for freedom because they had to take care of their families, and that involvement would have endangered their children. Some said simply that they had been 'too old' to fight.

There was another reason. John and several other informants told me about their jobs with the 'whites' (as they called them). Their memories – except maybe John's – about that time were rather happy. In the first place, they did have jobs even if they earned very little, and secondly, many women were responsible for their employer's household and children. White women relied on black women to nurture their children. For those who had lost their own children or who were living in broken families, the employer's family could be a substitute. I met women who had worked in the same families for 10 to 20 years and talked with great pleasure about that time. Some men also described their work in the white areas with pleasure. They felt that they were responsible for the wellbeing of their 'masters' and 'madams' (as they still call them today).

For many of the informants, it has become apparent that today's children and grandchildren reject their ancestors. They explained that when they tried to describe the past as 'better times without violence', their children and grandchildren would change the subject and bluntly say, 'That was your time; this is our time'. By cutting off the conversation, the children disconnected the older people from the social fabric. Older people felt offended and rejected. Their accounts of racial relationships during Apartheid are incompatible with the current representation, and separate the older and younger generations. The older people served 'the whites' as domestic workers, gardeners and handymen, and they were raised to be obedient to their parents, many by severe punishment. Their narratives of the time are accounts of oppression and exploitation but also of order and safety. They say that they could move safely in the streets, that they respected their parents and grandparents, and that there was

much less crime and violence. Such accounts imply a critical moral evaluation of the present. To younger people, the older people's accounts are those of 'slaves' and 'servants' who retain a submissive mentality. By romanticising the past, older people are urging the younger generation back to a submissive position. The older people are themselves a creation and a symbol of their oppression.

In a critical essay on the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, it has been argued that beyond the racial inequalities, poverty has contributed to 'the ghosts that refuse to lie down' (Ramphela in Wilson 2000: 183). Poverty, the 'second evil', not only separates the 'old' racial groups but differentiates the members of each group. One of its consequences is that the old and young struggle over the control of money and goods, as exemplified by the tensions in families around the state pension (Sagner and Mtati 1999; Ferreira 2004).

### The awesomeness of losing a house

I will elaborate on the 'special' loss of one's house and home. Houses are not only a material possession and a safety-net in times of poverty, but also have strong symbolic value, which was very well illustrated in Sylvia's account. Sylvia had suffered a stroke and was the first resident of the old-age home when it opened in 1996. She had been a domestic worker until she was 65 years of age. After her children grew up, she left her house in Langa and went to G. Sylvia continued to work as a domestic servant. At the time, she wanted to buy furniture and other things for her house. Sylvia told me how she came to lose her house:

Sylvia: I am 77 and I was married when I was still young, when I was 21. And I had five children when I was in Langa, not here in G. I am from Langa. I came to the old-age home because of my children. My children were not 100 per cent with me. Of the five children, it was only the first, the girl, and the last, the boy, who were the best. But the [other] three were bad to me. So, I can say that my life was not going right. I left my home; I have come to stay here. ... My husband died, so I stayed at home with my children. ... They became wild after their father's death. They were nasty to me, I don't know why.

Els: What did it mean for you to leave your home?

Sylvia: It was awesome to leave my house, but as far as I am concerned I was not happy (there). When you live in your house, you must be happy in your house and with your family. You got to be happy, but I did not get any happiness from them. So, that was why I thought by myself, it's the best thing. I didn't even tell them: I was going to leave them and go to the old-age home. They saw me taking my things and they saw me selling all the

goods. My furniture I have left. I had very good furniture in my house, but I sold it all. When they saw it, they said, ‘Oh, mama, where are you going?’ I said, ‘I am going to the old-age home’, and they said, ‘Why don’t you leave this furniture with us?’ I replied, ‘This furniture comes out of my shoulders, I worked for it – if you want furniture, you buy it yourself. What I am going to do, I am going to live in here. I won’t chase you out, you can stay, but you will have to work for it’.

Like John and many others, Sylvia experienced frustration and suffering because of the neglect and abuse of her family. As for many other older people, Sylvia’s house had been her pride. It was both the product and a symbol of her hard work. It was also her weapon in the struggle with her children. By denying the house and furniture to the children, older people could break the upward economic spiral in the family. The children would have to start again in places where houses and space are scarce.

To older people, houses have special meanings. Besides being a haven and a ‘happy place’, houses signify relative wealth, especially those that are owned. Houses can be filled with belongings that attest the hard work of their owners. Ownership of a house, furniture, roofs, front doors, windows and every other part of the house contribute to the pride of the owner. To the people who have been displaced or had to leave their homes in Transkei or the Eastern Cape, their houses became a stable element in life; a space between roots and journeys. The township became a place where a new community could be imagined, as in a diaspora. Rituals and customs ‘from home’ could be practised and preserved by older people, as a form of the ‘social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration’ (Gilroy 1994: 204), and the primary ground of identity formation when a wider place and community attachment had been severed. Many of the informants had experienced destabilisation and breakdown. Crina, the matron of the old-age home, who had lived for many years in G said:

I grew up in W and then we were forcefully removed and came to stay in G. We were property owners. There were houses built, not attached to other houses. We used to rent them. G used to be a very nice, quiet place but now (there are) no jobs and all that: hijacking, stealing money, breaking in and all that. All that has come to the place now: it’s not so nice anymore. ... The old people don’t feel safe in their own houses. That is why people prefer to come here. ... The young people do their own things. They bring friends in the house and drink and you don’t want it.

Older people experience threats from inside and outside the house. The resulting strong sense of violation derives from the meaning and importance attached to a house or home. The Xhosa language distinguishes

*ikhaya* and *umzi*, the first for one's own house, the second for an institutional (or collective) home. The old-age home was built to provide a 'safe place' for older people, but to them it is an *umzi* not an *ikhaya*. An older person's home used to be a social space, and traditionally the eldest had the prime domestic authority. Today, their ideas about nurturance, family, gender roles and generational responsibility are not valued by the younger generations – they are silenced and cut off.

Older people's roles, places in the house and responsibilities are no longer fixed, and they no longer acquire the authority that in the past increased with age. Meals, traditionally a communal event in the family with strict rules of food division, are no longer eaten together. Children and grandchildren take their food whenever they want. The informants complained that there were no moments to sit together and 'talk', and that their children and grandchildren come and go as they like.

One of the most vivid accounts of this loss came in Nothemba's memories of the transfer of knowledge to the younger generation in her grandmother's home. She said that when a girl first menstruated, the grandmother would tell her the hygiene and social rules that the girl should follow. Then, Nothemba, with good humour and a smile turned to my research assistant, a young Xhosa man, and said: 'Listen, my child, you should think about this. How did you learn about sexual life?' He said, 'From my friends and schoolmates'. Nothemba replied, 'You see?' She implied not only that sex education was an appropriate task for older people, but also that it brought grandparents and grandchildren together. Nothemba's reasoning for drawing the research assistant into the conversation became apparent in a later conversation when she said, 'You remember the story about my first menstruation? The children of today should keep to those hygiene rules, then this horrible disease would disappear'. Of course she was referring to HIV and AIDS (a topic that requires another paper).

For older people, the house and home as 'a point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological' has become an alienating space (Braidotti 1994: 5). Unwanted people such as the 'bad friends' of the children and grandchildren intrude. I know of grandmothers who have to live in a back-garden shack. The house is no longer a place where generational succession implies continuity. It has become an insecure place, a place that is threatened from the inside and the outside and can suddenly change into a 'madhouse'. In this space, *remembering* – producing duration and continuity – cannot take place. The loss of a house means more than the loss of material goods; it is the loss of memories that were once social memories, a sense of loss that Eisenbruch (1991) called 'cultural bereavement'.

### How older people think about ‘getting through’

When I returned to Nothemba for a third conversation, she responded with a vivid account of the good and bad times in her life. She jumped up and gestured, to stress how horrible were her experiences. When she described being removed from a train by the police and pushed to the floor, one could sense the intensity of the personal insult. It still hurts her. In the middle of her story she stopped and said, ‘You make me think; everything comes back, it hurts but it is good to remember, you must get rid of it’. This is not to say that anthropologists should do therapeutic work with reminiscence, although they sometimes might. Nothemba’s remark raised my awareness of the process of ‘getting through’.

For many older people ‘getting through’ is not an option. A common response to my attempts to talk about the past was to explain that they did not want to think about it because they had too many sorrows. They were worried about their children who drank; they had disputes with neighbours who wanted to settle in their house; they were suspicious that the young care-assistants in the old-age home would rob them of their belongings; and they worried about how they would get to the hospital if the need arose. But they also related their life stories in a particular way, with many comparative remarks about their childhood, their children and grandchildren, and today’s young people in general. Nothemba’s account was characteristic:

I grew up with my grandfather and grandmother, and my grandfather was very strict. On Sundays we all had to go to church, every Sunday, and in the evening to the church. On Saturdays we worked at home doing washing and ironing and all, you know. As I grew up, I was a very good child in the house, making coffee for the old people. My grandmother was a very good mother: ‘come, come, come, my child, make coffee for me. ... Oh, I grew up with very good people; my family were very good people, church people, all my family; we grew up together. ... But now, the kids of today, they don’t like us.

Els: What is the difference?

Nothemba: Today’s children, they don’t look after their mother. They like to hide them somewhere and just take their *potjie* (food) out. But we looked after our *oumas* (grandmothers) and did washing and everything. Four o’clock we were in the house, not in the street like other children. No! Always busy. ... The children of today, they may be well educated, but they don’t respect old people; they don’t care about old people. They take old people [to be] like babies, you know. They talk about what they like. ... Everybody has got his or her own problems, children, children. They only want money; they want houses, *makulu mati* (don’t worry). Today’s children, you mustn’t trust them, they’re no good.

Such narratives include moral judgements. These particular versions of the past are common in the stories of older people and have an explicit moral purpose. Lambek (1996: 239) argued that such memories are a commentary on present-day family relations, which leads us to ask what is affirmed and what is rejected in older people's accounts. Is the moral claim of older people justified and appropriate? There is a hidden value and a pragmatic of forgetting: it avoids the simple opposition of good and bad.

Mr Somwahla, another resident aged 77 years, revealed the problem. Mr Somwahla had married and had one son whom he never saw because he was not on good terms with the mother. Speaking of the young Xhosa men of today, he commented:

There is one thing I hear about, which is the use of guns on the streets. It has become normal, but I don't like it at all. I think people today, even those here in this home, old or young, are generally spoilt. The children just re-enact the behaviour of the generation before. The generations before them have not set the right example for them.

Mr Somwahla blamed his peers and the children of his generation for not having given 'the right example', implying that when today's older people were young, their parents and grandparents provided correct examples of how to behave but were not listened to.

It is not uncommon for older people to remember a terrible time such as Apartheid as much better than the present. In *Collective Memory*, Halbwachs argued that the most painful aspects of the past are forgotten, because 'constraints are felt only so long as they operate and because, by definition, a past constraint has ceased to be operative' (Halbwachs 1992: 51). But the older people have not forgotten the pain. Older people continuously alternate between the past and the present, although their memories cause much pain. 'Everything comes back and I have to cry', one commented.

There is a deep desire among older people to live in peace. At one meeting, Nothemba said that she had just been listening to the radio and that the broadcaster had advised listeners to forget the past and to focus on the future. She reflected, 'I believe he was right, we must forget the past to live in peace', but she then immediately related the story about her suffering during Apartheid. Others also told stories of the horrific past, while saying that they should 'forget'. Although the present seems incompatible with the past, many older people are as unhappy with the present situation as they were with the past: not only its losses and injustices but also the hostile and broken relationships with neighbours, family and children. The abuse and disrespect of the present day orient them to feelings of unhappiness, loneliness, anxiety and disappointment.

Another element of their discontent is the rigid organisation of the old-age home. Many were reluctant to comment on its management, but some remarks were made. Several emphasised that they had no option but to remain in the home and that the nurses were doing a good job, but complained about losing possessions and money, the lack of privacy, the inconvenient meal times and the poor quality of the food, the monthly fee they had to pay, their dependence on others' care and the incessant boredom. They were made to feel incompetent, dependent and childlike. Nolindile said, 'In my opinion an old person's life is not very good. I feel that these days an older person is treated like a child'. To avoid causing conflict, the informants generally said nothing but their frustrations remained. Their present situation reinforces the unhappy outcomes of their lives.

### Discussion and conclusions

Memory refers to the practice of remembering, either through narratives or individual reflection. Expressing and sharing memories is widely thought to be a common activity in old age and one that helps to transcend and divert from a fixation upon suffering and loss. A great deal of remembering is about others, which strengthens connections with them. But for those older people in South Africa who are alienated from and marginalised within their communities, remembering separates rather than connects. When the older people's remembering is rejected, they not only fixate on their suffering but also acquire another source of misery. In these cases, the function of remembering changes to a moral practice that explores social positions, belonging and power (*cf.* Lambek 1981). In the worst cases, remembering becomes the antithesis of re-connecting.

The disadvantaged and frail older people who recounted their lives to me cannot *remember*, in the sense of relating positive social memories and (re)connecting themselves to others, particularly their closest relatives and descendants, but instead are disconnected from the social fabric. The ubiquity of violence, abuse, intrusion and family conflicts forces this generation of older people to confine their memories to themselves; very rarely do they have an audience. The contents of their memories are intricately linked to the recent manipulations and revisions of the past in South Africa. The official reworking by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of the past may suit various national mythologies, but the memories of a large group of the population – older people – are largely excluded. Older people who have 'lost out' symbolise the dilemmas around whether and how to remember the days of Apartheid. Older people in

South Africa are the flesh and blood of what younger generations want to forget: oppression, lack of freedom, submissiveness, servility and compromise. In the view of some younger people, older people embody these aspects of Apartheid, but my conversations have revealed that the core values of older people lead to more modulated judgements and compromise.

The different interpretations and explanations of the past by older and younger people may well be the source of the many problems that older people experience at present. Older people have different ideas of what should be remembered. The nature of relationships in the past, the absence of violence (whether true or not), and a former law-abiding order seem to dominate their mental maps, and become a moral commentary on the present. Older people are very critical of the young. Many statements about the younger generations are negative and dismissive: children and grandchildren ask for money and they drink, are spoilt, criminal, disrespectful and a nuisance.

Some older people have been shunted into the old-age home, but others resisted their children's bullying by withdrawing financial support, leaving the family home, and abandoning them.<sup>2</sup> The reader must keep in mind that the research participants were frail older people who needed care. I have also met old people who retained a satisfactory position in their households. But it is a bitter pill for old people to realise that once they begin to lose their strength and health, they may also lose their social positions and will have to leave the household and face a social death.

The silencing of older people's memories has arisen through a refusal to listen by those who have tacitly made a radical break with the past. This means that older people are unable to mourn their losses because they cannot 'locate [themselves] as actor within a seamless unity of past, present and future' (Adam 1992: 159). In this way, many older people lack meaningful frames to 'locate suffering in history, [or to place] events in a meaningful order in time' (Good 1994: 128), which in turn harms their vitality and morale. I have encountered many frustrated, angry, disappointed and depressed older people. Shame, fear and poverty deepen suffering and prevent older people from telling their stories and getting through their last years.

Their memories of the past have become peripheral and probably will disappear entirely. National policies of reconciliation together with the struggle for life will erase the ordinary stories of the people who were not actively involved in the freedom struggle during the Apartheid era. The answer to the question asked in this paper (can older people get through?) must be for very many 'no', even though they are not entirely helpless victims of the past and present (Van Dongen 2004). They resist

the abandonment and neglect of their experience, but they are frustrated by the younger people who want a radical break with the past. The result in many cases is bitterness and the inability to cope with both the past and the present.

The experiences and cultural knowledge of older people could make a positive contribution to the formation of a new South African identity. Their narratives and memories of inter-racial relationships based on mutual responsibility and trust should not be rejected but evaluated more subtly. Maybe the most important message from the memories of older people is that the consequences of a violent state system are long lasting. The traumas of older people could be interpreted as an element of the community's suffering – here lies their constructive meaning. When I asked Nothemba's permission to use the videotapes we made together for a documentary that would express older people's involvement in the world even when living in an old-age home, her response was: 'Use the film. Younger people must know everything. They can learn and the past must not be forgotten'.

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### NOTES

- 1 Nowadays, older people migrate to Cape Town for better health care or to be reunited with their children who migrated earlier.
- 2 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this observation.

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