

# THE BIOGRAPHICAL NAMING

<b>Biographical work on discrimination, artistic freedom and censorship</b> .....	2
Adapting the name to something familiar .....	2
Recognition as an artist .....	3
Censorship .....	4
Fight against discrimination .....	5
“Managing to grow up well and out of it.” .....	6
<b>Associations</b> .....	8
<b>Framework and conditions</b> .....	9
Development of the questions.....	9
<b>Why biographical work?</b> .....	11
<b>References</b> .....	14

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## Biographical work on discrimination, artistic freedom and censorship

The participants of the biographical workshop were invited to reflect on their own biographical stories concerning discrimination, censorship and artistic freedom. The first workshop in Iran could not take place as there was still the pandemic situation. I passed on the questions to the artist Mana Mira, our partner in Iran. She was willing to talk to individual people and ask them for their answers. Either she would translate the answers from Farsi to English or the guide in this project would translate the answers from Farsi to German. I received the answers from four participants via email - three in English and one in German.

The biographical workshop in Austria was held online with six participants and lasted around two hours. Sometimes when it was difficult to explain, the participants tried to support each other to find the right expression either in English or German. However, I am aware that some meanings remain uncertain, and some sentences are lost in translation. They were informed that the session would be recorded, and a transcript would be made for analysis. Their names would not be used and they would stay anonymous. The age of the participants was between 25 and 43.

When offering biographical workshops, impulses are set to trigger individual stories. The workshop started with the personal story of the first name, experiences surrounding artistic freedom and censorship, as well as discrimination. Adapting a name to a new society was described as a known procedure and was also addressed in the other workshops during the whole Mapping the Unseen project. Artistic freedom and censorship are related, as well as artistic freedom and discrimination, as artists are sometimes not taken seriously. Experiences of discrimination vary among the participants, but everyone experienced discrimination during their lifetime in the professional or private sphere due to age, gender, illness, race, migration, or sexual orientation.

Adapting the name to something familiar

They told stories surrounding their first name *“I love my name because it’s melodic, easy and sweet and actually in our country it’s very unique.”* (AB) Some names also have a certain

meaning such as dawn, sorcery, religious eulogies, or being on the right track or being the person who does the right thing and so on. Finding the name sometimes requires good inspiration: *“They were delighted that a suitable name came up. [...] N was a female singer and harpist in the royal court [...].”* (EF) But when coming to another country, people had difficulties understanding the name and pronouncing it correctly: *“I decided to do what most foreigners do, shortening my name to something familiar.”* This is unimaginable for some participants: *“Now I have the feeling that if ever my name were to be changed, a large part of me would disappear. Everyone calls me by that name, just like on my birth certificate.”* (GH) Changing one’s name evoke emotions, *“Am I happy I had to change my name, no not at all – but it has made my life much easier.”* (EF) Two other participants recounted similarly: [...] *“it was my European ‘brother’ who has given me the name, as he said, it’s so difficult to pronounce your name, so he chose a character out of the play station for me.”*(MT) When people liked their name, this adjustment into society was easier: *“most of the people in Carinthia call me by this nickname for girls, everyone understands this and I like it.”*(RS) This adaptation procedure is often welcome, as we have seen in the story with the play station. It seems to be funny and makes life easier, but it would be very interesting to do some further research on this instrumentalisation of the first name and how it may change so as to fit in given a new cultural setting. From another biographical workshop of Mapping the Unseen, another story emerged: accepting citizenship. The person was asked by the responsible officer to omit the wedge, which does not exist in the German language. But with that the name is pronounced differently. To what extent does one have to agree to become a citizen? On the one hand, it is a voluntary decision made by the person who applies for the citizenship. On the other hand, there is a certain pressure to decide.

### Recognition as an artist

When talking about recognition as an artist, a participant talked about the experience of her cousin, that art is not seen as work, and that she heard sentences about her like *“why is she not doing real work?”* (DN) Her conclusion is that artists are not taken seriously. *“She is an academic artist, but she could never get a job as an artist because [...] nobody took it seriously somehow. [...] She is an academic painter. Now [...] she has a tattoo studio and tattoos people. [...] She has tried to earn a living with her art.”* (DN) Another participant had a similar

experience: *“People ask, what do you do? [...] What work do you do, and the actress says, 'I'm an actress'. Okay but what is your work? My work is - I am an actress. You feel [...] they don't have a good opinion about this profession.”* (CC)

This experience was not unique and gave a first impression of what limitation to artistic expression may look and feel like: How does one approach artistic work when one is denied professional recognition totally. How can you talk about artistic freedom when you are even not accepted as an artist?

## Censorship

Feeling censored in the workplace, even though there was freedom all around, was expressed by one of the participants, when asked about censorship. *“I have experienced censorship throughout my life. Even after moving to the UK, purely because of being able to experience freedom, censorship has still been going on in my life. Even though I have worked for the largest and most well-known retail companies in the UK, I have felt I am being censored more than I ever was in Iran in the workplace.”* (EF)

Other examples of censorship were given with guidelines that performances are still restricted, just not allowed for women, censored, because of religious and gender constructions. *“[...] we unfortunately do not have such freedom. The women artists do not have the freedom if they want to show something, or to play, or to sing. [...] You have to follow so many rules.”* (RS) E.g., a woman is not allowed to sing in front of an audience. Even if they are fighting for their rights and are now allowed to sing together with other women, to do some practice, this restriction is still upheld.

Another participant was giving insight to experiences in ex-communist and ex-socialist countries, where artists during 1944 and 1989 were not at all free. They had to meet the given political topics, they had to follow the themes set by the state. *“At that time, there were only concrete themes that one was allowed to visualise. And many artists did not [...] agree with that. There are many examples that they did not have a [...] normal life in their homeland. For example, I know a woman, [...], a very talented artist. She didn't get a certificate because her master's thesis didn't meet the topical [...] standards, even though her father was a very influential artist, she didn't get public recognition.”* (VX)

In the curatorial note of Mana Mira, our partner in Iran, all these aspects came up as well, even the fact of self-censorship *“I always thought that the main problem was rooted in*

*psychological taboos, self-censorship, spreading rumours about artists and seclusion of men of thoughts and ideas by society.*” And her wish, hope and vision throughout different cultures and societies is: *“(w)e may surmount these barriers by making seen all the invisible chains. I wish that one day all artists can create freely and be seen - since being means becoming understood.”*

Fight against discrimination

When opening the topic of censorship, the topic of discrimination arises and with that the conversation also referred to gender issues, age, otherness and so on.

One participant started with the gender topic: *“I work with a man, we started a company together, two female clients communicated with us about the project we were doing. And because I am a woman, they just ignored everything I said and kept talking only to my colleague.”* (DN)

Another one told: *“During the application I didn't say I was pregnant because if I had, my boss and the commission would have known, and I would not have got this job.”* (VX)

Regarding sexual harassment, another participant stated: *“But I have often been in the situation where I had to defend myself. In a situation of discrimination or sexual harassment and I had to defend myself. My reaction to this situation was to shout out loud or get physical. The perpetrator, who expected me to stay calm and not say anything, was shocked and quickly left. My goal was that the perpetrator finally understands that the next time it could end even worse for him and that you don't have to remain silent against violence.”* (GH)

People have this strength to fight against discrimination, even if it happens too often, as one participant noticed: *“but sadly it has become so usual.”* (KL)

Furthermore, the combination of gender and age is a matter of particular discrimination, when getting older as an actress for example, you will not have the same opportunities as actors. The roles are limited, “e.g. they then always play the evil old woman” (DN). Age is also a topic as a child, when growing up subject to *“huge social goals”* and not getting respect - *“not have adequate attention and support”*. (AB)

Being in an immigrant position leads to a subordinate status projected by the host society, experienced by children and parents when refused by the playschool, *“(when I) was looking for a kindergarten place, I was rejected for a year”* (VX).

This experience is ongoing when it comes to institutions such as the job centre: *“you are looking for a job and straightaway their answer is, hey you’re not from here, we cannot help you, you know, you are a third country national”* (MT). Or when visiting a tax office: *“I feel discriminated against when I go to the tax office [...], people speak only dialect, unfortunately I understand totally zero”*. (CC)

Another participant explained how to overcome a difficult diagnosis: *“(F)inally I found a doctor who said sports can take this away. [...] I could quit the medication. [...] I am grateful because [...] of this advice of running. [...] I must say I am so much stronger, psychologically also, you know.”* (MT) Furthermore, invisible handicaps lead to discrimination and with that *“it leads [...] partly to a conditional self-made exclusion”*. (ZW)

Generalising in discussions subjects’ people to the hurtful feeling of racism, as described, *“(s)o I just felt it’s a bit [...] yeah that it was an attack on religion and on race, you know, mentioning Africa specifically you know”*. The participant was aware that he/she would face the topic again when the next get together was held and would *“rediscuss it and make sure that it doesn’t happen again”*. (MT)

With all these examples of how to tackle and resolve unfair situations, a sense of togetherness emerged among the participants.

*“Managing to grow up well and out of it.”*

*“When I want to deflect something so that it doesn't come too close to me, I meditate or sing. [...] Sometimes I scream when I am angry. [...] I have had to learn that. [...] And sometimes I write. [...] Then the head becomes freer. [...] Then I can be much more open in the communication with my environment.”* (ZW) Reflection on a variety of possibilities to act and support oneself positively, as well as resistance, arises in some participants: *“if someone says something negative to me or no, 'you can't do that', that gives me strength, I have to do that. Yes, [...] I think what I can do to be successful”* (RS). Encouragement is given as one participant describes, *“what encourages me [...] that we try to understand others. [...] I think [...] this malice comes from dissatisfaction with oneself, [...] we just have to be reminded that each of us has a story and that we all are winning, because we are still fighting in this life, and we are continuing to move forward”*. (DN)

Sometimes traditions empower, e.g. *“We use a self-made Marteniza (bracelet) to give, to share. There are many beautiful traditions that strengthen and support us, no matter where we are and what situation we are in.”* [VX]

Even if one is feeling discrimination all around - *“I’m carrying it with me even now”*- the assumption is: *“I wouldn't be here right now in my life, that I can say very out loud, that I'm proud of myself for getting over it”*. (AB) One participant concludes: *“we have different life experiences, [...] we are not alone, we live in a society, [...] we can support each other.”* (VX)

Those who experience discrimination and censorship develop individual strategies to cope. There also seems to be awareness of discrimination in mainstream society, but it looks like it is accepted everywhere. This leaves us with the question of how anti-discrimination programmes could be improved: What strategies are needed to bring justice and equality into the opinion and behaviour of this society, where the majority seems aligned with the binary viewpoint of ‘me’ and ‘the other’? Further research could open up the unseen facts of the connection between power structures, power use and the need for binary systems to exclude, to discriminate and to censor people.

Or even better, the question for the future can be, how to create togetherness, solidarity and sharing. How to create a society where discrimination and abuse of power are excluded? How to develop justice and freedom? May be these questions are all-encompassing but for me they are vital.

## Some of my associations

How is encounter possible in Covid times?

How much encounter is possible in general?

Me being in a prioritised position.

What are we allowed to know from each other?

How can I understand being disenfranchised?

Entrechtet sein.

Who will decide which story will be told?

Who is erased from history?

Again, I find myself lost in translation.

But feeling what is said.

I believe in an art of justice.

I believe in togetherness,

That a social change is possible

Ro recognise humanity.

Seeing from a subjective position

Finding myself everywhere

Plurality, multiplicity, diversity is greater than binarity.

We open rooms that we enable encounter.

Spaces of possibilities.

Areas of recognition.



## Framework and conditions of the workshops

### **BIO-WS 5, Iran**

**topic:** discrimination, censorship

January-February 2021

**due to Covid-19**

**questioning via e-mail**

face to face by Mana Mira

4 participants

### **BIO-WS 6, Carinthia**

**topic:** discrimination, censorship

30 March 2021

**Online via Zoom Link due to Covid-19**

Duration: 2 hours

group setting

6 participants

All participants are anonymised just with letters from A-Z

Development of the questions for the two workshops

### **BIO-WS 5 Iran - Preparation via e-mail – answers also via e-mail**

“Do you know the story of your name - who gave it to you? Why? Are you happy with the name? Are there nicknames you like or do not like? What is the meaning of your name?”

“Do you have a special item in your pocket or in your bag or on your body? What is it and can you tell a story about that? Or can you explain the meaning of this item? Is this something that empowers you?”

“Do you have an experience of discrimination/censorship that you want to share or that you can share with us by telling us a story?”

### **BIO-WS 6 Villach – Carinthia - Austria**

“We have a first name, which we have carried with us since the beginning of our lives and which was given to us. What is the story of your first name? Do you know who gave it to you? Do you know the meaning of your name? Have you always been happy with your first name? Are there any abbreviations or did you choose something else for yourself? What stories are there about your name? Do tell us about it, if you like.”

“I would like to touch on the first topic that we actually started from, which is censorship, artistic freedom. Can it be experienced everywhere, or how do artists feel about it? What

experiences do you have or what stories do you know that occur to you now, from your work or living environment?"

"I would now like to introduce the second topic chosen by the artist Mana Mira, namely discrimination. And I want to address that on a personal level and ask what you would all be willing to tell."

"Thank you very much for these dense accounts of your personal experiences. I still have a question or a request for you now. You are familiar with such difficult situations and there are things that help you to overcome them, that give you strength. Now I ask you, what do you have in your pocket that you always have with you?"

## Why biographical work?

The approach to biographical work arises from the interest in developing the 'history' of the people who are involved, thereby depicting the reality of the perceived image of the human being and the world in relation to the recorded history. History can be understood as the history of all living humans. But in fact the common, official, recorded history is male-orientated and excludes a range of life stories. The biographical workshops developed in this project aim to include precisely these unseen, unheard, undercover, undiscovered stories. They open a shared space for a range of differing life stories, even those that have not been told in public so far, as it is up to the narrator what is recounted.

In recent decades, there has been a "turn towards biographical methods", especially in social science (Chamberlayne, Bornat, Wengraf, 2000). But biographical research in social science is already an old approach that started a century ago in Chicago with Thomas and Znaniecki's work with Polish migrants, questioning marginalisation, exclusion and transition. Its importance continues up until today, as Apitzsch and Inowlocki show:

*"[...] much qualitative interpretive research, and especially biographical analysis, does not presuppose social normality but rather asks about experiences during times of social transformation and in moments and times of crisis, and the emergence of needs for new social practices to prevent further exclusion or the complete breakdown of individual or social life."*  
(Apitzsch, Inowlocki, 2000:55)

The opinion and experience of individual people regarding the question of human existence are important especially in specifying the historical development of societies also as a history of subjectivity, as Luisa Passerini with her understanding of memory and oral history has pointed out. (1988/1996) Historian Joan Wallach Scott began to ask other questions about history: which status quo should be protected? Which contradictions have not been shown? Which invisibilities were honoured? To whom were the causes of the problems attributed - only those who pointed them out? It was she who finally defined the term gender as a completely new category, namely on the one hand as one that creates a difference in the first place, on the other hand as a "kind of power relationship". (Scott 1994: 18 quoted from Opitz-Belakhal 2010:13). According to Scott, the differences are first brought about through

representation and the discussion in which they are embedded. This discourse includes ways of speaking and thinking that produce and construct realities. In other words, if it makes a difference, there will be a difference. According to Scott, gender can be explored on several levels: 1. Culturally available symbols, 2. Normative concepts that attempt to justify these symbols, 3. Social organisations and 4. The subjective identity. Subjectivity is a condition for knowledge, but also represents the limitation of the capacity for knowledge. According to Scott, the main aim was to examine the historical, social and cultural conditions that are necessary for the development of identity. (See Opitz-Belakhal 2010:15). And Scott also states: "Experience is at once already an interpretation." (Scott1992:37 cited in Cranny–Francis 2004:39). Laura Lee Downs criticised Scott for being involved with the subject on an abstract level and not with the potential for action, the so-called agency and the experiences of people. She notes: "The focus on intersectionality, subjectivity and freedom of choice should illuminate the individual as an actor and give us a finer-grained and less deterministic understanding that looks beyond the collectivity that can arise in the course of political control" (Downs 2018:115).

In this biographical work for Mapping the Unseen, individual life experiences are important, as our interest is to understand and illuminate the emotions of the experience a person has in their social world, that makes an individual into a subject (see Cranny-Francis 2004:37). It comes to subjectively interpreted experience, a certain "narrative truth" (Kizilhan, 2005). Biographical work implies a discussion of memories, which reveal personal experiences and attitudes, thus granting access to social realities on a subjective and socio-historical level. In fact, the biographical workshops offered used elements from applied theatre, such as props and a timeline. At the same time, we consider that there is also an emotional recall by the participants and a creative process happens, as it is an invitation to tell it how it is, how individuals feel it and why it is so experiential for that individual person in that particular way. In the biographical narration, the person is there in his, her, their entirety, where the emotional life, rational understanding, the ups and downs of life, sometimes even the shamefully concealed are given space so that they acquire meaning and significance. Even dreams and wishes would find their place. Biographical research is of immense importance with its linked social context and perspective on non-hegemonic ways of living and loving. (see Gregor/Ruby, 2018, Stauber, 2018). Authentic narratives/stories are sought, and "own

experiences" are shared with others and are reconstructed. (Reich 2008) Fundamentally, I draw on the thoroughly political approach that emerges from Frigga Haug's model of subject-oriented research (1997/2001).

The way biographical work is applied here also opens access to intuitive memory, as it can emerge in a group setting, providing opportunities for associations and counteracting forgetting. To paraphrase writer and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, the conscious refreshing of memory is also a form of conscious creative process.

*“Die Erinnerung (der bewusste Akt des Sich-Erinnerns) ist eine Form von gewolltem Schaffensvorgang. Es geht nicht um das Bemühen herauszufinden, wie es wirklich war – das ist Recherche. Es kommt darauf an, sich damit zu befassen, wie es einem erschien und warum es einem auf diese spezielle Weise erschien.“ (2020:505)*

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