

THE BIOGRAPHICAL READING

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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 precisely include 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)

Framework conditions of these workshops

BIO-WS, Dhaka

topic: Mapping the devoid of subjecthood of the invisible Rohingya refugees
29-31 March 2020 cancelled

due to Covid-19

Questioning through e-mail

in July - **not possible** due to Covid-19 and limited Wifi access

BIO-WS 4, Carinthia

topic: Fleeing, Isolation and Invisibility of (Rohingya) refugees
20 December 2020

Online via Zoom Link due to Covid-19

Duration: 2 hours
group setting
4 participants

All participants are anonymised just with one letter from A-Z

Development of the questions

BIO-WS Dhaka-Bangladesh - Preparation through e-mail – no answers available

Can you tell me a story relating to your name?

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?

What do you nearly always take with you?

You might have it 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? Maybe there is also a connection to the topic of the “the devoid of subjecthood of the invisible Rohingya refugees”, if yes can you please write it down.

Do you have an experience of displacement?

Do you have an experience of expulsion that you want to share or that you can share with us?

BIO-WS 4 Villach – Carinthia - Austria - ONLINE TALK

“Thank you for being here and I would like to start now. I prepared a very simple question to establish contact in the first round: where are you sitting now? Who is with you or are you alone now? And how did you set it up for the next two hours?”

“My next question will lead to childhood. In this sense, as you have already said, history is actually the history of all people, as well as of individuals. Please describe a Sunday or a day with no work, a day off. Here culturally it is usually Sunday. How was this day when you were 6 or 7 years old, so around the time you started going to school? How was such a day off when you went to school?”

“I would like to briefly stick to this holiday or day off feeling. Christmas is a big festival of the year that is celebrated here. I think there are different big celebrations or holidays in all cultures, which you might also particularly like. A very big celebration that you have always looked forward to, when you got together with the extended family. Or perhaps it was a birthday or some other celebration. What did you like about it? How was it? Who else was there? What inspired you, what was so typical about it, what did it bring you?”

“I still have a few unanswered questions that I just thought of now, after we had already pointed out the direction - with this ex-Yugoslavia conflict and the situation of leaving the country. I would now like to come to the big issue of escape that accompanies our project here. What is your point of contact for each of you respectively? Regarding the issue of escape, flight, being a refugee?”

“Is there something that you always have with you and that somehow gives you security or strength, or where you notice, subconsciously, that you always have it with you in your pocket?”

“I would like to conclude with a question: is there a story about your surname, first name, family name that comes to mind? Which is perhaps important regarding your name, which you would also like to share with us?”

THE BIOGRAPHICAL READING

Biographical work in the context of 'The Devoid of Subjecthood of the Rohingya refugees', displacement and Fleeing.

The first workshop on this topic should have taken place in Bangladesh, but due to the pandemic situation it was not possible to go there. The flights were cancelled and with the lockdown situation the cooperating artist Ebadur Rahman¹ was also not able to go on as proposed with the work *"Ten days that shook the world"*, as he stated in his curatorial note. Through phone contact and video conferences, we tried to stay in contact with the artist. I passed on the impulse set for the biographical work as it was: do you know the story of your name? Who gave it to you? Why? Are there stories surrounding the name? Can you tell us a story? What do you have nearly always with you? Is there a connection to the topic? Can you tell a story about that? Do you have an experience of displacement, expulsion or lockdown that you want to share?

It was not possible for the artist to pass on these questions due to the lockdown situation, the restricted internet situation and he himself was reorganising his artistic work in a new setting. The fact is, we did not get any data from these surroundings. The only facts we got were from newspaper articles or social media. "The Rohingya people are an ethnic group from western Myanmar who have lived there since the 4th century. Islam embedded itself into the community around the 7th century when Muslims began to settle in the area. Rohingya continued to be accepted members of society until the late 20th century. First, it started with the Myanmar government discriminating against them. [...] Currently, Rohingya Muslims are dispersed in several South East Asian countries, number one being Bangladesh due to its close proximity to Myanmar. According to Bangladeshi authorities, there are more than 1.1 million refugees in the country who mostly live in crowded camps [...] United Nations (UN) Secretary General António Guterres described the situation as "a humanitarian and human rights nightmare."²

¹ Curatorial note by Ebadur Rahman: *"In 10 Days That Shook The World"* see the programme leaflet.
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² (http://othercollective.org/rohingya-refugees-personal-stories-of-fleeing-persecution/?fbclid=IwAR3NSiAjEWCB_c3XKskh8u7znvg1dwPz2zjsXio5yvqT0d5wlmxEXKkiwRQ)

The question remains as to when this unacceptable situation will be solved, and the International Court of Justice will work on that, as the United Nations Organisation also sees the persecution of this minority as a genocide. And Bangladesh is not going to the International Court of Justice but is transferring the Rohingyas to an inhospitable island, as Amnesty International reports: "On December 4, 2020, the authorities relocated more than 1,600 Rohingya refugees. Although this plant has not yet been declared safe and habitable by the United Nations, the government will bring about 100,000 Rohingya refugees from the refugee camp near the town of Cox Bazar on the remote island of Bhasan Char."

We did not meet the Rohingya, we did not learn any stories from these people who fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. We do not have any story and do not know the history of the Rohingya. The Rohingya do not have any contact with the world. In the refugee camps there is no Wi-Fi connection. No chance to tell the stories. Only a few media people or human rights supporters know about their situation.

In European countries such as Austria, part of the system is that people are kept in camps, as one participant told: *"Yes, I [...] am there for the refugees who have any social problems. Or simply when they need someone to talk to. And the conversation should also be private. [...] Many speak Arabic and Farsi and other languages that I don't know, and we don't always have an interpreter."* (W) Using Google creates pressure, *"I think it puts pressure on other people when they want to tell something privately. [...] And I did not want to google everything that was going on. It put pressure on me."* (Z) This waiting situation in the camps affects people dramatically, *"if they spend more time in this in-between life situation, [...] this threat that they can be rejected is always there and, yes, I know people who have been in this camp for 7 years. And they do not know what is going to happen with their lives. [...] The organisation of refugees has been really bad until now. But now they have Wi-Fi access."* (W) This refugee camp was established 4 years ago. That would mean that also refugees in Austria did not have access to Wi-Fi in this camp. An additional problem is that people can only walk in one direction and the camp is situated far away from the town. Another part of civil society reacted differently, one can say a turnaround has already happened *"There is a young man who is looked after by my mom and who lives with us. And what did my mom do, [...] she sat down in the evening and started learning Arabic. For her it was quite normal."* (T)

Do we really need this dehumanising behaviour to exclude people from the possibility to live a good life or even to survive? There is resistance against these strategies of isolation,

foreclosure, exclusion, devoid of subjecthood. Will it be possible to see a turnaround, as we already see in examples of the solidarity of people, and end the separation between migration and sedentariness, between migrant and non-migrant?³

Some voices

The biographical workshop in Austria was held online with 4 participants and lasted around two hours. First, the language had to be clarified, with people agreeing to speak in German and when necessary, they would switch to English. Sometimes when it was difficult to explain, the participants tried to help each other to find the right expression in English or German. But I am aware that some meanings stay uncertain, and some sentences are lost in translation. The atmosphere was very appreciative and esteeming. To tell and to listen were equally important for the participants. 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 remain anonymous. The age of the participants was between 29 and 42.

The first round tried to make the participants comfortable with the situation in this virtual biographical session. They went on to talk about their family festivities and their childhood, as well as about their experience of fleeing and the support they received.

Not being able to tell

The importance of storytelling and talking about history was emphasised right at the beginning of the biographical workshop in Carinthia by one participant: *"History is the story of people and where does the story of people begin with biographies and who creates the history of individual people with their thoughts, with their actions, and each individual action can contribute."* (T) It is often difficult to learn your own story from the parents, as already at the moment you experience it they may gloss over it, so that the implications are not understandable - and much remains unspoken: *"I said at the beginning that this is like an adventure. I didn't say we were refugees or that it was bad. I played a positive role as his*

³ See Regina Römhild, (2018). Konvivialität – Momente von Post-Otherness. In Yildiz, E.; Hill, M.; Yildiz, E.; (Hg.) *Postmigrantische Visionen. Erfahrungen – Ideen – Reflexionen*. transkript (p. 63-71)

mother. [...] that was not easy, and I always played with him as an adventure, and I had fun with him." (Z) Parents cannot tell or tell only fragments of the fleeing as something (still) not known – and as an adult you cautiously search for traces of what it was really like. Sometimes you find scattered puzzle pieces. "So, I don't have any, indirectly no fleeing history but only a fleeing experience that was passed on transgenerationally by the parents. So only from reports, [...] I would also like to learn more, but the possibility does not exist, because mother does not want to talk about the fleeing. Every time you try to talk, they cut you off... Then mother tries to tell me something, but not so much. [...] These are only fragments of my past, which I also unfortunately cannot reconstruct. [...]. But I hope that [...] through the years, [...] a holistic picture emerges." (Y) Uncertainties may remain, as well as gaps and breaks sometimes caused by a trauma that prevents narration. "It's an emotional issue, [...] I think it is a two-way process. [...] I hope it will take a little time and then she will open up. I think she will tell me." (Y) People therefore remain optimistic that the story will be revealed.

This feeling of untold stories, forgotten memories, a vanished past, continues in the region where the participants live. One participant noticed "[...] as I also drove through the Gailtal yesterday I was thinking of the displacement of Slovenians and where there are wounds. So, [...] I drove through villages with place-name signs where I noticed that it was totally Slavic, funny that this was actually normal in the Kanalta, this trilingualism (meaning Italian, Slovenian, German) and in the Gailtal it could simply be erased." (T) Additionally, it prompted fleeing stories from the Nazi era "With me it was [...] I was not affected [...] but I felt very much for the people at the start of the Yugoslavian war. [...] And [...] the second thing was that I was shaped by stories of fleeing [...] quasi of resistance but also of fleeing. So as Y also says, so epigenetic in that case that it didn't affect me. But I know about my great aunt who fled from the Nazis and then hid in an alpine hut for 1 ½ years and endured fears as a woman alone [...]."(T)

Helping hands

Coming to the new surroundings meant learning the language, going to school, familiarising oneself with a new culture and as a child there were strategies how to deal with that. "I chose 3, 4 neighbours. So, one neighbour, a second, a third, a fourth and I always alternated between them as a 6-year-old, always visiting a different one, because otherwise it was noticeable if I

came every Sunday that they might be bored or annoyed by me and so I always sought out different neighbours. And of course, when a 6-year-old stands in front of the door with a book and says can you help me, no one has ever refused." (Y). For another family it turned out that they feel well supported here "[...] and we have no war here, thank God. And he, my son, has a good start here to build his future." (Z) The mother sees hope, wishes and possibilities here, that the future can flourish here. When children have the chance to be promoted by good teachers as Y describes, they fulfil their own motivation and the expectation to develop as well as others. "I would also like to be as good as Thomas and Desiree. [...] I'd like to be that way too. My teacher always motivated me - look, you can do it, [...] you can do that, too." (Y) But children also have other experiences: "I was in the second grade of elementary school, there was a classmate who came from Croatia and [...] I invited [...] her and then she said to me, you know that you are the first to invite me home." (T)

There are different approaches and strategies as to how people were supported: "So this nice man, he employed all of them. For him, it was like a project. I take in the whole family and they work. The women mostly planted flowers, and the men worked on the construction site. That was such a project for him. I support you." (Y) In that way, gratitude and a certain kind of dependence arise. In the end, he helped 6 families and they all helped him. One participant stated, "You never asked because you were grateful to this person that you could come to Austria." (Y) On the other hand, it is important that a process is initiated against prejudices and otherness in the host society, as some projects already try to do with new arrivals: "It is important to me to include these people in our newspaper as well. We have to raise awareness so that these hardened attitudes can be broken down." (T)

And accumulatively perhaps these children, these people with a new perspective, will one day create imaginary spaces, archives, where the disappeared, the untold, the silenced will be collected – the future will be created. Their best practices can open up spaces for research that goes beyond hegemonial criticism towards cosmopolitanism and a post-otherness time, as there already exists a strong solidarity in civil society and an openness towards the incoming people⁴.

⁴ See Regina Römhild, (2018). Konvivialität – Momente von Post-Otherness. In Hill, M.; Yildiz, E.; (Hg.) *Postmigrantische Visionen. Erfahrungen – Ideen – Reflexionen*. transkript (S. 63-71)

Coming together

Festivities represent spaces for get togethers and have an atmosphere where negotiation can start.

"At the Ramadan [...], everyone met there, because I think that was just such a wonderful moment for us, where the family from all over the world came together, such a fixed point, [...]. But this coming home, in quotation marks, was really [...] where the family sits together. That also [...] shaped my childhood [...]. [...] that was exactly the point that always excited me, this network of the diaspora, which simply comes together and discusses important topics, [...] about how the grandfather distributes the land, who gets what. So, everything was discussed in these few days and it was always so exciting to listen to. The room was full of people. They were sitting on the floor. Little ones crawled under the table, the others were sitting around the table. With the grandparents the whole room was completely full. It was scalding hot because the tiled stove was always fully heated. So, with 20 people inside it was really like a sauna. But that was the experience. We discussed all topics and they were passed on to me as a child. So, you meet, you discuss everything." (Y) Whereas for another participant living in diaspora, this festivity is celebrated now *"with girlfriends and with friends, but only for one and not three days. We have quite a small circle now in our home"*. (Z) At this time, it is not yet possible to meet other family members from other parts of the world because of the pandemic situation and the protection measures they are subject to. But also, for another participant, a change from a gender perspective happened compared to his childhood happened, with the grandmother speaking instead of the grandfather. *"Now she is the one who takes centre stage. Now I've listened to you enough for twenty and thirty years, she says, be quiet for once, now I'll speak from my perspective."* I find that so exciting from this gender perspective, that it has also changed. Because he is then silent for once, because she says: *"now it is my turn to talk. You've been talking for 20 years."* (Y)

Anyway, this coming together as an extended family is a good place to negotiate and to discuss: *"we had breakfast for three hours, where we then simply sat together many times. [...] and what I can also remember and [...] there has always been a lot of political discussion. [...] there were just always a lot of people there who were emotionally sympathetic to you and where you could cry and where you could talk things out and there was always a feeling of wideness."* (T) Or ongoing discussions about the future and life, *"what are you doing [...], what*

is your wish [...]” (Z) take place and with that there are ambivalent attitudes regarding the concept of life. The awareness and the attention that are passed on in that situation are important, “everyone got their attention [...] and it was nice to see that joy that you feel, but also when the others were happy. And that was very nice for me.” (W)

New perspectives are already provided by critical migration research. All the positive aspects emerging from the findings of this biographical work can reinforce this new reading, set up a new version in this socio-historical context. The whole framework of values and norms by which one maintains one's self-esteem and by which one orients oneself in interpersonal relationships develops with the experience described above, because one lives in two societies at the same time. In addition, people also develop their self-culture. If these discussions also took place with an extended family of all people in the society, based on transcultural practice, as “Gesellschaften bestehen aus Menschen, die da sind und da leben wollen,”⁵ it would open up new areas of action to create the future. According to Yildiz, such in-between spaces are so-called transtopias, where histories and social developments are rewritten and interconnected in different ways: “Transtopien als Orte zu verstehen, an denen Geschichten und gesellschaftliche Entwicklungen neu geschrieben und auf unterschiedliche Art und Weise miteinander verknüpft werden.”⁶ Following this, it is time for migration to be seen as a constitutive element of social reality that encourages other representations. “Diese Lesart gesellschaftlicher Verhältnisse dekonstruiert nicht nur die hegemoniale Normalität, sondern eröffnet neue Perspektiven auf marginalisierte, nicht erzählte Geschichten und alltägliche Erlebnisse. Es geht um das Ausgelassene, Vergessene, an den Rand Gedrängte, kurz gesagt um ignorierte Migrationserfahrungen.”⁷ Biographical work can make an important contribution to this epistemological turnaround and open up possibilities. Working out how to belong to multiple cultures is experienced as enrichment and expansion, as well as how a space of encounter, a meeting space, encourages working together (on projects), living together in urban and rural areas and how this can lead to another perspective, another version of experience, with the impetus to recognise resources as resources and humans as humans.

⁵ Erol Yildiz, (2018). Vom methodologischen Nationalismus zu postmigrantischen Visionen. In Hill, M.; Yildiz, E.; (Hg.) *Postmigrantische Visionen. Erfahrungen – Ideen – Reflexionen*. transkript (p. 46)

⁶ Ebd. (p. 57)

⁷ Ebd. (p. 58)

Some of my associations

Unlearn

Undock

Decolonize

How?

Observe. Encounter.

Audience. Host.

Exchange questions

Hear answers,

sum up,

interpret

associate.

To reconstruct

repair broken dignity.

Stop on the border

What kind of border

The border of normative life

The border to survive

How is the view?

How is the reading?

What kind of attributions are used?

What do we focus on?

Power dictates the norm.

Who empowers this authority,

With the strategy to make everything unseen for us.

What are we not allowed to see?

The camps in Kara Tepe, Bilhac, Libya

We can close our eyes?

We need a new framework.

trying to save our society.

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Further reading on the depth hermeneutical approach by Regina Klein in the bookshelf.