

THE BIOGRAPHICAL SPACE

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Biographical work in the context of LGBTIQ

The participants of the Biographical Workshops reflected on their own biographical stories relating to LGBTIQ. Each of the three workshops lasted around two hours and offered a safe space for mutual exchange. It was neither a therapeutical group session nor just a loose gathering.

First, the language had to be clarified, with people agreeing to speak in English and that they would translate themselves. Sometimes when it came to Croatian or other mother tongues, the participants tried to help each other to find the right expression in English. However, I am aware that some meanings stay uncertain, and some sentences are lost in translation. The atmosphere was very appreciative. 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, they would remain anonymous. There were three different workshops with different people participating in the two locations (Zagreb, Klagenfurt). The age of the participants ranged between 25 and 65, one person participated in all three workshops.

When offering biographical workshops, various impulses are given so as to initiate the individual storytelling. The questions differed in the three workshops and started with the personal connection to LGBTIQ, their name and the story surrounding that, the emotions relating to the umbrella term LGBTIQ and personal feelings regarding the letters, the topic of privacy or political actions and how this led to their activism and micro activism. I was also using a timeline with important legal landmarks, as a backdrop of their own timeline of activism. To reveal challenges and needs, hopes or necessary societal changes that participants would have for the future, an opportunity of to imagine an ideal future was given at the end of every workshop.

Desire and emotions

"[...] I have this, I don't know, somehow aversion towards, you know, those letters, ah, which is, you know, kind of weird because of everything that I do I try to, you know, simplify ... use just like one, one single word which is queer (A).

Others said that defining themselves with L for lesbian didn't make them feel good, as they have no sympathy for this expression, as it is *"unappealing for me [...]. If I say it to someone I*

would say *I am falling in love with a woman [...]*” (O). The discomfort went on and the letter Q was more appropriate for most of them, *“Q because I like this somehow this term... I like it because it's fluid, it's flexible [...]. Should I define myself now... so is it pansexual... is it bisexual... it is always interesting”* (Q), meaning clearly that it is the person that is interesting.

What we can draw from this, is that even the umbrella letters LGBTIQ may not be enough for people to identify with it. What we see, is that definitions and expressions are rather very individual, connected to the personal desire or non-desire, *“I was like feeling maybe I am asexual because I didn't feel like [...] I wasn't feeling. I don't have any lust for a flirt.”* (U). Overall, the difficulty to allocate a certain “letter” to a certain orientation brought the discussion to question why the matter of belonging to a particular sexual orientation is so important in the society?

Inner conflicts

Coming out stories were discussed among other making reference to that labelling. Moreover, reference was made to a particular dilemma: Often ‘well-known codes’ would be in use, which would “privately” clarify a person’s orientation, e.g. within a family circle, while in public ‘nobody speaks about it’. *“[...] when I was thirteen, I told my mother that I'm a lesbian and she said ok. But she was only like ‘But please don't tell anybody else because I'm worried about you.’ And I'm not the kind of person that can be quiet. So, everybody knew that I was gay. [...], I outed myself [...]. In eighth grade, yeah. And, yeah, it was, I don't know. For me, it was not so hard. There was hate and something, but for me it was harder that, the feeling that, ah, the people who love me and support me, like my mother, are also like ‘Please be hush. Ok, you can be gay, but be gay for yourself. Just don't talk about it.’ Don't, yeah, just do it privately.”* (H) *“So, when I came out, my mother was also like, I mean as in shock, like, ah ‘Oh, please don't tell anyone.’ What will neighbours say? What will people from work say?”* (A) *“My grandparents didn't know about it and I chose it, [...] not to tell them. I brought my girlfriends with me, but I never introduced them as my partners. So, my grandmother [...] she died at the age of 100. So, she was quite old, and she was also very Catholic and I [...] decided to...not make a big thing of it. There were situations where my grandmother asked my mother won't she ever have any boyfriend or any husband and is there no man in her life.”* (S)

“So in my generation it was even more of a secret. We all knew, I think even the O... knew exactly who ... how ... but that was then swept under the carpet. That has changed over time.”(R)

“[...] he was far older when he started to go outin the gay scene and I can remember we had a birthday party. I think it was his 40, 50...I don’t know, I was quite young and I know the people were talking some kind of code. You know ... I recognised it was like okay I knew they were talking about something special, but I didn’t know what about. Then I knew, okay they are talking about my uncle and okay there are friends of him and they are in some way also special, so, this was the recognition of a little child who didn’t know anything about that.” [S] “[...] My family is very traditional and very religious, [...]. I was a very good child, I listened to everything and I was a little bit like a sponge, whenever they told me I did just the way they told me, despite how I felt and what I felt. So, I went to church and everything. And I googled: 'What do lesbians do?' [...] Because I didn’t know anybody and my family is devout [...] When I googled lesbians and I found some forum and then I started [...] I was reading and then I typed something, [...] I didn’t know where to start. Or how to look, how to act, I didn’t know anything. I didn’t know the language, the slang they were using. I didn’t know anything. [...] I started forcing myself out more because I’m not a very extroverted person, I am not very loud and it took me a lot [...] to even realize that I’m okay, [...] and then the situation at home -I didn’t want to tell them, I didn’t want them to know because they were still arguing very much against it and [...]it was enough because it felt good just to not have to explain something to someone [...] but just to know that you’re really not alone and it really made me feel better. [...] And just the fact that I realised there is a whole group of them and going out and places to go - I felt relieved [...]. (K)

But contrary stories also came to light, *“After coming out I was the funny rainbow sheep everywhere. Oh my god, every side cut and ...so much makeup on it..go for it girl...at every queer party I know {...}. It was a very exciting time.” (O).*

It is of interest to see that keeping silent only not to hurt other family members is a shared experience by many participants. It would be interesting to explore the dynamics of this further, in future research projects: Why do parents instruct their children to keep quiet? What really makes people keep silent, to keep it “private”?

Privacy

When talking about this personal desire, certain dilemmas emerge about privacy and political behaviour, “[...] even if you don’t do it, your privacy is attacked, no matter, because if you come out with it you can be private because it is supposed that people are heteronormative.”

(B) *“[...] people don’t appreciate the privacy of other persons anymore. In my mind it doesn’t matter if this has something to do with sexual orientation, but it has something to do with respect. Because when someone comes to me and gives me this gift of trust, I think it’s something I have to care about.”* (S).

“It’s a dilemma [...] I always have this concept that the private is political because [...] of course we all know the story if you are a heterosexual woman, a straight woman, in company you talk about your weekend, you talk about your children (...). You are talking about this. That’s normal, you show photos etc. etc. etc. If you aren’t straight, it’s a little bit weird till you get used to it.” (Q)

And this dilemma is ongoing even for parents or children. “For me it was interesting in my school. In my workplace I have some colleagues who I know are openminded and ...they know it. But I don’t say it to everyone.” (R).

Nobody can decide for another person, as they sometimes need to take their time or use circumvention strategies to say something that they cannot say, “I supposed that she was kind of hiding. Well, the question is who knows what about whom. And does one if she/he/they are not activist, do we always have, all the time a kind of label, some kind of ...to show off all the time? That’s another question.” (Q)

Heteronormativity, patriarchal tradition and religion

During this part of the conversation the stories that surround the giving of a first name were discussed. For example: participants were invited to tell the story of ‘my first name’: *Why was it chosen? Who gave me this name and why?* The family stories came up and the intergenerational transition with the grandfather as a central figure became visible, as well as the resistance of the mothers to follow the patriarchal system. *“[...] got it after my grandfather [...]”* (J). *“I got my name as well as [...] from the heritage from the family. Ah it was from my great grandfather.”* (L)

"[...] grandfather died a couple of weeks before I was about to be born, so they named me after him too [...] my family is very traditional and very religious [...]." (K)

"My grandfather wanted to give me the name Anna. But my mother didn't want like that name, so they decided to call me [...]. (M)

So, sometimes mothers and fathers resisted and chose the name outside of the family tradition.

Family traditions relating to naming children became visible as strong and enduring, especially if religion was interconnected *"From the religion where I come from with another cultural concept... I also feel a lot of pressure, [...]" (U)*

This pressure leads to family conflicts and emotional consternation spreads: *"And in between we had also some crashes and struggles and were totally attacked by religion. It's a religion of hate, it's not the religion of love, because if you made a distinction etc. etc." (Q).*

The answer of the participants was often orientated towards familial and societal engagement: *"throughout my life I was trying to redefine the traditional conservative, ah, concept of relationships." (G)*

The connection between heteronormative societal patterns, patriarchal tradition and religious behaviour is manifest and visible. For the participants this led and leads to unfulfilled expectations – things that they cannot fulfil for their family or loved ones. What does this so-called normality do to those who live and love in a non-heteronormative way? What does it do to those who do not fulfil the expectations of heteronormativity, of this binarity? Even when freedom is given by law to live your love life as homosexual, bi- or transsexual, how does one deal with the unwritten, unseen law that individuals express to them? The insights of the workshop are only a starting point for the exploration of such questions.

Activism and micro activism

As a political stance, the step towards activism follows and motivation for changes in society is perceptible. Personal, family and societal connections become conscious and can thus be consciously directed to action. *"I am bisexual, before I had like a problem to have the label put on me, because I was thinking oohh it's not important, why should I present myself anyway like bisexual, but then I started to be activist [...] and it was very important to have this label. To make things visible." (B).*

"I started with activism like eight or nine years ago. So, it was very important, ah, for me and I'm also part of a lesbian organisation, ah, which has been active here in Croatia for ten years." (H).

"[...] at first I started to volunteer in various organisations of civil society that dealt with LGBT issues and eventually I got employed [...]. So, when I came here, I was like, ah, kind of mesmerised by the type of people here actually doing something for themselves and for the community and I, I wanted to be a part of it. [...] And I also, ah, founded my own organisation (...). (A)

"I am an activist, ah, so as a feminist activist I was collaborating, ah, with many people who belong to the society and also working on some projects that were, ah, helping to fight for human rights, also LGBTIQ rights. And also, I think I'm connected by the letter Q at least [...] So, in the year 2001 ah my friends, group of people I worked with and lived with, we started to write proposals for sexual education in schools. So, it was more than, no, it was exactly twenty years ago and of course we were thinking come on, who would not want that. We need it! And so many people were like: 'Yeah, that's a great idea!' [...] so you know the thing started to grow and there were like few NGOs at the time that came up with their propositions and applied to the state, [...] for the granting and stuff like that. (G)

"I did workshops. [...] and I tried to do good sexual education in these workshops and the [...] principal of the school invited me for a conversation, which was really ugly." (B). These new approaches of sexual education workshops in Croatia were stopped immediately, and furthermore in 2013 a constitutional referendum was held that marriages can only be between man and woman. Somehow a fundamental family structure was manifesting again. "I became more active since the [...] referendum on marriage. And then I've been acting in various initiatives, [...] I am one of the founders of the organisation (...). Also because of my personal story, I become a parent like four and something years ago." (E)

"It was tough, yeah. I feel I had to really hide a lot (laughs) and I was not an activist at the time, just beginning to live like this life. I did this micro- activism, individual. [...] personal and struggling with my family also because it was coming out in lots of like layers, yeah. [...] I did micro-activism, but I didn't go onto the street, but then in time of course everything changed completely into another direction. (B).

"[...] we had to do something, like you said micro levels, because we just realised the whole macro level was not going to happen. So, we have to take smaller steps" (J).

“And I was also at some of these meetings, and I remember how hard it was for everybody to somehow in a hurry agree on the approach. How to approach it? Because they already went to the media with this super stupid story about the family, which was gross because they actually disregarded so many other types of family, except a father, mother and a kid, because so many families don’t have a mother or father or they don’t even have a mother or father, so it was really disgusting towards the straight people also, but they were really using all the means to produce this like normality level, which meant that that we are not like that – normal people.” (N).

Micro activism was individually practiced when a certain degree of psychological strain was given. Contributing to creating awareness allowed these individuals to generate some sense of empowerment. The dream of freedom and of having open mindedness about sexual education was not realised, but there is still the inner feeling of power to work towards social change. The constitutional ban of same sex marriages, let activism grow, as resistance brought activists together. It is further to be explored why there is a certain lack of simultaneity between micro activism and activism?

A vision of another normativity

Prompting the imagination or even a vision requires opening a bag and more fictive storytelling: *what do you nearly always have with you? Is there a connection to the topic? What is in your bag that gives you the feeling of being safe or feeling good?* At first glance, the items referred to movies, to the dead, pertaining to an inner world that is not often touched on and told with all the feelings or unpleasant past memories.

“I think we're on track for a good romance movie. Something ... (laughter) like Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore in Ghost. We, we're getting there, you know. (A)

“I ... noticed there, there's some, ah, it's a temple zone. [...] So, ah, sometimes it takes the emotional direction of ... So. Once I found a guy dead. [...] It's a ... It's a picture that you make once in a lifetime.” (G).

The offer of creating new stories led to the opportunity to discover power relations and the entanglement of capitalism and politics. The need for change was palpable, e.g. intergenerational transmission conserves the *“old spice”* (H) and it releases *“new spice”* (several participants) through resistance, activism, movements, as we heard before. *“We'll*

make a campaign. We'll make a crowd-funding-campaign. We like, make some pictures and videos with the camera. We can, [...] do our hair and use make-up.” (C)

“A New Spice. A New Spice.” (Several participants)

“Yeah, I would, go for, for the money. Ah, not that I disagree. Money always helps, most of the time it helps. But [...] I would just use this [...] to create some empowering story for, yeah, for different, ah, activists, or minority groups. [...] maybe to start with, this power bank for example. It can be a symbol. Ah, it's placed where you charge your batteries, when you're completely low. For example.” (G)

The stories told showed, that talking about LGBTQ has rarely been an easy experience in public. Instead, such conversations often took place in an out of normal situation or setting, such as party scene. Despite this common experience the feedback clearly showed the wish for more readily available spaces of encounter, where mutual exchange can take place.

“Now, to tell the truth I had a kind of ... I was saying to myself a couple of times it would be nice to have it again, so, like some sort of conversation. Not necessarily only LGBTIQAP but...why not? Can we have this place?” (Q)

“There is diversity for sure. And I think it also shows there is this idea of the LGBTI community being like a homogeneous group of people that are like all the same or similar or stuff like that. But [...] there is also diversity around the smaller groups. So, even though there is like a queer unifying moment or like a non-heterosexual moment or whatever you want to call it, [...] there is still individuality among those people. And, ah, the acceptance of those individualities then is the thing that makes us stronger, rather than, ah, just further dividing people into smaller groups and then having them fight among themselves or whatever. I really like the diversity of this display [...], of personalities and stuff.” (E)

Furthermore, there is hope for a new generation, who already have another perspective on “normal”.

“There are people, like my youngest brother is ten years younger than me and he already knows the difference between transgender, trans, drag people and then he is like: “Oh, trans people are more or less normal.” And I'm like: “Oh wait, what!” Did you just say that he is not a gay guy, that he is actually a normal girl? “Yeah! Didn't you explain that to me?” And I was like: “Yeah, and you coped with that, you understood that?” “Yeah, that's normal!”. This is increasingly so for his generation, which are like twenty now, eighteen, nineteen. They are way smarter, they are doing something like with their positive mind and they are micromanaging,

like we all did, like when we came out of the closet whenever that was, we did that to our friends, to our ah families, willing or not willing, whether they were accepting of us or not accepting still to this day, we are making a change and we will always have people who support us and who support living. Period. Because love is love and that's it. So, like yeah. Thank you for this lovely opportunity to reflect on everything.” (L)

Finally, all these fragmented bits and pieces in the biographical space reveal how diverse life plans can be, in general, but also within the LGBTIQ community. It would be of interest to further explore what this – the understanding that divergent life plans are rather the norm than the exception – could mean for the way we look at societal development today or in the future and the way history (his/her story) is written.

Some of my associations

I am irritated.

She wants to understand if the person

Is A He or She

If it's not a man or a woman

What is it?

The heteronormativity gives safety.

The heteronormativity is limiting.

The wrestling begins.

What can you rely on?

How do we know who we are?

When we cannot any longer categorize clearly.

To be a lesbian

To be bi

I reluctantly dive into the other language.

How can we talk about...

What needs to be protected?

What should be disclosed?

A conflict a dilemma

When is the private political?

Still the old question

Passed pictures and classifications,

lying deep in the dark,

are stigma and marginalization,

associated with the depreciation,

the categories of bondage

the discomfort remains.

Recognized and yet not recognized.

Withdraw uniqueness?

They only communicate via binaries.

One understands only man, woman, and heterosexuality.

I want to avoid the conflict.

Between opposing views of the world and people

Between woman and woman

That comes too close.

She wants to see their faces.

I must reveal myself.

I must protect myself.

"Don't say it to everyone" reverberates.

The space of "loosing" and "losing."

Why is female sexuality scary?

Why must it be possible to determine it?

Who practice power over whom and why?

What is the norm?

The normal, the historical

is constructed (Arendt)

Framework and conditions of these workshops

BIO-WS 1 Zagreb

5 November 2019
Dordićeva 8a/II, Zagreb, YHIR, 2nd floor
Duration: 2 hours
group setting
9 participants

BIO-WS 2 Zagreb

6 November 2019
Dordićeva 8a/II, Zagreb, YHIR, 2nd floor
Duration 2 hours
group setting
8 participants
3 participants came to both workshops.

BIO-WS 3 Klagenfurt

21 February 2020
8.-Mai-Straße, 28, RAUM 8, Klagenfurt
Duration: 2 hours
group setting
7 participants
1 participant came to all three workshops.

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

Development of the questions for these workshops

BIO-WS 1 Zagreb

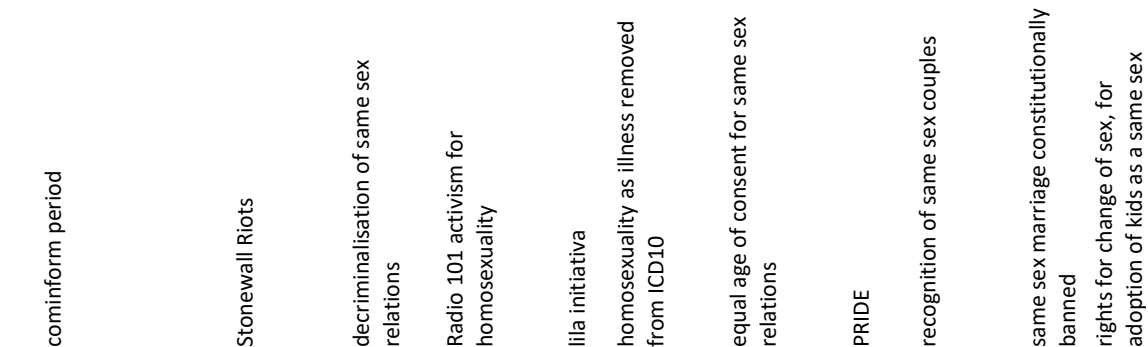
“In this first short round, I just want you to introduce yourself and how you are connected to this topic. What’s your personal story, or what’s the story behind becoming an activist?”

“I invite you now to have a look into your bag. I think you always have something with you, just something that you take with you all the time, and maybe it's also something that's important for you or empowering you.”

BIO-WS 2 Zagreb

“The topic here is LGBTIQ* and the situation surrounding it, and today I would like as a first round to start with our name, and I invite you to think about it – do you know who gave you the name? What is the meaning of your name? Do you like your name? Did you have nicknames, or have you chosen your own name? Are there any stories behind your name, who chose it and why, and how was it for you to live with that name, when you were very young, as a child? How is it now?”

“I would like to connect your stories to the different moments of a timeline, about LGBT* here in Croatia, how it developed.”



This timeline is related to some aspects of the pioneering book about sexual orientation “An oral history of homosexuality in Croatia” (2016). Editor: Zvonimir Dobrović, Gordan Bosanac. Publisher: Domino, Zagreb.

“I would like as a last round to know how you are and did you enjoy this? Just give me a final impression of the workshop or short feedback.”

BIO-WS 3 Klagenfurt

“Our title is Mapping LGBTIQ, and now I invite you to introduce yourself with one of these letters. But I also invite you to share your feelings about this complex use of letters. How are you doing with it?”

“I was just asking about this secret; everybody knows about it, but nobody knows. These two sides - are there some other stories about that. Is it still like that in society today that everybody knows but, in the end, nobody knows? What would you say?”

“Does anybody else also know these different stages of coming out? What was helpful for achieving the state of confidence, trust, being fine with yourself again?”

“I would like to carry out a short exercise if you agree. I take the word pleasure and I invite you to check your bags now or whatever you have with you. Do you have something in it that you always have with you for pleasure? Can we please put this on the table?”

“I would like to invite you now to create a story together with these things here and using the acronym LGBTIQ.”

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