

FACTS AS EXPERIENCES: HOW TO LEARN AND TEACH HISTORY IN A BIOGRAPHICAL WAY

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Abstract

The process of historical research, learning and teaching consists of data-sampling, interpretation and communication. Researchers, learners and teachers have to cope with de- and reconstructing historical experiences and their documentations as expressions of impressions. Therefore, the objectives of the study are historical experiences documented in autobiographical texts and in archival material.

Following the different lessons/modules of a course about biographical history, students can learn how to become aware of certain aspects behind historical facts and events, which are often hidden in documents or neglected by textbooks. They become motivated to make their own experiences in this method by using oral history elements (interviews) and to look for alternative points of view in learning and research.

Key words: *biography, education, experience, hermeneutics, history.*

Introduction

After a disenchantment with historicism after the Second World War and the fundamental criticism of biography in the 1970s, when historians were seeking a theory-driven historical science and saw biographies as evidence of an antiquated and unreflective approach to history, there can be noticed a “biographical turn” since 1980s (Caine 2010, 1; Lässig 2008, 1) and an interest in the psychoanalytic point of view (Roazen 1987). Also the aspect of the biographer as bound to his own place and time, the dynamic between the historian and his subject and the research for unknown persons from lower classes/female-biographies (‘oral history’/‘narrative history’/‘history of every day life’) are of great importance. Social research studies show that socialization go on throughout life, that experience often is constructed, and that meaning arises mainly from discursive practices (Bertaux 1981). Because of the incoherent character of the sources, the need of construction, de- and reconstruction of perceptions, memories, forgetting, interpretation and overwriting, biography should be recognized in its context and in its social and cultural determinants. Therefore, methods from symbolic interactionism, pragmatism and hermeneutics are helpful. Therefore such approach can become an important addition to the historical orientation at economic trends, social structures and institutional frameworks to explain the past.

The following study, demonstrated in a workshop in Tartu/Estonia, should underline the advantage to integrate structural and biographical approaches, which combine single narratives with a meta-narrative (hermeneutics).

Both approaches towards the past, the structural and the biographical, have their weaknesses. If history is only concerned with structures, long term processes, and mass phenomena “a science of human societies will entirely lose sight of the human beings themselves.” (Lässig 2008, 2). On the other hand, “the weaknesses of biography include a lack of theory or methodology because of the fragmented and inconsistent character of life (stories). People take on different roles during their lives with contradictions, upheavals and turning points” (Lässig 2008, 3).

The following study demonstrates the biographical approach to historical learning and teaching exemplified by the narration of an Estonian Displaced Person.

It is based upon experiences with biographical methods in education and counselling and on biographical research concerning certain persons and situations. It combines methods of oral history, coaching, education and research.

Methodology of Research

General Background of Research

The main motivation to care about biographical approach to history is the experience that working with data and facts alone is not sufficient. Furthermore, there is a great need for pupils and students to make their own experience with historical facts, events and backgrounds.

The third aspect is to preserve the cultural heritage of single persons and groups, and to make it accessible for the following generations to draw benefit from them (for their own coping strategies, their empathy and argumentation skills by enlarging their knowledge about certain discourses and to facilitate alternative frameworks and point of views for interpretation). It also can motivate students to become aware of the role of memories, relationships, of the meaning of truth and of influences.

So, for example, the history of Estonia can be taught from different points of views using the same material. If pupils learn that 1227 Germans came to Estonia and founded Reval 1230 they also received a certain (German oriented) point of view and learn that such a group is a homogenous one. They become irritated about their visits to Tallin and are not aware of the situation of the Estonians/Livs in that time. Similar experiences people can make concerning the first common singer-festival in Estonia in 1869, where both traditions (German and Estonian) encounter in a certain situation, or in research of the German resettlement of 1939, which often neglects the Estonian point of view. Therefore, the biographical approach helps to integrate data, facts, emotions, memories, interpretations, social backgrounds, discourses and personal intentions.

Biography as a social construct (Alheit 2000; Apitzsch/Siouti 2007) and as an instrument of social regulation (Kohli 1985) is a design template for subjective self-representation and self-authentication, and is bound up with the development of communities (Alheit 2000). Biographical research is interested in the process-related and constructive nature of life stories (narrations), and it distances itself from identity models which regard identity as something static and rigid. Especially in the field of Migration Studies the method of ‘hermeneutic/biographical case reconstruction’ (following Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997) is used to provide a methodological way of looking at problems and conflicts, but also of examining the subjective action competencies available to the subjects as ways of coping with crises in migration situations (Apitzsch 1990: 90).

In this context, the concept of biographical resources (Hoerning 1989) is at the centre of the analysis (Apitzsch 1990).

Sample of Research

The study is an demonstration and evaluation of a course for/with Estonian students. It consists of the material (Text, questions and tasks) and the research (evaluation)

Text (Maddisson & Vesilind 2009, 12-17 (in parts)):

1) When the “German Times” began in Estonia in 1941, I had just turned six, so I can’t write anything remotely wise about that period. All I can do is relate some personal but random snippets of memory. But among those surviving memories is also the story of the beginning and the end of an era - for me and my family as well as our country. Before the establishment of Soviet bases in Estonia in the fall of 1939, we lived on Aegna, an island connected with Estonian naval defense. My father was one of the naval officers in charge. But with the coming of the Russians he was mobilized into the Soviet army, and our lives changed dramatically. We now had an apartment in Tallinn, but we actually spent the winter of 1940-1941 in a manor house near Väike Maarja. The building had been taken over by the Soviet army and my father was assigned to that location. The officers’ families were allowed rooms in the old manor house, so Mother and I lived there as well.

2) Thus, by the summer of 1941 mother and I were staying on a farm, also close to Väike Maarja. By then everyone associated with the Soviet army had been evicted from our previous winter’s “home,” and mother, wary of the approaching German front hadn’t dared to return to Tallinn. I remember that it was a beautiful summer’s day, full of warmth and sunshine, when the war came to us. Together with the local farm people we were on a small meadow, surrounded by forest. They were all women, actually, because the men, if they had not been drafted by the Soviets, were most likely hiding in the woods, perhaps among the “Forest Brothers,” the Estonian guerillas. But we were there to cut the hay and take it back to the farm. Mother had come along to help, and I was the resident pest and nuisance. I still remember how lovely the day was, and how brilliant the hot sun.

3) Aimi and her parents on Aegna Island seemed that we were totally surrounded by the sounds of war. Loud noises seemed to be both overhead and around us over - come me by fear, we quickly abandoned the haying and returned to the farm. That night I woke up under a tree in the farm’s apple orchard. Neighbouring farms were ablaze, and my mother had carried me there for safekeeping. “Payback” time had arrived - retribution against those who were perceived to have collaborated with the Soviets. Our farm had escaped the torching, but after that night Mother had no desire to remain in that revenge-crazed village. Travelling again, by a circuitous route, we found our way back to Tallinn.

4) By the end of the summer, 1941, we were back in our Tallinn apartment, but where my father was we didn’t know. I don’t remember that I knew enough to be overly concerned that load rested on my mother’s shoulders. But I do remember, clearly, one evening in the early fall. One of my aunts also happened to be at our place when there was a loud knock on the door. And when the door was opened shrieks and screams filled the hallway. I was quite frightened. But as things calmed down I realized that these had been the sounds of joy. In the hallway stood my father. Much later I learned that he had been fortunate to escape across the battle front to the German side, and after a short period in a German prisoner-of-war camp had negotiated his way back to Tallinn. Now he even had some German sweets for me. The world, once more, was turning as it should.

5) The last activity of that evening, that I remember, was my father going to have a bath and that my help was not required. But now began the real “German Times” for Father was recruited into the German army (the third army he had served with within one year), and for the next three years was stationed to various locations in Estonia. To keep him company Mother and I, like Gypsies, kept moving with him, even though we had found a more suitable apartment in Tallinn - a large, gray stone house on the corner of Lau-Lupeo Street and Tartu Boulevard.

In the early spring of 1943 father was assigned to Kuressaare, on the island of Saaremaa. We all went there. From Kuressaare I remember two playmates. The first one was a girl a bit older than I was. I remember her beautiful blonde curls and how she always wore three black ribbons in her hair. The largest one was tied on top of her hair, while two smaller bows were by her ears. She told me that she wore them in memory of her mother, father and grandfather: All had been deported by the Soviets in June, 1941.

6) And thus by the summer of 1944, Mother and I were once more in Tallinn. There, one day, by chance, we came upon a group of people who were apparently waiting for something. Among them was an uncle of mine, my father's youngest brother. He with his family and the other members of the group were going to Germany. They were waiting for some transportation. All of a sudden something totally incomprehensible had invaded our lives. To leave Estonia? Mother's apprehension drove her to write to Father for advice. He was once more "somewhere else" with the German forces that were attempting to hold back the Soviet movement to the south. On August 22 he wrote back, trying to calm Mother's fears. The situation was under control, he wrote, as "Our boys from Finland have come back and will be sent to the front." Mother must have written again, for Father once more replied on August 30, from Kehra. He thought that the Tartu front had improved, and that we shouldn't panic and flee for Germany. If we were to go at all, he wrote, try to get a permit for Finland. He could not have been sharing Mother's forebodings for he wondered if she could possibly send him some fresh cucumbers? On September 17 Father himself was on the Tartu front, and it is possible that Mother had received her last letter from him while in Estonia.

Procedure

The research was on the different aspects of the text concerning the biographical aspect:

- Lesson 1: History and private life - a strange relationship.
Following text 1 students discuss interactions between certain historical data and own experiences, memories and emotions. They learn that there are different points of view (concerning statistical material), recognize metaphorical language, the use of symbols and rituals and learn to avoid stereotypes.
- Lesson 2: Living in communities as a framework for interpretation.
Following text 2 students discuss the influence of peer-groups and socialization. From the biography of the narrator they learn the development of coping strategies
(together with mother in Geislingen, 1949 left for Australia (finishing high school, Teachers' College and university studies), 1960 to Canada (married, MA, teaching senior-high- school classes). death of husband 2000- retirement.
- Lesson 3: Coping with fear - an historical and personal challenge.
Following text 3 students discuss different coping- and rescue - strategies (irony, circuitous routes, changing of place and recognize them in historical (war, crisis) and personal contexts (stages of transition).
- Lesson 4: Coping with ambiguities in history and personal life.
Following text 4 students discuss about ambivalent situations in try to find out how to distinguish between the polarities. They learn the difference between either - or - strategies and 'both - and' - strategies, their reasons and their consequences.
- Lesson 5: Coping with the changes in life and their historical background.

- Lesson 6: Following text 5 students discuss different aspects of changes in life.
Sharing experiences as a way of historical research.
Following text 6 students discuss how to find their own way of biographical research

Results of Research

The analysis of the text (with students) demonstrated the influence of historical facts and events on a person and underlines the impacts of a person's character on his/her attitude towards historical events (being used to mobility, focus on a special sense (ear), coping with encounters)

1. To move as an important category to understand history.

(During the text the dialectic relationship between facts and emotions can be noticed:

The fact: "German Times" began in Estonia in 1941 and that her father was mobilized into the Soviet army underlines the metaphoric of being an object of movements. Her formula that times begin and people are mobilized underlines the importance of being moved. This summer of 1941 she was together with her mother "staying on a farm" but only for short time, because "the war came to us" - again the experience of being influenced without any own opportunity for action. In the contrary they were forced to a circuitous route back to Tallinn and noticed that the world, once more, was turning. She finds herself as Gypsies. In such situation her father, moving from one army to another, moves away, at least "going to have a bath"

These examples teach how to recognize certain categories and metaphorical language in historical texts and motivate to make own experiences with such hidden characteristics.

2. Learning by listening: Recognizing styles of experience.

The author reminds at her only random snippets of memory but she noticed that their lives changed dramatically. The time of war coming near for her was "a beautiful summer's day", although they were "totally surrounded by the sounds of war". Similar sounds she noticed when neighbouring farms were ablaze and she woke up under a tree in the farm's apple orchard. She listened to a loud knock on the door, to shrieks and screams and noticed that it were frightened sounds of joy.

Similar to the process of learning in which individuals use different senses also historical texts are influenced by this characteristics, which have to be recognized.

3. Community without men: The systemic point of view.

She remembered that "men, if they had not been drafted by the Soviets, were most likely hiding in the woods as "Forest Brothers," They were all women. She, too, lives as a child without father.

Her encounter with him is symbolized by German sweets coming from a German prisoner-of-war camp for her and by the mutual sending of letters between her parents who try to suggest each other to follow his optimism or her scepticism. Similar is the situation 1944 when mostly women are waiting for a ship to Germany.

These examples underline the need for a systemic point of view in order to recognize the special framework of certain situations, and to understand reasons and motivations for certain attitudes and interpretations.

Discussion

Working with historical documents students recognize that facts alone are not sufficient for historical knowledge, because they let them alone with the challenge of interpretation. Biographical data, combined with historical facts, help to imagine important aspects of historical experiences in certain situations. Therefore, they are, like oral-history projects, an important complement to traditional ways of historical research and education, which has its focus on documents and objective facts. It combines individual and systemic perspectives, and try to make comprehensible the motivations, emotions and actions of individuals and groups in a holistic way.

These main results of this field-research (in workshops with students) underline, what is also mentioned by other historians, although the relationship between biography and history was and is not without difficulties (Caine 2010; Lässig 2008), biographies of individuals (famous or anonymous), and groups provide insights into contexts and interconnections that are relevant to everyday history. Therefore, since 1970s, such approaches became more and more popular for historians (Caine 2010, 74), combined with the motivation to look for narratives and “new ways to think about how a particular story might be told” (Caine 2010, 124). Together with the focus on everyday history and oral history, especially young historians (students) can learn to integrate facts and emotions into a complete picture of a historical event or fact: An individual example often makes it easier to reconstruct in detail, how social, economic, cultural, political, or ethnic networks form, solidify, intersect, or dissolve the added value of membership in certain networks. This category of ‘biographicity’ (Alheit 2000) helps to become aware of certain frameworks, strategies and kinds of atmosphere, which influence human behaviour in historical contexts. Therefore, biographies promise new insights for the history of mentalities, for the study of what human beings have experienced, processed, infused with meaning, and lived through at certain times and in certain places and for the study of individual social groups (Caine 2010,1). Therefore, the research about biographical approaches to historical education suggests to implement biographical research and work in educational contexts and curricula, because by doing so, the strong connection between biography and history (as the sample of life-histories) becomes obvious (Adejunmobi 1979). Students can analyse other coping-strategies and transfer them into their own life, or can gain empathy for their own ancestors’ experiences and can learn to change their points of view in a creative way.

An other suggestion following the results of this particular study and similar studies concerns the stimulating effect of biographical work. Working with (auto-)biographical material and with awareness of one’s own biography/experiences, students learn to “preserve a small segment of a relatively recent historical period as viewed through the eyes, experiences, and memories of people, who lived during that time” (Siler 1996,3) by integrating individual experiences in a historical framework.

A third proposal of these results is to find out new methods to improve and to evaluate the biographical and holistic research and presentation-skills of students (questioning, imagination, empathy, creative work and others). By facilitating biographical research opportunities (by presenting autobiographical material), educators can motivate their students to improve individual and collective historical research and work in classroom. As a supplement (not substitute) for archival research, the biographical approach motivates to rescue valuable oral-history material (contemporary witnesses) for following generations, and becomes an impulse for historians to develop their own ways of biographical research (oriented either at discourses, or at oral-history material, or published biographical material).

Conclusions

The discussion of own results and of research literature underlines that the most important contribution of the biographical approach for historical research and education is its holistic character. It helps people to combine analytical and imaginative skills (left and right brain).

Following the example of one Estonian DP, the strong connections between the aspects of knowledge, emotion and action can be recognized; the importance of (active and passive) movement, of (sensitive) awareness and of community for transitions and crisis in life become obvious, when students learn to imagine with empathy, how people cope with historical situations in an individual and in a collective way, and recognize the role of emotion (fear, hope) and perception (sounds, smells, sights, feelings).

It also helps to exemplify complex situations and to integrate individual experiences in a systemic perspective (War as a sample of sounds and emotions; evacuation as good-bye, life as journeys).

A second important contribution of the biographical approach is its motivating energy. It motivates students to integrate own experiences with historical ones by comparing them and sharing them with others. They could for example find out, how the Estonian girl's experiences influenced her later life, how models and strategies of coping and interpretation develop from experiences. This can motivate them to develop own projects of historical research by making interviews with grandparents or elder people, and to make biographical research in archives (by sampling and analysing not only official documents, but letters, pictures, poetry, narrations). This special research can become an impulse for students to consider their own coping strategies and to recognize alternatives (humour/irony; friendship). Comparing these expressions (narratives) of impressions (experiences; e.g. a DP-card as symbol for camp-experiences) with their own life-history (e.g. student-card as symbol for membership), they become aware of the close relationship between different experiences and learn to research in an empathic way (by using imaginative and creative skills).

The third important contribution of the biographical approach to historical research and education is its communicative aspect. In order to make the historical record complete, the students could, for example, consider and discuss with others the different ways of interpretation concerning the historical value of child-experiences (only "snippets" instead of facts) or concerning the interdependence between objective and subjective phenomena (absolute or "my" truth?; motives and activities; individual and collective, social and cultural identity); they can become aware of the ambiguities in life (changes from fear to joy and return) and of the influence of early experiences on adult coping-strategies and historical theories (journeys and changes of home/community as a multicultural mix as standard models in life).

Through these important contributions, the biographical approach can influence new ways of research: Researchers not only ask: „what happened?“, but „with whom?“, and „in which (emotional) situation?“ Not only „who acts?“, but „why and with what intention and emotion?“. They not only look for external but also for internal impulses and motivations for actions and reactions. Following this approach teachers can assist students to widen their repertoire of historical research skills and can facilitate a setting for holistic and creative research.

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