

The Future Needs Remembering – Remembering Needs the Future!

Short glossary and introduction to analytical work with oral accounts of life stories

The processes of how public images of history emerge, historical events are remembered or forgotten and individuals develop images and personal interpretations of history are complex and difficult to survey. It is therefore of particular importance in educational work with images of history and life memories to find concepts that simplify the idea of memory processes and provide an introduction to concepts that have been developed in recent decades by historians, social scientists, cultural scientists, political scientists, psychologists, educationalists and neuroscientists.

In this essay, several methodology concepts used by OWEN e.V. in its biography and history work will be briefly introduced.

How do we understand history?

The concept of history has two meanings: it includes both past events as well how they are portrayed, for example in the science of history and in historical literature. (Schüler Duden Geschichte, 1996)

When dealing with individual biographies and the “official writing of history”, it is important to understand that “history” has emerged from a choice of certain events which have been interpreted as being important in a concrete socio-political context and from their interpretation in societal processes (discourse). Individual perception of historical events and actions and the image of history held by individuals also depends on their biographical experiences and personal environment, as well as on the societal conditions in which history is remembered and received.

How do we understand memory and remembering?

The concept of memory as a type of storeroom where memories are stored and remain the same is now obsolete. (Welzer, 2005). Processes of memory are affected by the conflicting areas of subjective experience, academically quantifiable historical facts and “official” commemoration. The contents of our memory change every time we remember and every time we think about past experiences. Earlier memories lose their original form and are extended and replaced by new impressions. This “interpretation” does not depend merely on the earlier experience itself but more often occurs after the remembered event or experience and is closely connected to the present as well as to the expectations of the future held by the person who remembers something. Remembering thus is an active and selective process of the reconstruction of the past. When people refer to memory in everyday life, they usually mean the individual’s capacity to remember.

Individual memory

Individual memory refers to the memory of a single person. It contains what this person has experienced, learned and “stored” in their personal memory. However, memory contents never consist of “knowledge” only. Sensory perception and emotions also have a significant impact on memory. Both emotions connected with the immediate experience of the remembered situation as well as later perceptions

that have become associated with this situation in the course of remembering have a role to play here. In general, the person who remembers a situation cannot distinguish these different emotions from one another. (Welzer, 2002).

Oral sources or biographical accounts - the memories "stored" in individual memory - are of great importance in historical education work. They enable not only access to historical knowledge but also to the connections between individual memories and one's own identity. Memories of "oneself" that are connected to extremely negative, unprocessed experiences are often subject to defence mechanisms such as projection, isolation of affect and intellectualisation when creating a reference to oneself. (Jureit, 1999, 46).

Although the holder of individual memory is the individual himself/herself, he/she does not exist independently of others but instead is involved in social contexts, group relationships, value hierarchies, relations to the present and orientation towards the future.

Both the contents and form of memories that can be "fetched" from individual memory vary from individual to individual. "Contemporary witnesses", who experienced historical eras such as the time of National Socialism and the Second World War, therefore do not remember what actually happened and what they actually experienced at that time – instead they remember what they retrieve the present-day perspective of their individual memory.

The concept of memory is used in a wider sense in academic discussions about the transmission of historical knowledge. It refers here to historical knowledge shared by larger collectives of people. Cultural scientists have developed various models of memory in order to further understanding of the interrelation between individuals, societal structures and cultural conditions. The models of the Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, and the Anglicist, Aleida Assmann, have proved most useful to OWEN's work. These models focus on the concepts of collective, cultural and communicative memory.

Collective memory

The generic term "collective memory" describes the common store of knowledge about the past that is more or less shared by a group of people, that is, a collective. It was first used in the 1920's by the French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs. "Memory collectives" can vary greatly: they can be the family, a social group, a village community, one's own generation, a nation or a society. They can also be groups of people who share common experiences such as witnesses to the fall of the Berlin Wall, victims of torture, Holocaust survivors, refugees or displaced persons from the Second World War or former activists of the student movement of the 1960's and 1970's.

The spectrum of the memory contents about an historical era held by these "memory collectives" and the way these groups evaluate them is therefore very wide, depending on from what perspective the period was experienced. For example, men and women experienced the Second World War in different ways.

People born in the 1920's experienced a "different National Socialism" to those born at the end of the 1930's. Holocaust survivors have different memories about the end of the Second World War to those who were sympathetic to the Nazi regime, or passively supported it, as well as to perpetrators of the regime or those who had to leave their homes after the war ended.

Collective memories are also subject to significant changes and are susceptible to manipulation. Collective memories can also cause changes to memory cultures – whether consciously or unconsciously – that can be decisive for socio-political developments.

Aleida and Jan Assmann divide collective memory into two further categories: communicative and cultural memory.

Communicative memory

The concept of communicative memory refers to the shared pool of memories held by the “co-experiencing generation”. Individual memories of past experiences are transmitted via the contents of communicative memory. This occurs in the direct communication amongst a single generation as well as between different generations. Communicative memory is formed in a milieu of physical proximity, common lifestyles and shared experiences. The conveyed contents therefore often have a particular emotional and sensory meaning. (Welzer 2002). Understanding in the intergenerational communication of memories is always limited, which is connected to the parameters of the experiences of each generation. The limits of a generation therefore also represents a gap in understanding. One can only communicate what the addressee can understand.

Memories that are transmitted communicatively encompass a specific time horizon that is determined by the change in generation. Every change in generation leads to a significant shift in the memory profile of a society. A particular milieu of experiences, values and hopes in which individual memories were incorporated is dissolved when a generation changes. Perspectives that were once decisive now move from the centre to the periphery. Communities of experience, memory and narration change radically when the three to five co-existing generations disappear. In our culture, this occurs after around 80 – 100 years. (A. Assmann and U. Frewert, 1999, 37).

Multigenerational memory represents an important horizon for the transmission of personal memories to the co-existing successor generations. As a result of its fixed time limits, communicative memory represents a society’s short-term memory.

Cultural memory

Cultural memory enables the formation and storage of social long-term memory beyond the generation of those who experienced an event. It “secures” the collective memory of the past that cannot be transmitted directly as a result of the fixed time limits of communicative memory.

Cultural memory makes use of external media such as writing, images, sculptures, monuments, architecture, festivals, rituals, symbols and institutions.

The contents that can be conveyed in these ways depend both on societal conditions and on political and power structures. It is precisely those contents that promote a particular image of society that are stored in cultural memory.

Societal identities are formed through these manifest forms of remembering the past, which can also be regarded as a type of commemoration of the past. Single individuals perceive themselves as belonging to a cross-generational memory culture with wide-ranging historical experiences that are often regarded as one’s own historical roots.

Access to media representations of historical education is decisive in the share in cultural memory held by individuals and groups. The coordinates of the shaping of history are re-set and modified from generation to generation, as part of socio-political developments and in particular after the collapses of systems such as in 1945 and 1989.

The interaction of the different types of memory is of decisive importance for the formation of the historical consciousness of individuals, groups and societies.

What do we mean by “historical consciousness”?

Historical consciousness is the area of human consciousness where individuals organise their knowledge of the past and thereby put the three periods of time – past, present, and future – into context. The formation of historical consciousness is a continuous individual process. (Rüsen 2001). Historical consciousness, like individual memory, is subject to change. Both external factors and processes of change in society, or changes in the personal surroundings of an individual as well as psychological processes influence the formation of historical consciousness. It provides the individual with a sense of orientation and identity and determines values and behaviour.

Biographical work in OWEN’s educational work

The East-West European Women’s Network (OWEN) has used approaches from biographical and memory research in its civil society educational work for many years. The association’s work is also closely connected to the experiences and learning processes of its staff and trainers, who consider themselves to be learners.

A wide-ranging understanding of the mutual influence of the individual, cultural and structural factors that determine the emancipating development of individuals and the dialogues that encourage peace between different social groups is at the heart of OWEN’s work.

OWEN uses the violence triangle model developed by the Norwegian peace researcher, Johan Galtung, in its educational work.

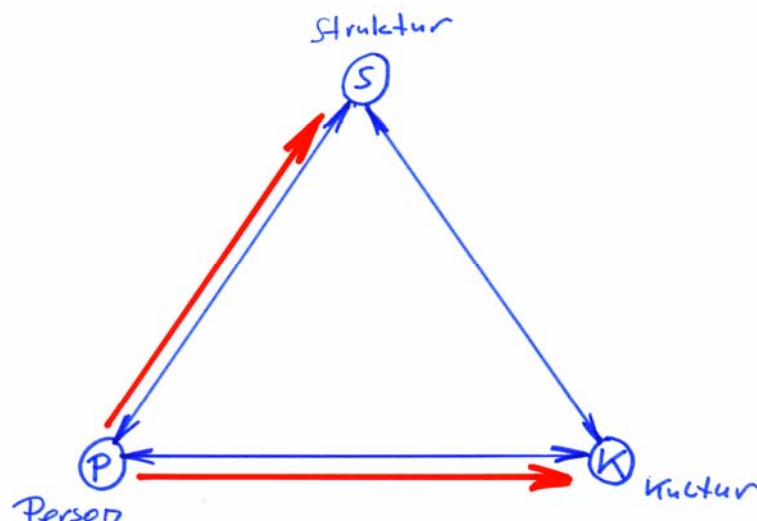


Figure 1 shows that structure and culture have a mutual and changeable relationship with a person, which characterises society. Individuals are often portrayed and perceived as “objects” of structural and cultural factors, as if they were merely “recipients” of knowledge and structurally and culturally determining behaviour.

However, in OWEN's work, the focus is on an individual's behaviour, the range and limitations of their behaviour, and thus on the individual's influence on structures of society and cultural conditions. Therefore the arrows from the person (P) in figure 1 are printed in bold.

We work with the biographies and biographical accounts of women and men in educational events, publications and exhibitions.

Three aspects are of particular importance to us in our work:

- The perception and analysis of turning points in a biography, which reveal the autobiographer's individual courses of actions and decisions.
- The opportunity to reconstruct and controversially discuss these turning points in dialogue-based group discussions.
- Self-reflection and the “recipients” (seminar participants, readers, exhibition visitors etc.) dialogues regarding their own involvement in cultural and structural contexts and their own patterns of behaviour and decision-making.

We found methodology elements in the sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal's academic work, which we have been able to use as a basis for the didactical design of our workshops and seminars.

Experienced and recounted life stories

The analytical separation of “experienced” and “recounted” life stories is a crucial element of the biographical analysis method (the “reconstructive case analysis”) developed by G. Rosenthal. (Rosenthal 1995). This separation assumes that elements experienced by the individual are mixed and superimposed with elements from communicative and cultural forms of memory in every autobiographical life account. Both what was actually experienced, and individual and collective interpretations, are revealed in the specific mixture of these elements in the individual life account. Reconstructive case analysis makes it possible to separate these elements in the form of concrete material, in order to then be able to state why a particular person tells their life story in this specific way.

We have developed a diagram for civil societal work with autobiographical life stories, which depicts the individual elements of the life stories, and provides the seminar participants with a differentiated perception and distinction in their own and others' accounts.



The setting of narrator and listener are portrayed in the diagram. One must differentiate between different types of knowledge and levels of portrayal in the diagram's funnel-shaped life story.

These levels are as follows:

1. *Event*: Events are limited in time to the duration of their course. They are never reflected completely accurately but recounted stories may contain many details and actions that refer to the actual course of events.
2. *Experiences*: The concept of experiences includes the view and perception held by a particular individual. Many people who were present at the same event will have experienced and perceived completely different things. A selection process, in which some details are perceived while others are "overlooked", is already active during the event itself.
3. *Memory*: A second selection process operates in the active reconstruction of past events. Elements that have some sort of connection with the present-day situation come to the consciousness from the range of possible memories. This can be a concrete experience, the narrator's general life situation, or the interview situation itself.
4. *Experience*: Experience consists of memories that have been thought about and processed. The person has learned "a lesson" from the events they experienced. One must take into account that these lessons are always constructed after the event and should not be confused with the direct experience of an event.
5. *Account*: The elements that can be presented in an account or story depend largely on the narrative situation. Although different people need different conditions in order to be able to talk about themselves, in general one can say that an atmosphere of acceptance and trust encourages the ability to speak.

It is important to bear in mind that both narrator and listener influence how an account is shaped in a concrete setting. If the narration setting is one of trust and mutual well-being, difficult and burdensome material can also be discussed.

Another important aspect is that the listener puts what she hears into a familiar context and can only understand what she hears on the basis of her own experiences and knowledge. Some material will be easy for her to understand and will evoke her own memories, while other material will remain incomprehensible or even "unheard". The listener does not only "hear" the narrator's account; at the same time she also hears the voices of her own "inner orchestra" that are called up during the interview. In order to make this clearer, the listener is depicted in the diagram with a large ear and a rucksack with her own life memories.

Behaviour and decisions

Apart from the way accounts are composed of events, experiences, memories and experience, the structure of an account also plays an important role in the way it is understood.

During the memory process, the narrator forms the shape of her own life story by deciding at every turning point of the narration which memory segment she will next present. We see here a parallel between what was actually experienced and its portrayal in the life history account. Again and again in every life there are turning points where personal decisions determine all further outcomes and experiences. This is also valid for turning points regarded by the narrator as a stroke of fate as the attitude she takes towards this fateful event also has to do with personal choices and determines all further behaviour and actions.

During the narration the biographer has to decide over and over again with which episode the account should be continued. The attitude of the autobiographer towards her own experiences and memories is revealed by these decisions. From this point of view, the whole story is ultimately shaped by the decisions of the narrator, who gives the account its form and meaning. With this perception in mind, the narrated text that is to be examined is first divided into its individual sequences in order to then form conclusions from the contents and the way the individual segments are conveyed. Along these lines, the course of a life can be understood as a string of decisions. An individual life is shaped by the way a person makes – or avoids making – decisions. OWEN's biographically oriented education work focuses on making the participants conscious of the contexts that led to these particular decisions.

The individual's decisions demonstrates both her own will and the structural and cultural conditions in which the decision is made. For example, the decision to offer resistance in conditions of totalitarian dominance, and the concrete actions which express this resistance, are intrinsically linked to the direct environment and the individual's structural and cultural background.

In OWEN's work, the analysis of biographical turning points and the controversial discussion of decisions and actions are regarded as a way to learn from history in order to develop concrete action strategies today for the conscious and self-confident shaping of the future.

Hypothesis development

In order to examine and understand concrete actions it is not only the result of the action itself that is important, but also the background of feasible actions, which first make the decision-making process and thus the meaning of the decision visible. In concrete terms, this means asking oneself which other decisions and actions might have been available to the person in the situation at the time.

Gabriele Rosenthal suggests the abstraction method as procedure in the analysis of biographical texts.

This method consists of three steps:

1. Using a single text extract or life date, hypotheses about all possible consequences for the narrator or the composition of the subsequent text are first formulated.
2. In the second step further hypotheses are formulated from the first hypotheses. (If my assumption A is valid, then B would have happened/the narrator would have continued her account with....)
3. In the third step the interpreter then looks at the next life date or recounted sequence and either confirms or discards her hypotheses.

The abstraction method can be used in educational work to stimulate group discussions about parts of life stories or relevant topics. When the individual group members express and defend their hypotheses, it becomes clear how their own background and experiences determine their hypotheses on the text extracts. Discussions about biographical texts are especially interesting when the hypotheses are formulated and expressed by group members from different backgrounds and generations.

The differences and similarities in the hypothesis formulation can be debated in a subsequent group discussion, which increases consciousness of how one and others are influenced by cultural patterns.

Remembering and forgetting in the context of National Socialism

The particularities of autobiographical memory and narration in Germany continue to be shaped largely by memories of the Second World War and National Socialism. The generations born after the Second World War have formed their historical consciousness from the accounts or silence of older people. However, there have often either not been any discussions about the decisions and behaviour of the generations of their parents or grandparents, or these discussions have not been detailed.

The coming change in generation represents a great challenge to dealing with the history of National Socialism and the Second World War. In a few years' time, the "witness generation" who consciously experienced this phase of history will no longer be alive. The communicative handing on of the very different biographical memories of events and experiences during the time of National Socialism and the Second World War will no longer be possible.

We need to develop and test new forms of historical didactics in order to keep this history in cultural memory and convey it in a way that forms consciousness. It is necessary to strengthen historical didactical methods that include the widest possible range of narrative life accounts, that is, communicatively conveyed memories. It is important to closely consider the material that is to be passed on to the next generations. On the one hand, the horrors and terror of the Nazi regime

must be clear from these accounts. On the other hand, it is also important to develop the self-confidence of the successor generations and to convey how one can resist in thought and action. Biographical work whose contents convey a connection to one's own behaviour and perception can change one's perceptive of one's grandparents' and great-grandparents' experiences.

It is precisely discursive discussions with their variability of memories that can make a decisive contribution to the formation of a democratic and pluralistic consciousness of history. They can strengthen sensitivity and perception vis-à-vis the usurpation and manipulation of historical memory and the resulting abuse of history.

If we offer successor generations the opportunity to understand the past not only through passive listening but also through active hypothesis formulation, a valuable contribution can be made so that the "lessons from the past" can be positively applied to the actions and decisions of the younger generations in the future.

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