

Lhbn 2018 conference Torino

Individualization, togetherness, and its discontents

This paper intends to focus on one significant aspect of the conference theme. The interconnectedness of the individual and the groups, communities and affiliations of which the individual is and become part throughout life, the complexity of this interconnectivity in the present society, and some implications for learning and for biographical research.

The invitation to the conference the theme: “‘Togetherness’ and its discontents’ (implying the associations to ‘Civilization and its discontents’ by Freud) states that “We are social and communicating beings”, but also that we “live in a world that celebrates individualism”. What is the impact of this celebration? Our heredity of old fairy tales show a rich display of the discontents of narrow community bonds, and the individual separation acts as the hero starts his explorative journey into the wide world. We also know today how individualism and isolation and loneliness can be a devastating combination. An ongoing discussion in the Lhbn network and beyond is the interpretations of the relationship between the individual and the community, considering e.g. the difference between a Freud, Kant, and Bateson. Therefore, this relationship deserves special attention considering the 2018 conference theme.

The first part of the paper presents a theoretical discussion of the interconnectedness and complexity of individualization and togetherness in social communities and affiliations; and the issue of possibilities and disadvantages and discontents inherent in the general features of the contemporary society. The second part is an analysis of a biographical interview with a young girl which underlines the remarkable importance of the quality of relationships also in early learning contexts. Finally the relationship between the grand narrative of individualization, lifelong learning, and the development of biographical research will be discussed.

Events or communities?

Quoting Mink, Ricoeur (1984) applies his term “grasping together” - of events- in order to describe the emplotment in a narrative. I made an illustration with circles on a curved line besides a linear timeline in order to present the emplotment of the story line from the beginning to the end and to demonstrate the difference of the story line to the linear chronological time line which of course may be reconstructed from a biographical narrative. Even a strict chronological narrative has a story line and a plot which selects and promotes certain parts of what happened to the expense of others. During a project researching: *Active Citizenship and Non-Formal Education* (2002) in the beginning of the century my research assistant asked me referring to the illustration with the circles and to the biographical interviews she had carried out: “But what is it, actually, that the narrators are grasping together in the biographical narratives”? Suddenly, I realized it was not events but social contexts, short – or longer – episodes of different communities of practice or affiliations. People asked to tell their story told of their lives in the family, with playmates, with grand-parents, in the street, in schools, in worksites, in educational settings, in leisure context, in intimate relationships etc.

Shortly after, I wrote an article about: "Affiliation and participation" (2001), as I realized how crucial this feature of the biographical interview is.

The social contexts, 'communities of practice' 'affiliations', 'sites for togetherness, or belonging' – or whatever we decide to name them - are decisive for the identity constructed (and felt) in the biographical narrative.

The empirical research showed different degrees of participation and belonging in various social contexts with significant effects concerning active citizenship and identity.

Who we are, depends to a large extent on the social contexts in which we have participated, on the affiliations we experienced – or not - to our relationships in those contexts, and on the sense of togetherness or distance, contents and discontents we felt.

Personhood and language

Taylor (1989) underscores the connection between personhood and language:

"There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language...So I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness, etc., are through my and other's experience of these being objects for *us*, in some common space." (p.35)

"The close connection between identity and interlocution also emerges in the place of *names* in human life. My name is what I am "called". A human being *has* to have a name, because he or she has to be *called*, i.e. addressed. Being called into conversation is a precondition of developing a human identity, and so my name is (usually) given me by my earliest interlocutors. " (p. 525)

He mentions scenarios where e.g. prisoners or other inmates in camps no longer have names but just numbers in order to deteriorate their sense of identity.

This example clearly demonstrate that communities exist that do not recognize individual selves, but also that recognition of the individual self depends on the other, depends on how another person is addressed or talked about, depends on what happens between people in a community, relationship, or context.

What is the need of a name if no one calls you? We may think about our common ways of addressing someone: "How are you?" "How do you do?" Although normally answered as superficially as the questions are put, the standard phrases' literal meanings point to the significant relationship between the personal and the partner in interlocution. The standard phrases for addressing the other literally points towards an interest in the individual person in spite of the fact that the exchange of questions and answers in this situation were emptied of their literal meaning ages ago.

Ricoeur (1994) underscores the way we respond others. This is our responsibility as human beings. Nevertheless, people are often addressed, regarded and treated not as an individual person but as a

generalized other, a member of a group, some collective unit. Not every community assigns a status as an individual to each member, let alone to people outside their community.

Generalizations take place when a situation is restricted to the here-and-now-perspective, in this particular contexts you only see: Pupils, patients, students, unemployed, convicts, foreigners, Muslims etc.

Modernity and biographical narratives

The title of Taylor's book quoted above is *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. The modern identity requires a narrative understanding of life which can only be given in a story, he says. Those individual life story narratives contrast the generalized other mentioned above. Often in this ESREA LHBN network the connection between biographical narratives and modernity has been discussed, e.g. by Alheit in his article "'Subject figurations' within modernity: the change of autobiographical forms." (in Formenti, West, Horsdal 2014). He mentions the story of Martin Guerre, a fictive premodern story about someone who has a name, but as the plot develops, his role in this society shows to be more important than the individual self. From later periods in literary history Alheit demonstrates the development of more individual subject figurations and, accordingly, a stronger emphasis on the individual, biographical story. This individualization may also be reflected in the rise of "Bildung Novels", first the bourgeois type that Alheit mentions, later from the working class, and even later (the 1970es) female lives.

More stable groups and communities and less movement characterized the traditional society. Increased movement and the plurality of different contexts and relationships in modernity bring forward a greater need for the biographical and narrative construction of individual coherence in comparison to the collective community stories and traditions. There is a lot of difference between fulfilling a role and the need of personal, individual contributions in quite different contexts.

The span of almost two centuries between the first bourgeois Bildungsroman and the female variety indicate the difference in class and gender regarding citizen rights, individualization, and personhood. The first democratic Danish constitution – like in other places – included only white, wealthy males over 30. They alone were regarded autonomous human beings worthy of citizen rights in opposition to children, women, the poor etc. Kant proposed that autonomy involved some education and rationality.

In many countries – e.g. Denmark, parts of a traditional society continued far into the 20th century, not least in the country-side. During the sixties and seventies many people moved from the country to the cities, and the relatively stable traditional society broke up. The new generation became to a large extent emancipated from the tight frames of the traditional society, from "the togetherness and its discontents".

Just as Freud, from whom the title of this conference derives (*Civilization and its discontents*, 1930), describes the necessary limits for individual behavior in any given society and culture, individuals may regard certain features of the societal or family norms as limiting their personal choice and desires. Biographical narratives from mid twentieth century clearly demonstrate this understanding. Gradually throughout the last century the general interpretation of existence changes from "fate and chance" to "individual choice" as the individual from the society is given more opportunities (Horsdal, 2012).

Individualization became and is continuously a celebrated grand narrative with an enormous impact. The significance of given social contexts declines in the interpretation of self and existence we find in the biographical interviews in spite of the social influence on opportunities which sociologists inform us about.

Notwithstanding social limitations the fate of belonging to a given social context is easier to transcend than before, not least because children today are brought up to celebrate individual movements instead of the collective security as M.C. Bateson demonstrates in her book: *Peripheral Visions*. (1994)

Contents and discontents

It is not, however, quite as simple as that. The crucial issue of the transition from fate to personal choice is the importance of belonging. In a traditional society belonging to a social context was rarely questioned. It was natural, and expulsion, therefore, was considered a severe punishment, whether one was exiled from a home country or banished from a smaller community of practice. Belonging was natural, however not always pleasant. Belonging to a certain community was often followed by feelings of discontent in certain aspects. The various communities (or families, or work context) were different, some were good, and some were quite horrible. "It depended on where you landed", and an old man who had to leave home to work on other farms as a young child stated. "In those days, you were not asked what you wanted". (The contrast to this expression I found in the narrative of a man born just 15 years later – after the 2nd war. He said: "It was fantastic that you could do what you wanted").

The other side of the coin proceeds in the description of ordinary childhood experiences from the middle of the last century. Many narratives inform us about the pleasure in being part of the family's working life, doing things together and the feeling that your contribution to the community was necessary and thus appreciated. Children had to work, but they were needed, and their belonging in the family was not questioned.

I guess one of the reasons why Honnet's discussion of recognition turned out to be so popular is the decline of necessity of participation in the given social contexts. The sense of belonging no longer is obvious. The self-concern implied by the question whether or not you are good enough to be recognized and accepted in a certain community or relationship can be problematic. 'Do I belong here?' 'Is this the right place for me to be,' or should I move on?' These existential questions for an individual in modernity (or post-modernity) call for an enormous need for recognition to chase away the fear of exclusion. The emancipation from the strict limits of the social contexts in a traditional society meant that a person had more opportunities to choose his or her profession. One now could quit and leave, a region, an education, a marriage a lot easier than before. Social mobility was possible through education, and women became financially more independent. But all these changes implied that the sense of belonging to a social context no longer was quite as obvious, and the fear of exclusion increased along with a need for recognition and appreciation. People felt they had to be accepted and appreciated for individual and personal reasons in intimate relationships, in working sites, among friends, and in a lot of other places.

I was very inspired by Lave and Wenger's work (1991) as I tried to develop a methodology for analysis of the communities of practice and relationships I found in the biographical narratives (Horsdal 2017a). I can use several of their concepts when I analyze each of the social contexts and affiliations mentioned in the

stories. *Legitimate, peripheral participation* – the subtitle of their first book - contain several useful concepts. You may or may not be a legitimate participant in a certain social context. Ask refugees! And your movement within the community may be centripetal in time, or you may remain in a peripheral position or even be excluded. Lave and Wenger also discuss the relationships and interactions within the community. Are the rules transparent or not. And how do the relationships and interactions affect the identity of the participants. You may assume or reject the cultural identity constructed by the community. Those questions are fertile to ask in the analysis of a biographical narrative. All the time their focus is the interpersonal interactions and relationships rather than the individual development.

Lave and Wenger only describe a single community of practice in this book. Later Wenger discovers the point of the transitions between different communities throughout life and discusses the term 'trajectory'. The transition from one social context to another is a very interesting topic to analyze and, of course, indispensable in a biographical narrative. A community may bridge or inhibit transitions to other contexts. Some social contexts are forced onto the individual and not a matter of preference (e.g. imprisonment).

An old Danish proverb was: "if you dislike the smell of the bakery, then quit!" But if we consider the present conditions it is quite a lot of different bakeries with different smells in which we have to fit in!

Some communities are more open and tolerant; some are quite narrow in their concept of 'normality'. Biographical narratives with young people from migrant minorities sometimes show how difficult it can be to move between the traditional family context with its social control and the modern Danish youth culture.

Back in 2004 one of my Ph.D. students interviewed 30 persons with some learning disabilities. And the result was depressing. The stories were full of feelings of inferiority and exclusion, feelings that teachers preferred the clever students, embarrassment by not being able to read the signs in public transportation and thus not knowing the codes of behavior in everyday settings.

In a European research project on citizenship and lifelong learning I asked a few questions after the biographical narrative interviews. One was: "Where do you feel at home?" My idea was to investigate the significance of the affiliations in the different social contexts. This research made me realize how much we long to belong.

The active citizen turned out to be a person who is able to enter new contexts and establish new affiliations and relationships – not by jumping from one place to another disregarding the past – but one who is able to construct some kind of biographical coherence between the different communities of practice in which she participated and eventually felt 'at home'. She has a rather stable sense of identity, a freedom of expression and she is able to negotiate meaning in an open and democratic way; whereas people who lack a sense of belonging have a very unstable sense of identity that effects their interactions. Some people are willing to go to an extreme to belong somewhere, not to be left alone, e.g. join a gang or stay in a violent relationship (Horsdal 2012).

An empirical case

I asked my students in a course on biographical narratives to make their first interview with someone they knew in order to practice the methodology. One of my students interviewed her 11 year old daughter and gave me permission to use the narrative.

The girl's story is almost exclusively about relationships, to her family, to playmates, friends, animals, even when she is on holidays abroad. Also, she is telling about the things she loves to do together with her companions.

Now, I move on to the kindergarten. It was a nature kindergarten. I had a lot of friends. The best of them were Emmi, Frida, Inger, Carl, little Frida, Valdemar, Emil, Nico, Gustav and Josefine and a lot of others. And then there were a lot of animals.

Her story proceeds in the same patterns, rather chronologically, from her family, a playroom, kindergarten, preschool, different grades of school etc. She is quite detailed, not only concerning names, but also describing all the different activities she loves.

The big change of this happy child life description occurs in the third grade.

There is nothing to tell about third grade. It was just boring. Is it stupid to write that I do not have many friends. Because Jessica and Victoria started to play together. Between classes I walk around the house and I don't do much. I don't know... I found it was extra difficult because a girl in my class kicked me and turned me down on the ground every day. I felt it was difficult in the 3rd grade, but luckily I had my super sweet parents who helped me a lot. I appreciate this. I wouldn't have made it without them. They really helped me....

4th grade became much better. I played a lot with Tilde, Signe, Jessica, Maja, Clara and Laura.

In her conclusion she returns to her family:

It is nice to live in this family because we are nice to each other. We treat each other in a nice way, talk and behave properly. We have time for each other. Mmmm...we often do things together, though we are not often on holidays our holidays are long, and that costs a lot of money. What did you write? It is important that you write it correctly. We love each other, we do nice things together.

This is by no means an unusual story from a pre teenage girl from a loving and caring family. However, it is remarkable to realize HOW much the relationships in the different social contexts mean. Belonging is crucial; even though this girl continually has her loving and caring family and several animals around her.

Belonging and learning

A colleague of mine from Aarhus University interviewed some schoolchildren in a research project on social inclusion. One boy said: "It is easier to concentrate on what goes on in the classroom if you are not afraid of the breaks"

This answer is so much to the point. In order to learn you must be able to concentrate, and therefore you must thrive in the community. Biographical narratives with adult learners confirm this, and, unfortunately, confirm the longevity of negative school experiences. The desire for joining adult education mainly builds on previous confidence in the ability to learn, and comfortable feeling about learning contexts. New learning contexts that make this possible may produce an immensely fruitful renegotiation of a person's learning identity. Luckily, our life story narratives are continuous, dynamic, renegotiated, replotted, and subject to multiple interpretations. The possibility for the construction of a configuration of meaning through the plot cannot escape the question of belonging; so much more crucial in the individualized society.

In 2001 I wrote:

“We may – and often do – reinterpret past experiences and actions in the light of our contemporary situation, but we cannot do away with the, deny their past existence if we want our lives to have meaning. And as Charles Taylor puts it: “this means our *whole* lives.” (1989:50) “In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.” (ibid:47). The increased mobility puts the question of identity on the agenda.” (p. 129)

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