

Gender in Peacebuilding: History, Memory and Conflict Dynamics

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Theoretical Overview

A central element of OWEN's educational work involves engaging with individual memories and life experiences. This focal point derives from our experience that the processes of societal transformation in Central and Eastern Europe - including East Germany - after the collapse of socialism were accompanied by far reaching reinterpretations based on individual life experiences and historical perspectives. This transformation showed, on the one hand, the close concurrence of official histories and political power structures and on the other hand, the meaning of history and historical memory for societal reform. In our work with diverse social groups – within Germany as well as internationally – it has become clear that a great potential for conflict, but also for societal reform, can arise from the interaction of official histories and individual experiences and memories. Based on this experience, we have gradually developed methodological and thematic approaches to stimulate dialogue between women and men from diverse social groups and societies regarding their own historical experiences and their meaning for self-understanding and action.

The biographical and historical work of our educational project "OMNIBUS 1325" (http://www.owen-berlin.de/html/english/projects/proj_omnibus.html), a course in gender and civil conflict resolution work) concerns itself in the broadest sense with history and the interaction of the politics of history and individual and collective memory. In the first section of this article we will illuminate a few theoretical assumptions which form the basis of our work, and the second section will use examples from practice to show how this theory is implemented in our educational efforts within OMNIBUS.

The Politics of History

The perception and interpretation of "history" arises in general from the selection of particular events which are assessed to be important in a given socio-political context. What is determined to be important or "correct" depends considerably on the respective politics of history and the socially accepted historical narrative.

The concept of the politics of history refers to the manner in which meanings and interpretations of historical events serve ongoing political and societal purposes. Interest groups compete with another to determine which aspects of the past, and in which manner, will be remembered and interpreted, making the politics of history also a politics of power which serves to advance particular political interests. This is particularly relevant in conflict situations, where involved parties often revert back to their own “knowledge” of history in order to justify their respective demands. In democratic societies, negotiation over the official historical memory takes place through public discourses among civil society, yet civil society is largely excluded from decision making over historical memory in totalitarian societies.

What is a culture of memory?

The foundation of our work with memory is the assumption that memory is produced with intention, no matter what is being remembered. Norms are defined at the societal level which prescribes the manner in which memory is created and the content which will prevail in public discourse.

Strands of discourse are understood under the culture of memory as means by which memories are reproduced, expressed, narrated and developed. This can occur in more or less official spaces. Cultures of memory are to a great extent determined by political and societal systems, as many of the rules which govern political participation in general are also mirrored in cultures of memory. In societies in which human rights are lowly regarded and the freedom of expression is strongly curtailed, the possibilities for free and open articulation of different memories are likewise very limited.

Nevertheless, all actors who are involved in history and memory in the broadest sense have a stake in the development of cultures of memory and can also influence them to a certain extent. A vital goal of our educational work is to make the rolls of individuals as actors of and in cultures of memory known in order to support a conscious participation in these cultures of memory.

The process of memory occurs principally in the overlapping area between historical events, subjective experiences and “official” remembrance. Meaning is ascribed to memory only after the remembered occurrence or experience takes place, making it closely tied to the present and expectations of the future which are held by the bearers of the memories. Thus, memory represents an active and selective process of reconstruction of the past.

The Egyptologist Jann Assmann and the Anglicist Aleida Assmann have proven the worth of OWEN's educational work. For them, the concepts of collective, cultural and communicative memory stand in the forefront, and will be explored here in more detail.

Individual Memory

Individuals remember that which they personally live, experience, learn and "retain" in their personal memory, and they can normally differentiate between memories of "knowledge", feelings and later interpretations. Witnesses, who for example personally experienced the era of National Socialism and the Second World War, do not remember exactly that which then occurred and they experienced, but they remember instead that which they can retrieve from their individual memory from a contemporary perspective. Individual memory is biographical memory, necessarily tied to the lifetime of the remembering person.

Collective Memory

The overarching concept of collective memory denotes the common body of knowledge shared by a group, or collective, about the past. Individual memory gains meaning through the process by which it is shared with others in different forms of "memory collectives" such as families, local communities, nations or societies.

Collective memory always occurs selectively, with some specific temporal or societal contexts being left out while others are accentuated. Collective memory is also political memory in the sense that it can serve to legitimize societal power relations and structures within the collective. Aleida and Jan Assmann further differentiate between the communicative and cultural levels of collective memory.

Communicative Memory

In communicative memory, we share with other living generations a common pool of memory, as individual memories of past experiences are passed onward. The communicative memory originates from an environment of spacial proximity, common ways of life and shared experiences, and often contains elements with particular emotionally or sensual meaning. With the passing of each generation, society's profile of living or short term memory is displaced, giving communicated memories a specific and limited time horizon.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory secures the collective memory of those events, which, due to the passing of generations, can no longer be shared directly through communicative memory. The safekeeping of collective memory occurs through cultural forms such as written texts, memorials/monuments, rituals, symbols and institutions. Its content depends on societal conditions as well as political structures and

power dynamics, such that only those matters which fit into the collective historical outlook of the society are retained as cultural memory.

The interaction of different levels of memory has decisive meaning for the development of the historical consciousness of individuals, groups and societies. In our educational work with history and biography, we operate on diverse levels on memory. We frequently address our work to cultural foundations of memory in the form of historical knowledge, yet there is also room in seminars for memory and narratives from individual and communicative memory.

Biographical memory and those memories and narratives conveyed by relatives are often associated with the emergence of strong emotions. For example, tales of the wretched experiences of parents or grandparents with war or violence can produce feelings of pain, sorrow, shame and guilt. Such narratives can also awake or foment hatred, which is then passed on to successive generations. Therefore, it is particularly important for peacebuilding work that any emotions which may arise in discussions relating to painful or traumatic experiences be able to be expressed and reflected upon. There is thus a necessity for protected spaces for dialogue which convey security and trust in order to enable participants' emotions to remain tied to their memories of past experiences rather than to become associated with the present situation or conflict.

Personal memories and narratives always constitute a process of selective and, consequently, subjective (re)construction of the past, which can not be equated with the actual events and occurrences from "back then". For biographically-oriented educational and historical work, it is therefore of central importance to distinguish between events, experiences, memories and narratives. Events are temporally limited to the duration of their occurrence, and can thus never be mirrored in pure form, although it goes without question that many scenes and details in narrated histories do factually refer to the past chain of events.

The concept of experience comprises the views and perceptions of the respective person. Multiple people who are present at a single event can experience and perceive the occurrence completely differently. Already as an event is occurring, a process of selection is taking place in which some details are noticed while others are overlooked.

The active reconstruction of past experiences brings a further process of selection to bear. From an abundance of possible memories come only those elements to consciousness which are in some way related to the present situation. This could mean a current occurrence, picture, space, odor, or more broadly, the current life situation of the person narrating or the expectation of an upcoming event. Experiences are reflected and processed memories. The individual draws a "lesson" from his/her

experience and gives it meaning. It should be kept in mind that such lessons are always a construction after the fact and can not be mistaken for the direct experience of an event.

The elements of memory which can be presented in a story or history also depend divisively upon the situation in which the story being is told. Although different persons require different circumstances under which to tell their stories, in general a safe space is needed for the telling of personal stories, with an atmosphere of acceptance, trust and care, as well as an audience which listens with attentiveness, respect and empathy.

Examples from Practice:

1) Life Paths and Points on the Map

Family origin, territoriality, nationality, and identity have played important roles in the armed conflicts in the Caucasus since the beginning of the 1990s, as ethnic affiliations were often used as rationales for the legitimization of territorial claims and armed violence. In response, we are applying the methodology of “Contextualizing Life Paths” in the Caucasus and Germany to further mutual understanding through historical-biographical dialogue. The purpose of this exercise is to use histories and biographies to illuminate the interaction of time and place while bringing together diverse groups.

For this exercise, multiple large geographical maps are hung on the wall in which the current territorial borders of the Caucasus are marked, including a world map. Participants are asked to mark on the maps with coloured dots the locations where 1) they currently live, 2) they were born, and 3) their family root's lie. They then discuss what they see on the marked maps, including any thoughts or feelings which the maps elicit. Participants' answers demonstrate the challenge of describing an image without immediately jumping to subjective interpretation, and the diverse meanings that the maps have for those involved. When asked which feelings and associations the maps elicit, participants often feel the need to tell personal stories, but also express their hopes for the future.

This activity typically evokes thoughts of peace, memory, history, diversity and interconnectedness. Since it shows that all individuals are unique yet interconnected, and that they bring their own individual life paths and histories to the group, this exercise serves as a good introductory activity. Exercises such as this also illuminate the turbulent history of migration in Europe in the 20th century as a result of war, crisis and displaced borders.

2) Communicative and Collective Memory / The Time Line

We have worked with variations on the “Time Line” exercise in all OMNIBUS courses. The purpose of the exercise is a personal examination of different perspectives on history and historical memory, as well as reflection upon the interaction between historical developments and different levels of memory and historical consciousness. Additionally, the exercise sensitizes participants to the differences of various presentations of history, making them aware of their own rolls and responsibilities in passing on history to future generations.

A large sheet of paper with four well-spaced horizontal lines of different colours is hung on the wall. Each line symbolizes a time line which spans from the past into the present, with an arrow leading into the future. Decades are marked out along the lines beginning with 1860.

First, participants are asked to mark the birthday of an older person whom they knew personally (such as a grandfather or grandmother) on the first time line, along with the person's name and place of birth. This serves to illustrate one important source of historical knowledge, namely personal, and participants are asked to spontaneously name other sources, such as books, diaries, monuments, archaeological sites, works of art, cave paintings, archives, museums, schools, universities, the media, stories, letters, etc.

Next, each participant thinks spontaneously of an historical event, which he/she then marks on the first time line. Considering each other's responses, participants often note the abundance of catastrophic or war-related events named. Then, participants are asked to name events which affected their own families, and to note them on the second time line. Finally, participants name and note down events on the third time line which they learned about through the stories of family members, thus through communicative memory. Considering the three time lines together, participants often notice that some events appear many times on the time lines, while others occur rarely, and that there can even be diverse descriptions or memories of one single event.

Turning to small groups, participants tell personal stories evoked by the exercise to each other and consider how their telling of the stories is influenced or effected by various contexts, emotions or social rolls. In a feedback round, those involved are also given the opportunity to comment on the content and effectiveness of their discussions.

It is our experience from these seminars that family histories are more often passed down by women, and that their content and narration is closely tied to social rolls. Women more often tell tragic, sad or comical stories, often involving suffering under war, hunger, or deprivation and what they did to

overcome these hardships, whereas men tend to tell more heroic tales. German families did not heavily discuss the past, especially the era of National Socialism, preferring instead to tell of the end of the war and the difficult post-war period. The emotions with which individuals narrate a history are often transmitted to their listeners, especially when close emotional or familial relationships already exist.

Finally, participants in the exercise add their own birthdays to the fourth time line, along with historical events of personal importance to them. They then imagine how they might tell these personal histories to a (fictional) grandchild in the future, and discuss their reflections on the seminar as a whole.

The exercise as described here is complex, yet it serves to bring together various aspects and levels of memory which are of importance to the development of individual and collective historical consciousness. Our historical memory and perspective on the past is mediated by many factors, and in turn influences how we see the present and our own actions and decisions, as well as the history which we wish to pass on to future generations. Not only our own knowledge, but also our institutions, emotions and outlooks play a role in our examination of the politics of history. This exercise provides a structured space in which to illuminate the individual elements of historical knowledge and to enable participants to consciously and responsibly confront their pasts.

3) Communicative Memory and Conflict

There are always two elements to conflicts: the apparent and the unapparent. As with an iceberg, decisive elements of a conflict typically lie below the surface, with aspects such as the self-understandings, values, moral views, needs and fears of conflict parties out of sight. The past and how it is dealt with also plays a central role in many conflict situations. This regards not just what is remembered – the previous events – but also the manner in which they are remembered, and the meanings which are attributed to these events. Relationships between those who still remember the events of the past are to be taken into particular consideration.

Before, during and immediately following armed conflicts, involved parties and actors use history, politics, and cultural memory to legitimize their respective actions. The enduring explosiveness of the subject of historical memory appears even in times of peace, such as in Germany in public and private discussions regarding the era of National Socialism, the Second World War or the evaluation of the GDR past. Consideration of the conflict potential which can arise from history and the manner in which it is dealt with takes up considerable space in OMNIBUS courses in the Caucasus and in Germany, proving once and again that engagement with history and memory has deep emotional relevancy on many levels. The purpose of this exercise on “Communicative Memory and Conflict” is a critical

consideration of the interaction between personal aspects and relationships and communicatively transmitted memory.

In this exercise, participants are then asked to remember and discuss in small groups a situation which they commonly experienced but remember differently, as well as one in which those involved in the first situation remembered what they had experienced. The groups then share their examples with each other and give feedback on the discussions. In feedback sessions, participants discussed the factors which may have influenced their different memories of the situations, such as personal relationships, or emotional connections, as well as barriers which may have blocked memories or their expression.

The exercise should illuminate the fact that a single situation can be remembered in very different ways, and that these divergent memories can create a potential for conflict. Since the exercise relies on the personal memories of participants, it is possible to explore the situations more carefully, especially with regards to personal emotions and perceptions. With a better understanding of personal memory, societal conflicts with foundations in conflicting memories also become easier to understand.

Our seminars have shown over and over again that work with history and memory can bring out many emotions, and since violent conflicts often have strong historical-political components, work with memory is key to conflict resolution. Since respective sides in a conflict typically see their perspectives as absolute truths, exercises such as this one provide the opportunity to recognize the subjective and interpretative aspects of memory. When we direct our attention not to the grand political stage, but rather to the smaller scenes in which the same mechanisms operate, we can overcome resistance and open doors which will also help us to solve future conflicts and develop greater understanding for the positions of others.