3 One Story, One Person

The importance of micro/bio research for disability studies

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The intellectual development of microhistory

Microhistory has its beginnings in Italy in the 1970s as *microstoria*. These scholarly ideas were in the melting-pot for some decades before their influence began to be felt internationally in the 1990s. Microhistory was one aspect of the “cultural turn” in history, which “turned” historian’s ideas from the quantitative approach to the qualitative.

Considering the principal characteristics of microhistory there are several aspects which require attention. Some are concerned with the exploration of “history from below” in the English-speaking academic world and “everyday life history” (*Alltagsgeschichte*) in the German. The intention here is not to trace in detail the reasons why the pioneers of microhistory, such as Carlo Ginzburg started to undertake historic research of this nature. But it should be pointed out that one of the principal reasons was that they felt it was necessary to respond to the French *Annales* school, and the tradition of history-writing which had evolved there. The *Annalistes* emphasis on long periods, grand historical narrative, and extensive geographical areas utterly lacked, in the view of Ginzburg and others, any insight into how individuals lived their life from day to day. The approach failed to address the diverse contradictions in the life of every person, their struggles with themselves and the surroundings, both formal and informal. They concluded that this could best be achieved by posing new research agenda and applying new and unconventional methods in answering new historical questions. There is thus nothing surprising in the fact that these two scholarly traditions—microhistory and biography—have been working together in recent years, as individuals in all their variety are the basis of both schools of research.

American historian Guido Ruggiero (1990) points out in his introduction to *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* that the methods of microhistory have mainly been focussed on using the individual increasingly in order to identify major formal changes within society: “At its best, this approach seems to promise a method that will help overcome the depersonalization and abstractness of social history without losing its insights

on the broader structural factors that condition events. At the least, by portraying how individuals respond to and make decisions in the face of such factors as they perceive them in a concrete historical situation, this perspective provides an important caution on the too easy spinning of the web of modern theory back into the past" (Ruggiero 1990, p. 12).

The emphasis will here be placed upon the individual as a historical phenomenon, working with the concept of "agency" in that context. The concept of "agency" is used here in the same sense as William H. Sewell, Jr. (2005) uses it, maintaining that it is defined as one's ability to have some control over the social settings people are part of, which means that one can affect how these ties develop. They take place within some specific structure which affects people's actions in different ways (Sewell 2005, p. 143–145). While the focus will be on the methods of microhistory, historians' conventional approaches in their research will be discussed, and how they have related to individuals and their attitude to life. For this reason, there will also be discussion of the resources which are the primary candidates for use in applying micro/bio methods in historical research. People on the periphery is the focus of this article.

The individual as a research target

The place of individuals in research projects is one of the characteristics of the micro historical approach: that is, the relationship between the external conditions of their lives, and the interior lives of those individuals. In all societies individuals live with certain laws and rules. They are also expected to comply with predetermined standards of conduct which have been shaped by traditions, generation after generation. But within every individual is a conflict between diverse desires and wishes; And all of them perceive their personal potential in their own way, often in opposition to accepted tradition and the laws and rules of society. The structure of the society evokes, in other words, a personal response in each individual, and that means that the paths people choose are often utterly at odds with the ones mapped out for them. In research it is important to pay attention to this conflict—and here it is irrelevant whether micro historical methods are applied, or those of biographical research—because it is the key to all changes that take place in society. Without it society would remain in a condition of stasis or perpetual *status quo*.

It may be important to look to the German historian Alf Lüdtke, who explains the position of the individual in his research better than anyone else, with the German word *Eigensinn*. That word is generally used as a disparaging reference to children's awkwardness or waywardness. Lüdtke applies the word to individuals' personal understanding of all conceivable details of life, and their interpretation of things. The better-off in society often complained of the common people's lack of discipline, alleging that

the common people would do what they wanted, regardless of anyone else, and would never obey orders.

Geoff Eley (1989) provides an excellent definition of the concept and its use: “The key to Lüdtke’s argument is the concept of *Eigensinn* – an almost untranslatable combination of self-reliance, self-will, and self-respect or the act of reappropriating alienated social relations, particularly at work but also at school, in the street, and in any other contexts externally determined by structures and processes beyond workers own immediate control” (p. 323). The important factor here is that *Eigensinn* is rarely a conscious action in time and space; instead it is unconscious, and almost always unrelated to the formal institutions of society. Hence the concept embraces that type of human conduct, which is generally regarded as irrational, i.e., at odds with dominant values or received custom. Clearly, this explanation of the concept and Lüdtke’s use of it is vastly important, as scholars are always making progress in understanding that the inexplicable factors in people’s conduct are a much bigger factor than has hitherto been assumed. Micro historians are likely to be on the lookout for such qualities in people’s character – to be expecting behaviours which cannot be foreseen. This “instability in human conduct” – the inexplicable behavioural quirks which are utterly familiar in daily life – may throw a highly significant light upon how ordinary people lived their lives in the past. This use of the concept by Lüdtke may thus have a crucial impact on how scholars who apply the “biographical approach” address their subjects – something which has not been done systematically by traditional biographical researchers.

But what does it mean, that there are certain limits to rationality? Can a history that is not premised on the importance of the rational in human society be expected to end up either in a chaotic postmodern descriptive approach, or as an interminable list of examples? The answer is unequivocal: History should seek out and study the structure of the society, while also demonstrating the scope the individual has within it. The micro historian generally emphasises that it is not only the individual who enjoys a certain freedom within the social structure: The structure itself is in a constant state of evolution and is full of paradoxes which mean that it is “open at both ends.” The Italian micro historian Giovanni Levi (1992) concludes: “This is truly a reversal of perspective in that it accentuates the most minute and localised actions to demonstrate the gaps and spaces which the complex inconsistencies of all systems leave open” (p. 107). But the first step is the presumption that the deeds and desires of individuals do not follow some fixed path: That they are in a constant state of flux, and unpredictable, something which the biographical approach can and should fully recognise.

“The singularization of history”

The scholarly development which has been traced above – a combination of evolution in the methods of microhistory and the discovery of new source material (egodocuments) (Mascuch, Dekker, and Baggerman 2016,

p. 11–56, Halldórsdóttir 2007, p. 35–49, Halldórsdóttir 2016, p. 81–100, Magnússon 2015, p. 77–94) – has led to a rejection of the idea that contextualisation is indispensable for historians (Magnússon and Ólafsson 2017, Magnússon and Szijártó 2013). In this the biography has had a great influence on this line of thought, and at the same time it has distanced the present author from other micro historians and their scholarly approach. The above argument leads to the conclusion that the ideas of Hans Render and Binne de Haan that “to understand the whole, we have to understand the parts, but to understand them, we have to understand the whole,” will not work (Renders and de Haan 2013, p. 8, Magnússon 2017, p. 42–52). It is argued here that it is important that historians place a strong emphasis on the internal context of the entity being researched, while avoiding the grand narrative. By focussing on the internal context, as is the rule in biographical research, the historian acquires a share in material that would not otherwise be noticed.

The attitude to microhistory of the well-known U.S. historian Jill Lepore’s (2001) is a case in point, maintaining that “however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole” (p. 133). It is argued here that the value of microhistory lies precisely in the opportunities opened by bringing out the unique aspects of the person and studying it in the subject’s own immediate environment. The dialogue between the subject and the environment brings out, exactly, how society really works in people’s daily lives. The same principal works for the biographical approach: To approach the subject as something or someone unique, that can open the way to a new understanding of how the society, to which each and every person belongs, works. But this is not possible, unless the scholar rejects the grand narratives, or strives to avoid them as far as possible—and does not have his or her mind on the big picture.

In order to approach the subject as explained above, it is possibly to apply a research model called the “singularization of history” (Magnússon 2003, p. 701–735).¹ The general idea of the “singularization of history” is based on the following: The model looks inward, and studies all aspects in close detail, bringing out the nuances of the events and phenomena we choose to investigate. The idea is that the focus will always be fixed on the matter in hand and on that alone. The ideology consists in investigating with great precision each and every fragment connected with the matter in hand for which there are sources, and in bringing up for consideration all possible means of interpretation that bear directly upon the material. The main point here is both to study as thoroughly as possible the material directly relating to the subject – to examine every detail exhaustively – and also to strive to bring into the study as much material as possible that relates to the subject, from the immediate environment. Such efforts often open doors to unexpected connections and “voices,” which may offer competing explanations of specific aspects of the study.

One may argue that there are, in fact, two ways to approach any matter: 1) Work outwards, looking for connections to other issues to create a larger synthesis and 2) Work inwards, surveying all corners – leaving no stone unturned – to fill out the “space” that the material at hand takes up. The latter way of doing research is not the most common among historians. On the contrary, historians tend to be preoccupied with the larger context, sacrificing the gain that a detailed analysis might bring to their research. As will be stated later on in this article, the argument will be made for a more intense analysis of the historical sources than historians have grown accustomed to – to deconstruct their context and inner being in as much detail as possible, just as many historians do who deal with the biographical method.

Even if the scale is reduced in the way envisioned here, one must still expect some structural orientation within the frame of reference. But this structure must always be subject to laws other than those imposed by the traditional metanarratives and, because of their scope, must be more malleable – i.e., the frames must be more limited and more easily controlled. What is proposed here is that the essential idea behind microhistory be taken literally: That scholars place the main emphasis on the small research unit and confine themselves largely to that. In this way the opportunity arises to give the full range of voices within society a place in historical research. The singularization of history in this sense provides the researcher with a means of bringing out the contradictions that exist between the different “discourses” of individual groups, and that is a precondition for our being able to approach ideas and points of view that in the general run of events do not come to the fore (Cohen 2019, Magnússon 2010).

Microhistory as a biographical approach

In the final decades of the twentieth century, biography as a historical method underwent a renaissance in many western countries, especially in the hands of qualified cultural and social historians who took a micro historical approach.² The principal feature of these writings was twofold: Firstly, the increasing recognition of the fragmented nature of historical scholarship has made traditional research, including conventional biographical study, outdated, and out of step with current academic thinking. The response has been clear, mostly leading to those who work with individuals as their main subject now doing so in a new and different manner. In other words, the scholarly trend has worked against the way in which traditional biographers went about doing their business.

Secondly, one thing that has changed is that scholars have introduced biographical subjects of a new kind – members of the society who live on the periphery, who are now studied in highly original and interesting ways. The poets and statesmen – the “greats” – who used to be the primary subjects of biography, were marginalised. Ordinary people who had never done

anything extraordinary had, nonetheless, left traces behind them. This tended to be because these people had got into trouble with the law, or alternatively because they themselves had written about their ideas and views on life. Material of this nature often proved useful in historical research which took account of the “biographical approach,” while also benefiting from the new cultural and social history, seen for instance in the methods of microhistory. What characterises this material is precisely its fragmented nature – sources are few and often difficult to deal with – and that demands that the scholar apply a new approach to the subject. The biography had thus developed into something quite different from the conventional life-story – although such works retained their popularity on the book market as entertaining reading (Renders and Velman 2020).

The biographical approach gave rise to very interesting experimental adjustments of sources: legal documents were, for instance, deconstructed; Special scrutiny was given to the relationship between those who found themselves on the wrong side of the law and those who were in control of the courts—the complex ways in which power intersected with people’s lives. Experiments of this kind went so far that scholars even started to work on lives of people about whom little or no evidence was extant.

It is thus safe to say that the biographical approach evolved towards scholarly experiments which focussed on study of the “self”; How the “self” has evolved and been shaped by diverse factors which are part of people’s life and work – gender, nationality, social class, education and so on. Research on the “self” sought to achieve an understanding of the ways people dealt with how they were shaped, in the context of the time. At the same time, the “objective” perspective in historical scholarship, which had predominated throughout the 20th century – the historian’s *sine qua non* – was increasingly being challenged as a desirable objective, or even a possible perspective. Thus the “subjective” principle gained currency: scholars sought in their works to bring out the individual’s experience of life, and of the phenomena being studied. Historians also unhesitatingly stepped into their own text and took their place next to the subject.³

The narrative of the “slow” process

This scholarly research model provides the opportunity to *slow down* the research process, to examine each fragment of knowledge, and place it in the context of other knowledge possessed by the researcher. In this way many of the best-known findings of micro historians have come into being.

Worth a mention in this context is the “slow” ideology which has appeared in the last 25 years or so and has a contribution to make to this aspect of micro historical studies (Bell and Leong 1998, Levine 1997). “Slowness” calls for creativity: Sensitive, imaginative contemplation of phenomena concerned with people’s everyday lives. *Slow* is the watchword of a range of movements in the arts, architecture, spatial consciousness, and studies

of time, reflecting individual and collective awareness of quality of life: How to resist the perception of reality which demands quick responses – glib and shallow statements, generally based on some momentary instinct: A straight line from A to B, consumption that prioritises speed (“fast food”) and maximum calories in the minimum time, spaces providing low-maintenance comfort and convenience, looks that hides people’s soft spots.

The basis of the Slow ideology – like slow violence – is precisely the opposite of this: Not to seek to smooth out people’s rough surfaces, but to find opportunities to demonstrate the positive side of the fact that not everything, and everyone, is the same. It is important to give oneself time to consider the qualities of people who have walked a rocky road in their lives, and not the smooth, straight path. Every person’s manner and body language has its own qualities which give meaning to life; But these can only be discerned by scrutinising all the details of each subject. This ideology opens up an opportunity for micro historians to examine their subjects minutely, and to discuss them in an enlightened manner. This ideology often leads to such detailed examination of objects and materials on the scholar’s desk that the result may be a revelation of something that might be called “slow violence,” a behavioural pattern that characterised many societies and was often “hidden” in the language and the mentality of the general public as well as those in power.⁴

There are two reasons why this concept is important: 1) The slow ideology has the advantage to temper the speed of the research; It puts the burden on the scientists’ shoulder to look for endless clues in the sources about small and sometimes insignificant everyday life occurrence and 2) Like, slow violence will not be found or located, unless we break away from the traditional dealing with the archive. If the scientist managed to step outside of the regular theoretical focus of scientific research, he or she is likely to find behaviour and action that are not open to the public eye.

Expanding the knowledge of lives of disabled people based on their own perspectives is an unusual opportunity and provides important information for society at large (Stefánsdóttir 2019, Stefánsdóttir and Traustadóttir 2015, p. 368–380). It is a common knowledge that throughout history people with intellectual disabilities have lacked voice, agency, and control over their lives. Recently they have been acknowledged as valuable contributors to the society at large and the discussion of intellectual disabilities (Walmsley and Johnson 2003). Life stories of people with intellectual disabilities have flourished since the 1990s, especially in the UK (Cooper, 1997, Potts and Fido 1991, Keilty and Woodley, 2013). For example, some significant international anthologies have also been published (Atkinson *et al.* 2000, Traustadóttir and Johnson 2000, Johnson and Traustadóttir 2005, Walmsley and Jarret 2019, Chapman *et al.* 2015) where the focus has been on the stories told by the people with intellectual disabilities.

In Iceland biographical and life story work with people with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new research area. Several life stories

of Icelandic people with intellectual disabilities have been published in international anthologies (Traustadóttir and Johnson 2000, Johnson and Traustadóttir, 2005, Chapman *et al.* 2015, Walmsley and Jarret, 2019). Some Icelandic life stories have also been published as a part of doctoral theses (Stefánsdóttir 2008, Björnsdóttir 2009). The majority of the life stories mentioned above (international and Icelandic) have been carried out in cooperation between researchers and people with intellectual disabilities. Still, it needs to be kept in mind that autobiographies written by people with intellectual disabilities are rarely found, though with some exceptions (Cooper 1997, Muir 2014, Hreinsdóttir and Stefánsdóttir 2010, Hreiðarsdóttir and Stefánsdóttir 2017). All this scientific approach where the individual is in the forefront is extremely suitable for microhistorical research.

Most of the autobiographies and life stories mentioned above have provided accounts of the many forms of societal discrimination and abuse, often in institutions where the individuals have been subject to inhumane treatment. At the same time the life history can also be a form of resistance, a counter-narrative told in opposition to the dehumanizing conditions and portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities as helpless victims living tragic lives (Atkinson 2004, Mitchell *et al.* 2006, Stefánsdóttir and Traustadóttir 2015). Many of the life histories give a very revealing account of scientific abuse, how the medical profession dealt with people with disabilities when they had nothing to say about their own conditions and life (Stefánsdóttir 2008). In fact, these stories are among the strongest criticism on modern scientific methods found in the 20th century.

The autobiographical manuscript by Bjargey Kristjánsdóttir (1927–1999), called Bíbí from the farm Berlín in the northwest part of Iceland, that will be dealt with in the next chapter written by Guðrún V. Stefánsdóttir and Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, falls into the above mentioned category of testimonies that come from a person who few paid any attention to, or asked what she wanted to do with her life. She was just told to sit and stand as her gradinences wanted her to behave.

Despite of this all, autobiographies similar to Bíbí's, are rarities, both in international settings and in Iceland. Bíbí's story is going to provide a unique insights into the lived experience of a person who was marginalized throughout her life, but lived most of her time in a local community in Iceland and had a clear ideas of the life she wanted to live and expressed it in her autobiography. Again, this extraordinary document will be the central feature of the next chapter and I believe that the study of Bíbí will fit well into the conceptual framework I have laid out here in this chapter.

Notes

1. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. (2003) 'The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge,' *Journal of Social History* 36, 701–735. The article was republished in an international collection of essays, *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical*

- Studies I-V*. Editor Robert M. Burns. London, Routledge, 2006, in vol. IV: *Cultural History*. The general ideas presented in the *Journal of Social History* article from 2003 has elicited a powerful response from both Peter N. Stearns and Harvey J. Graff in the Icelandic book: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, *Sögustrið. Greinar og frásagnir um hugmyndafræði* [The History War. Essays and Narratives on Ideology]. Reykjavík: Center for Microhistorical Research, 2007. See Peter N. Stearns, 'Debates About Social History and its Scope,' 17–21 and Harvey J. Graff, 'History's War of the Wor(l)ds,' 475–481. See also: Kristján Mímisson and Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. 'Singularizing the Past: The History and Archaeology of the Small and Ordinary,' *Journal of Social Archaeology* 14:2 (2014), 131–156.
2. Much has been written about biography in recent years. Suffice here to refer to an enlightening roundtable in *American Historical Review* in 2009: *AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography*. *American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009).
 3. Also: Gabrielle M. Spiegel. (2007) 'Revising the Past / Revisiting the Present: How Change Happens in Historiography,' *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 46: Revision in History 46:4, 1–19, which addresses the place of the individual in the postmodern and poststructural academic discourse. Finally, it is important to point out an issue of *Rethinking History* (2009) which addresses similar issues to those mentioned here. See e.g., Matthew Hollow. (2009). 'Introducing the Historian to History: Autobiographical Performances in Historical Texts,' *Rethinking History* 13:1, 43–52. I too have stepped into the scholarly text in: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. (2007). *Sögustrið. Greinar og frásagnir um hugmyndafræði*. Reykjavík: Centre for Microhistorical Research.
 4. This concept could be compared to direct-, structural- and cultural violence that is sometimes used in disability studies and in social science in general. Recently the concept microaggression has gain importance, violence that is a daily phenomenon and occurred over a long period of time – a type of violence that is difficult to pin down and is mostly hidden from the naked eye. See discussions on the concept of slow violence in Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon. *Emotional Experience and Microhistory. A life story of a destitute pauper poet in the 19th century*. London, Routledge, 2020, 133–139.

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