4 The Peculiar Attitude of the People

The life and social conditions
of one “feeble-minded” girl
in the early 20th century

Guðrún V. Stefánsdóttir and Sólveig Ólafsdóttir

Introduction

Bíbí is the nickname of Bjargey Kristjánsdóttir, an Icelandic woman born in 1927 who died in 1999. She grew up on a small farm called *Berlin* in northern Iceland. After falling seriously ill before her first birthday, Bíbí was labelled “feeble-minded” by her family and the local community. In her early years Bíbí was ostracised within the home and hidden from visitors. Bíbí wrote her own autobiography, keeping it secret from her family and neighbours. The autobiography, an enormous work totalling about 120,000 words, evinces intelligence and insight into her life and circumstances.

In this chapter, Bíbí’s childhood story is analysed based on two research disciplines: 1) critical disability studies and 2) microhistory. By connecting these two research fields, we will provide a new critical thinking about disability, as well as history. A feminist intersectionality framework is used to analyse Bíbí’s childhood story. The primary aim of this chapter is to shed light on the hidden history of people with disabilities, especially, girls in Iceland in the first half of the 20th century and, more specifically, to explore how social class, disability and gender intersected and impacted Bíbí’s childhood. We also demonstrate how the scientific knowledge and dominant ideology about people with intellectual disabilities influenced and shaped Bíbí’s life and circumstances. Then, we reflect on how Bíbí’s autobiography appears as a counter narrative that resists negative historical beliefs and stereotypes of people with intellectual disabilities. For this purpose, in addition to Bíbí’s autobiography, we use various official records, such as church records, parish registers, and annual reports from her local community. As well as explaining various events in Bíbí’s life, these documents also elucidate the spirit of the age and the general state of mind of the people who were part of the community she was brought up in.

Historical background and literature overview

The history of intellectual disabilities in the 20th century is largely a story of discrimination and social exclusion. In historical public records, people with intellectual disabilities were for the most part presented as abnormal

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and inferior. This is the grand narrative that dominates the history of intellectual disability (Atkinson and Walmsley 1999). In addition, the eugenics movement and the medical understanding of disability have played a crucial role in constructing societal views and stereotypical understandings of people with intellectual disabilities (Carlson 2010, Kevles 1986, Walmsley and Jarret 2019). The eugenics movement argued that “feeble-mindedness” was hereditary and “mental defectives” were seen as a threat to society due to their uncontrollable urges and degenerate characteristics (Karlsdóttir 1998, Scheerenberger 1983).

As a result of the medical understanding of disability, people with disabilities have often been characterised as tragic or silent victims: sexless, eternal children, or subjects for doctors’ and specialists’ remedies, such as cure, care, or segregation (Hollomotz 2011). As a consequence of the attitudes described above, it was seen as shameful for parents to have a child with disabilities, lending support to prevailing professional opinions that institutionalisation was in the best interest of all concerned. Despite this, many children grew up with their parents and siblings even though education was not available, nor any other social support or social services (Stefánsdóttir 2008). The first legislation concerning people with intellectual disabilities in Iceland was passed in 1936 (*Lög um fávítahæli* [1937] 18 445). The Act defined the legal framework for the first Icelandic institution for people with intellectual disabilities. It was later revealed that children and adults were subjected to inhumane treatment and oppressive conditions at the institutions, while education or any other form of meaningful activity was rarely available (Scheerenberger 1983, Stefánsdóttir 2008).

People with intellectual disabilities have lacked voice, authority, and control over their lives. However, since the 1990s there has been an increasing commitment to avert this trend and to engage people with intellectual disabilities in many forms of biographical and life story work (Atkinson 2004, Walmsley and Johnson 2003). The pioneering work of U.S. scholars Edgerton (1967), in listening to the views of people with intellectual disabilities, and Bogdan and Taylor (1982), in giving validity to life stories of the people, paved the way, making significant contributions to changing attitudes and to disability studies. Life stories of people with intellectual disabilities have flourished since the 1990s, especially, in the U.K. (Cooper 1997, Rolph *et al.* 2005, Potts and Fido 1991, Keilty and Woodley 2013). In recent years, some notable international anthologies have also been published (Atkinson *et al.* 2000, Traustadóttir and Johnson 2000, Walmsley and Jarret 2019, Chapman *et al.* 2015).

In Iceland, biographical and life story work with people with intellectual disabilities is a relatively new research area, although several life stories of Icelandic people with intellectual disabilities have been published in international anthologies (Traustadóttir and Johnson 2000, Johnson and Traustadóttir 2005, Walmsley and Jarret 2019). Some Icelandic life stories of people with intellectual disabilities have also been published as part of

doctoral theses (Stefánsdóttir 2008, Björnsdóttir 2009). Thus, the majority of the life stories mentioned above (international and Icelandic) have been carried out in cooperation between researchers and people with intellectual disabilities. Autobiographies written by people with disabilities, such as Bíbí's, are rarely found, although with some exceptions (Burnside 1991, Cooper 1997, Deacon 1974, Hunt 1967, Hreinsdóttir and Stefánsdóttir 2010, Hreiðarsdóttir and Stefánsdóttir 2017, Muir 2014).

Most of the autobiographies and life stories mentioned above have provided accounts of the many forms of societal discrimination and abuse, which often occurred in institutions. At the same time, the life history can also be a form of resistance, a counter-narrative told in opposition to the dehumanising conditions and portrayals of people with intellectual disabilities as helpless victims living tragic lives (Atkinson 2004, Stefánsdóttir and Traustadóttir 2015). Hence, autobiographies similar to Bíbí's are rarities, both in international settings and in Iceland. Bíbí's story provides unique insights into the lived experience of a person who was marginalised throughout her lifetime, but nevertheless spent most of her life in a local community in northern Iceland.

Methodology

The analysis of Bíbí's autobiography is based on two research disciplines: 1) critical disability studies and 2) microhistory. The general idea behind the latter is explained in this chapter written by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon in this edited volume. We do not focus on that particular methodology in our chapter. We do, however, introduce its influence on this study as we continue with the analysis of Bíbí's autobiography.

Critical disability studies

The role of critical disability studies in this chapter is to analyse disability as a cultural, historical, social, and political phenomenon (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Similar to traditional disability studies, we challenge approaches that pathologise physical, mental, and sensory difference as being in need of correction, and instead advocate both accommodation and equality for disabled people in all areas of life. The method is used here both to describe the socio-political constructions of disability and to track the impacts of these constructions on marginalised people like Bíbí. Critical disability studies commonly use intersectional analysis (Campbell 2009, Minich 2016). Intersectionality is a concept used to describe and analyse the experiences of marginalised people in terms of multiple factors. As we use the concept, it acknowledges that systems of gender, ability, race, age, and social class intersect and influence wider power relations and personal experiences. From an intersectional perspective, disability is not considered in isolation from other social categories. Thus, it becomes more apparent

that different social categories and oppressions work together in producing injustice (Collins 2008).

Critical disability studies are significantly aimed toward analysing ableism (Campbell 2009). Ableism, in the context of disability, means that certain physical, cognitive, sensory, or other types of abilities are preferred, and people who have differing abilities are considered impaired and different. Ableism is discrimination on the basis of ability and a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body projected as the perfect, and, therefore, essential and fully human. Such ableist views have been used to legitimise unequal treatment of disabled people. In ableist societies, disabled people are viewed as less valuable, or even less than human. The eugenics movement of the early 20th century would be considered an example of widespread ableism (Carlson 2010, Campbell 2009).

The source material

The data used in this chapter are twofold, Bibí's autobiography and public records, such as church records, parish records, and annual reports.

Bibí's autobiography. It consists of twenty notebooks, amounting to 1,200 pages, written in capital letters – each book around a hundred pages. The autobiography is filled with personal descriptions of her life. The text is very unusual and is mostly written in pencil, and some of the words have been retraced several times as if she was trying to make sure that her story would not be forgotten. The original manuscript is kept in the Manuscript Department of the National and University Library of Iceland, which means that the manuscript is open to the public. In this chapter, the focus will be on her childhood, from birth until her confirmation at the age of fourteen. Bibí covers that period mostly in the first three parts of her autobiography.

Public records. From the times of the “Mist Hardships” (*Móðuharðindi*), lasting from 1783 to 1785, until the first decade of the 20th century, most public supervision was in the hands of clergymen, provosts, district administrative officers, and county magistrates. This can be divided into two domains of authority: that is, spiritual and secular. It is notable that the spiritual authority was responsible for the basic education of the public and preparation for confirmation, the most important ritual of introducing individuals into the community of adults. The secular authority was responsible for providing minimum support for those who did not have the capacity to work and to sustain themselves. Those two components, lack of education that was the basis of confirmation and capacity to work, led to marginalisation.

The records created by the authorities listed above are of diverse origins. They are censuses, church records, parish registers, and annual reports on the state of affairs from subordinates to supervisors, letters of exemptions from confirmation, statements of estates at death and reports of auctions,

to name but a few. All records reflect their writers. Clergymen, for example, used different language to describe their congregation than the district administrative officers or other authorities. Nevertheless, by systematically analysing, contemporary remarks about individuals with the aforementioned definition of disability in mind, it should be possible to unravel both threads and traces of disabled people in any society.

With the aid of these perspectives – critical disability studies and the methods of microhistory – it has been possible to untangle the threads of Bíbí's life. The main sources originate from the vicar in Hof Parish, both church records and parish registers. Censuses, conducted at ten year intervals, also offer significant insight into the community structure of the period.

Social conditions and important persons in Bíbí's childhood

Bíbí was born in the village of Hofsós in Hofshreppur municipality. Her parents were Kristján Guðmundsson, farmworker, and Guðrún Steinþórsdóttir, who worked predominately as a housewife and in the fields. The little girl was named Bjargey at a christening ceremony on January 2, 1928 (ÞÍ. Fell í Sléttuhlíð – prestakall 0000 BA/6-1-1. Prestsþjónustubók 1918–1960). In 1929, her parents moved to the cabin known as Berlín, just outside the village, where Bjargey, or Bíbí, was brought up and where she lived into her adult years. Bíbí was commonly identified with the cabin Berlín, although she was not particularly fond of this connection with the farm. The 1910 census contains the first official reference to the small cabin Berlín, stating that Berlín is a turf cabin with one whole timber front and two half-barrel shaped gables. Berlín was less than 15m² in total area (ÞÍ. Manntalið 1910 – Stjórnarráð Íslands – III.). Bíbí's descriptions in her autobiography clearly reflect those of official sources, indicating a highly primitive level of comfort with restricted personal space.

In her infancy, Bíbí was considered a promising child, but after falling ill before her first birthday she was classified as “feeble-minded” by her family and neighbours and hidden away from strangers. Bíbí shares her recollection of her family's attempts to conceal her existence:

I wasn't allowed to be outside if guests were passing by, which was often in bright sunshine and fine weather. I can tell you a story from the time when I was probably around nine years old. Two girls arrived one morning, one of them was related to me and mum. I cannot recall whether they were offered coffee, but, anyhow, I was the victim of the peculiar attitudes of the people and had to hide in the dark corner by the oven while they stayed. If this peculiar attitude had involved making me go inside when guests arrived or when someone was travelling on the road, it would have been a different thing. But when my father wasn't at home, I could be anywhere I wanted. He was ashamed of me because I was disabled and looked different from other children, that's for sure.

During Bíbí's upbringing and adolescence, social discrimination, and prejudice towards people with disabilities was widespread, especially, if they were considered to be intellectually challenged. It was not uncommon for children and adults with disabilities to be isolated in their homes or concealed, as in Bíbí's case (Stefánsdóttir 2008). In her autobiography, Bíbí often mentions the "peculiar attitude of the people," as she does above, when describing the negative actions or attitudes towards her. Nevertheless, in her story she describes how it was her father who was most ashamed of her and that she was only told to hide in a dark corner when he was at home. By contrast, Bíbí also notes that there was considerable contact between farms and that, as a child, she often went on visits to neighbouring farms. Thus, it would appear that no attempt was made to hide Bíbí away from close neighbours and that when Bíbí talks about "guests" she probably refers to "strangers" who did not know the circumstances in her home.

Although the "peculiar attitude of the people" put its mark on Bíbí's childhood and adolescence, she liked living in the country. In her story, she often refers to the Icelandic landscape, revealing her love of nature and her country. She also describes her love for the animals on the farm and how they became her best friends and soulmates, especially, the cats. In her autobiography, Bíbí often refers to the widespread poverty of her youth, although her parents appear to have been neither poorer nor richer than other small farmers in the district. She mentions that a lack of clothes prevented her from being outside and that she often felt cold because she had no warm clothes to wear. But she never mentions hunger or a lack of food. She takes a considerable interest in food and her story presents numerous interesting descriptions of culinary culture and the daily diet, as illustrated by the example below:

At home, our regular diet was blood pudding and milk porridge, milk soup, on rare occasions sweet soup, and rice soup, sometimes bread soup; Twice a week we had meat soup, on Sundays and Wednesdays. Often stew was prepared from leftovers, especially, on Mondays. Otherwise, fish was often on the table, both pan-fried and boiled, fish-balls were made from haddock. The stomachs, liver and heads of cod were also eaten. All of this was good food, but the meat soup upset my digestion and always gave me acute diarrhoea.

Bíbí's descriptions of the Berlín family's dietary habits and choices are in line with other contemporary sources. The daily diet was rather simple but changed in step with the seasons and varying success in the fishery, depending on weather conditions. A special effort was made to make thorough use of all organic matter and food scraps (Gísladóttir 1999).

Bíbí describes both positive and negative aspects of her relationships with other children from neighbouring farms. In some cases, she was

accepted as an equal, but on other occasions she was teased or ignored. Bibí describes these relationships in her characteristic manner, saying: “My childhood was anything but pleasant; This was because of the people’s peculiar attitude; It is wrong of grown-up people when they pretend not to notice that their children are bullying and teasing a person with a disability. That is a nasty attitude to have.”

The childhood friends Bibí and Alda

Bibí had one close childhood friend, Alda; they were lifelong friends, and their friendship was of great importance to Bibí. She dedicates her autobiography to Alda and, at the beginning of her autobiography, she writes:

What made me begin to write this book was that I was talking about my life to my lifelong friend who died this winter. Once when I came to visit her, she approved of the idea and encouraged me to start writing. Therefore, this book is dedicated to her, Alda Kristín Jóhannsdóttir.

Alda was born four years after Bibí, March 18, 1931, and died in 1989. Her parents were Jóhann Eiríksson, a landlord farmer and fishing operator at Þönglaskáli, and his wife, Sigurlaug Einarsdóttir (Þ.Í. Manntalið 1930 – Hagstofa Íslands 1944). Þönglaskáli was one of the first concrete houses in Hofshreppur district (Þ.Í. Manntalið 1940 – Hagstofa Íslands 1955). The families of the two friends came from opposite ends of the social ladder. Alda was born and brought up in a concrete house owned by her father who managed his own fishing boat and had people working for him. Bibí, on the other hand, lived in a small cabin, and her father, Kristján, worked as a day labourer in the village, in both agriculture and fishing.

It was a short distance between Berlín and Þönglaskáli and despite the difference in social status, there appears to have been significant contact between the two families. Below, Bibí describes her friendship with Alda.

We had similar temperaments, both rather quiet souls, me, and that girl. I got to know Alda better and I don’t regret that acquaintance. I liked her, we never quarrelled during those years of friendship, but enjoyed playing together in peace. I felt sorry for Alda and thought she was having a rough time. No doubt Alda also felt I was having a rough time, especially, because of the peculiar attitude of the people. I’m sure it was not the custom at Þaunglaskáli to hide Alda away when guests arrived. Alda often came to my home, with her parents’ permission. I just hope no one laughs at me when I officially state in this book that I loved Alda as I would have loved my sister if I had had any. We played with my doll and other things. It never occurred to us to try to control each other, this was out of the question. We never slandered anyone, we called nobody names and we didn’t tell lies about anyone. We

just talked about our things and interests. I remember that if I knew Alda was down at Naust, I waited in high expectation, hoping that she would come and visit me; And I was so happy when I saw a fair-haired head appear over the hilltop at Naust farm, then perhaps a red coat appeared and finally all of her. I waited excitedly until she came through the gate between the homefields, and I often stood near the gate until she came to me. This was my Alda, handicapped from birth, but could nevertheless run incredibly fast, considering the circumstances, and she was brave – this was probably what kept her going.

This fragment from Bíbí's story bears witness to her warm feelings for Alda and shows how important their friendship was to both of them. According to Bíbí they were close confidantes and their friendship lasted as long as they both lived. As the above piece reveals, Alda had a disability from birth, and this may well have contributed to their mutual understanding and empathy for each other. Bíbí does not indicate the nature of Alda's disability and official documents contain no suggestion that Alda was in any way different from other children. For example, she went to the primary school in Hofsós, whereas Bíbí was not allowed to attend the school (more later). It may be relevant in this context that there was a significant difference in the social status of their parents and Bíbí's words can be interpreted in this direction, when she says "... it was not the custom at Þaunglaskáli to hide Alda away when guests arrived." It can be reasonably inferred that in her relationship with Alda and in the games they played, Bíbí was able to express her true self and escape the role she was often forced into that is, being a disabled child, and a second-class outcast. What these two girls shared as friends was what the historian Barbara Rosenwein (2016) refers to as emotional community. Emotional communities "...are groups – usually but not always social groups – that have their own particular values, modes of feeling, and ways to express those feelings. Like 'speech communities,' they may be very close in practice to other emotional communities of their time, or they may be quite unique and marginal" (Rosenwein 2016, p. 3–4). Bíbí shared this emotional community with Alda.

My brother Steini

Bíbí had one brother named Þorsteinn, called Steini. He was born August 26, 1936, when Bíbí was nine years old. Bíbí's feelings towards Steini were mixed, although there is no doubt that she cared for him. She describes him as an inventive and amusingly goofy character, but she also says he was unmanageable, naughty, and mischievous. Bíbí describes in her autobiography that their parents preferred Steini. His status within the family made Bíbí feel wretched and jealous, and she attaches various epithets to the boy, such as "the prince," "the prodigy," and "the oaf." Bíbí argued:

It was quite incredible how they pampered this boy. Later, I was to look after the little prince, in particular I was supposed to hold his dummy, but I could not keep it up. The backs of my thighs became so sore standing there motionless like some kind of object. It was no better when I was supposed to sit on the floor with the boy; I did that twice but gave up and then she hit me. Mothers should never do such a thing with their disabled child. But I am going to tell you here and now that I would rather have looked after 100 chickens than that little brat.

Bíbí was aware of how her parents felt about Steini and, as a result, she had strong feelings of rejection and inadequacy. As so often in her account, Bíbí hit upon the crux of the matter when she wrote:

They spoilt him rotten, that's for sure. He was a boy, but I was a disabled girl. I know this is not a nice thing to say, but sometimes I felt that all three of them, my parents, and the boy, were like a pack of snarling wolves. You're always in the way, that's how it was with me.

These sentences reveal Bíbí's intense pain at being so callously set aside. In her story, Bíbí often brings up how she envied Steini, not only because he received much more attention than she ever did, but also because he was allowed to work outside with her father. Bíbí's parents insisted that she help her mother with the typical feminine work inside the farm, whereas Bíbí wanted to work outside in nature. Bíbí and her father constantly argued because of this and, as a consequence, he often hit her or locked her inside the farm. As she describes it: "I was often caned when I protested against washing up or helping mum."

When Bíbí was growing up, the place for women was inside the house, cooking and cleaning and caring for the family. Bíbí did not fall into that category. As described, intersectionality seeks to understand how disability and other social categories, such as gender and social class, intersect and lead to oppression and exclusion (Campbell 2009). Bíbí was not only labelled "feeble-minded," she was also a girl, and her family was poor and had low social status in the community.

The prominent men in the local community – physicians and clergymen

Diagnosis and the impact of being stigmatised

Bíbí was not fond of the medical profession in her early years, as she describes in the autobiography: "In the beginning, when I was young, I was for quite a long time scared of a certain profession; That is, the doctors. I did not want to have anything to do with them, which was not at all surprising."

Bíbí maintains that she was a promising child. In the summer of 1928, when Bíbí was almost a year old, she lived with her parents at Hofsós. To be able to support the family her father went to work in Siglufjörður, but her mother was hired to work on a nearby farm and took Bíbí with her. Conditions on the farm were grossly inadequate and unhealthy. As a result, Bíbí became seriously ill. She describes the consequences of her illness as follows:

After this, I fell ill and was taken to Siglufjörður for further examination and light therapy. I became so ill that people thought I would die, but those who are least liked live longest. That's how it was with me; It would have been better if I had kicked the bucket then rather than becoming the flotsam and jetsam of this world, if I can put it that way – all because of the peculiar attitudes of the people.

Bíbí's narration above reflects her sorrow over having been marginalised and excluded all her life. In the fall of 1937, new developments in Bíbí's struggle with the medical profession came into being, as described in the following passage from her autobiography:

In the fall of 1937, my mother took me urgently to Sauðárkrókur [the nearest town]. The following morning the boat reached Sauðárkrókur. I cannot remember what time it was when we met the doctor, probably around 3 o'clock. I did not like the look of that creature – I apologise to eventual readers for my language! As soon as we entered and I saw him, I lost all control and wanted to have nothing to do with him. This probably happened when I was to be undressed, but anyway the quack inspected me from the top, but not all the way to the toes. Then the churl announced his verdict. I was a wretch in both departments; That is, both mentally and physically, which was a lie. Actually, the bastard announced what was wrong with me. I seem to remember my mother telling him that I was able to read, when he asked. Then he made up the fantasy that I must not eat meat; Instead, I was to eat things I had never tasted before, such as dulce and scurvy-grass. He seemed to think he could put into me what was missing, but he couldn't take it from anyone else, the old scamp. During the night we returned home, but we had hardly entered the house when guests started asking my mother how we had got on. She told them what the old rogue had said, repeating all his bunch of lies. I was furious about this. What I would like to say is this: Never tell guests what is wrong with your child after having taken them to a doctor, least of all if it is something particular.

This detailed description of an incident from the distant past, written in Bíbí's diaries decades after it occurred, is of particular interest.

Magnússon (2005) points out that memory is closely connected with momentous events in people's lives, both negative and positive. It is probable that this was such an event for Bíbí, one that, in her mind, demonstrated how she had been stigmatised as deviant and second class. Bíbí's description reflects her attitude to the highly negative stigma of disability, which she regards as a label that leads to exclusion and negative attitudes. This is, especially, noticeable in the way Bíbí was deeply hurt by her mother telling others about the doctor's diagnosis.

In the Sauðárkrókur physician's report to the Directorate of Health for the year 1937, the main diseases occurring in his area are listed under their Latin names, one of which was "Poliomyelit," or polio (Latin: *Poliomyelitis*). The doctor diagnosed one patient as having this disease; this patient was probably Bíbí (ÞÍ. Skjalasafn Landlæknis. Skýrslu héraðslækna fyrir árið 1937). When the pastor conducted his regular pastoral inspection in Berlín in 1936, a year before the visit to the doctor in Sauðárkrókur, he wrote in the comment's column that Bíbí was suffering from rickets (Latin: *Rachitis*). Bíbí describes the attempts by doctors and the clergyman to diagnose her illness in the following terms:

My mother had taken me to them all, but to tell the truth, I cannot remember any of them. One thing, I remember, though; Each said his own piece of nonsense. One said I had rickets, which was nonsense. Another said I had swollen glands behind the stomach; This was also nonsense. Kids who have this, grow naturally and it has no effect on them. I know this well now.

Bíbí was probably right in the above assessment. At a later stage in her life Bíbí was diagnosed with hypothyroidism, which probably afflicted her from early age. This ailment can display a number of symptoms, varying from fatigue and constipation to curtailed growth and intelligence. To prevent this condition, all neonates have for a long time been screened for this particular disease, which has virtually been eradicated in almost every developed country (Roberts and Ladenson 2004). The symptoms outlined here are often referred to in Bíbí's autobiography when she describes herself and her "sickliness," as she puts it. Moreover, she tells us that she was often tired and that her growth was not normal.

Bíbí does not explain why her mother, Guðrún, took her to Sauðárkrókur to consult the local family doctor. This may well have been mainly because Bíbí's mother wanted the opinions of another physician. In 1937, however, the year they visited the physician in Sauðárkrókur, there was also a doctor available in Hofsós. Although we cannot be sure, it is possible that Bíbí's parents felt that Hofsós was too close and that the shame attached to having a disabled child played a major role in the decision.

Education and the reading lessons

In 1907, Iceland adopted the first legislation on general education (Lögm fræðslu barna [1907] 59 A 128). The law stipulated compulsory education for children 10–14 years of age. Other aspects of children's education were assigned to the home and children were supposed to come to school more or less able to read and write. This requirement to teach children at home was based on the centuries-old domestic education system where the pastor acted as supervisor and examiner. Although the final examinations that were part of the compulsory education system had taken over the educational assessment that had previously been part of the confirmation, clergymen nevertheless continued to test children's abilities in reading, writing, arithmetic, and biblical knowledge well into the first decades of the 20th century. It is worth mentioning that in Hofsós in 1938, children were taught in an old school building with one classroom and in the basement of the local community centre (Anon 1938). Despite the legal obligation to provide compulsory education, the law also specified that children could be exempted from attending school due to "lack of intelligence" or illness. We cannot say for sure why Bíbí did not have the opportunity to go to school, but this legal exemption may well have played a role. Bíbí describes her feelings on this as follows:

I have felt so sorry, deep down within myself, not to be allowed to go to school with my peers. But what of that. There are probably few things that peculiar attitudes cannot spoil. In those days when I was ten years old, all my age peers had to go to primary school, but I was not allowed to go to school, instead they got a girl to teach me after dad had tried.

This reference also bears witness to the "peculiar attitude of the people," the negative perspectives that dominated the community in those times, and also demonstrates how much it hurt Bíbí's feelings to be denied the opportunities of her peers. Nevertheless, Bíbí's father was keen to ensure that she was taught at home; this instruction was carried out by various people, such as her father himself, her grandmother, and girls from neighbouring farms, as Bíbí mentions above. Things did not always go smoothly, however, as Bíbí recounts in her autobiography. The struggle with her father she describes in the following manner:

Sometimes the old codger, my dad, lost his patience, and told me off while teaching me to read. Once he slapped me in the face with the alphabet book. Nobody should do a thing like that, least of all hit a weak, disabled child. My granny was a more patient teacher than my dad. Later, they got a girl to teach me. Her name was Guðríður and she

made me read the book of bedtime stories which aunt Jane had sent me. I could probably read by that time. I never went to primary school but took the spring exam and answered questions.

The church records show that when the pastor came to inspect the home at Berlín in 1936, Bíbí was nine years of age; she knew the letters of the alphabet and was able to read simple words. Two years later, another pastor had taken over and he gave Bíbí the following grades: Christianity v, reading v+, arithmetic v. Here, v – indicates “good,” which is worse than “excellent,” but better than “poor.” An additional comment accompanies Bíbí’s entry: That is, the statement “backward” (Þí. Fell í Sléttuhlíð – prestakall 0000 BA/6-1-1. Prestsþjónustubók 1918 – 1960). This comment probably originates from Bíbí’s parents because the year before, in 1937, Bíbí’s mother, Guðrún, had taken her on the consequential visit to the physician in Sauðárkrókur.

The confirmation

With the Reformation in Iceland, it became the duty of pastors to test their parishioners’ knowledge of Christianity. This role became more comprehensive as the centuries went by, gradually expanding to include all general education of children in reading, writing, and finally arithmetic. This educational career was completed with the children’s confirmation, after which they were regarded as adults at the age of 14. Certain conditions needed to be fulfilled to be confirmed, the most important of which were having been christened and learnt the necessary subject matter and being fully 14 years of age (Arnórsson 1912). Although the law on children’s education implemented at the beginning of the 20th century relieved the clergymen of some of the above duties, the old traditions nevertheless remained strong. The confirmation was, in other words, a big event in Bíbí’s youth and seen as a ticket into adult life.

On July 8, 1941, Bíbí was confirmed in the local church of Hofskirkja and the clergyman wrote in the church record that both her knowledge and conduct were “Excellent” (Þí. Fell in Sléttuhlíð parish 0000 BA/6-1-1. Church register 1918–1960). It is of particular interest, however, that Bíbí was confirmed alone and her age peers, eight boys and three girls, had been confirmed together at least a month earlier, on Whit Monday (Þí. Fell í Sléttuhlíð – prestakall 0000 BA/6-1-1. Prestsþjónustubók 1918–1960).

Based on Bíbí’s autobiography, there appears to be no doubt as to whether or not she was to be confirmed. Although she did not attend school with her peers, she began confirmation preparations with them when she was 13 years old. It would appear that right up to her confirmation day, Bíbí and her family thought she was going to be confirmed with her peers. It was, therefore, a bitter disappointment to her when she was excluded. In

her autobiography, Bíbí tells us that her mother went to Siglufjörður to buy clothes for the confirmation, and she describes the day when her peers were confirmed in the following manner:

Yes, if only it could have been like that. On Whitsun morning I of course wanted to join my peers. Mum started dressing me in the fine trousers and the suspender belt. Then my old daddy urgently had to go to the village before noon and when he returned, he said he had spoken to two honourable gentlemen; They were the Reverend Guðmundur and Bragi, the district doctor. He said he had asked both of them whether they thought I was fit to go to a certain ceremony with my peers and apparently the pastor said “yes,” but the doctor said “no” and his opinion decided the matter. This was the news my old dad brought back. In those days it never occurred to me to be suspicious of anyone. I was upset to miss going to the church and not being able to join my peers and I started to cry. Everything was ready; Sigurlaug á Þönglaskála had done my hair and Anna Páls had set it in waves.

One can easily imagine the young girl’s shock, helplessness, and disappointment. Bíbí also indicates in her story that when she was eventually confirmed alone, a few weeks later, she was not impressed by the ceremony; no doubt prior events played a major role in her evaluation.

At first, Bíbí probably thought that the reason for the sequence of events on the confirmation day was that she had been ill with a cold a few days earlier, although she had recovered on the actual day when the confirmation was to take place. But later, Bíbí realised that the real reason was different and once again she blamed the “peculiar attitude of the people,” or the negative mentality of the time, which had so often spoilt her childhood and would continue to do so for the rest of her life.

Interpretation and concluding remarks

Bíbí’s autobiography clearly reflects the influence of the grand narrative of eugenics and the medical understanding of disability (Kevles 1986, Walmsley and Jarret 2019). As a result, Bíbí was marginalised and experienced many forms of exclusion and oppression. Bíbí was definitely unaware, as were other members of the community in those times, of the impact of eugenics and medical science upon negative attitudes towards her. She blames the “peculiar attitude of the people,” not her impairment, for her problems and wretched circumstances. It could be maintained that Bíbí’s understanding of disability was opposed to the traditional medical understanding, where all problems are seen in terms of the impairment of the individual (Goodley 2016). Blaming the present state of mind of the general public reveals the modern social understanding of

disability. Critical disability studies note that disability only becomes a barrier because of society's negative attitudes and responses (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009). Bíbí did not fit into the ableist vision of society and these views were used to justify her unequal treatment and isolation. In Bíbí's case, the negative attitudes of her family and the local community became the largest hindrances in her life.

As described in this chapter, intersectionality theories were used to analyse Bíbí's childhood story. Thus, it becomes more apparent that different social categories, such as disability, gender, social class, and oppression, combine in producing injustice (Collins 2008). The examples from Bíbí's story presented in this chapter clearly reveal how those three social categories – that is, disability, social class, and gender – intersect in Bíbí's life and lead to multiple forms of oppression and exclusion in her life. An example of the way gender and disability intersect in Bíbí's childhood is how her brother Steini was preferred to her, as she points out, because she was a “disabled girl,” and he was a boy. Bíbí's parents were poor farmers, and her story contains numerous examples of the way her disability and social class intersects. A clear case in point is the difference in social position of Bíbí and her friend Alda, both of whom had disabilities. Alda's parents were, however, positioned considerably higher on the social ladder than Bíbí's parents. Thus, it becomes more apparent that different social categories and forms of oppression work together in producing multiple layers of discrimination and oppression in Bíbí's life (Campbell 2009).

The main theme in the examples from Bíbí's childhood are the exclusion and humiliation she was subjected to. She also includes examples of how she protested and challenged people when she felt she was unfairly treated. Those protests were not always loud; They frequently occurred in her mind, as demonstrated by the text of her autobiography. Although the examples from Bíbí's autobiography reveal the injustice she had to live with, they also strongly reflect Bíbí's personality; She was a humourist, a great lover of nature and animals, and, in many respects, her way of life resembled that of other country children. Bíbí shows us that the longings and expectations of the little girl are the same as those of her peers early in the early 20th century, which first and foremost involved the comforting presence of family and loved ones, safe shelter, having friends and being involved and accepted by one's family and the local community.

To further clarify Bíbí's childhood, various contemporary sources were used where her name occurs, such as church records, parish registers, and annual reports. As well as revealing various occurrences in Bíbí's life, these sources also cast light up the spirit and social attitudes of the times when she was growing up. Bíbí's own story, however, often provides a totally different perspective and, in some instances, appears as a counter-narrative to the dominant official attitudes, as so clearly demonstrated by her confrontation with the medical profession. By integrating these methodologies, as we did in this chapter, building on critical disability studies and microhistory,

we hope to create a new and critical way to analyse personal stories. By presenting Bíbí's autobiography as a counter narrative against the attitudes that characterise the dominant ideology of the period of Bíbí's childhood and youth, and the way she is depicted in contemporary official sources, the grand narrative is challenged and exposed. The focus of such an approach is always on the individual and his or her relationship with the near environment in each instance. Thus, our presentation of the past is expanded and enriched by the smallest details, as Bíbí's autobiography shows us in its exceptional clarity and detail.

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