

BOOK REVIEWS

Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood **Marnina Gonnick & Susanne Gannon (Eds.)**

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Review by Paul Scheibelhofer & Philip Taucher

The edited volume “Becoming Girl”, published in 2014 by Marnina Gonnick and Susanne Gannon, sets out to further knowledge on young women’s lives and identities through the method of collective biography. The book situates itself in the field of “girlhood studies,” which encompasses scholarship from a range of disciplines such as history, sociology, ethnography or media studies. As a subfield of women’s and gender studies, girlhood studies seeks to elucidate the social realities and discursive production of young women’s lives at the intersection of multiple forms of dominance. It aims to generate knowledge about girls’ life-worlds as well as destabilize taken for granted beliefs about what it means to be “a girl.” *Becoming Girl* partakes in this academic endeavour by presenting outcomes of collective memory sessions conducted by groups of feminist scholars and students connected to the editors. As Gonnick and Gannon state in the introduction, the book is the outcome of a group effort, which shows in the fact that most chapters are written by different combinations of a recurring set of authors. While this lends the book a coherence that edited volumes often lack, it also leads to recurring themes and approaches across the chapters and limits the overall scope of the volume. The book’s eleven chapters are organized in two sections: Four chapters present the methodology of collective biography as conducted by the authors and reflect upon potentials and limitations of this method in the light of post-structuralist thinking. The remaining seven chapters are assembled under the header of “themes” and present analyses of material produced in collective biography sessions. This organization of the book is particularly helpful to readers interested in the method of collective biography but makes it also a worthwhile read for scholars of girlhood.

From Collective Memory Work to Collective Biography and Beyond

The methodology of collective biography serves as a common ground for all contributions in this volume. All authors cite a collection by Davis and Gannon (2006) on “doing collective biography” as the main methodological point of reference for their research, particularly when they claim to further develop the methodology. Davis’ and Gannons (2006) publication is also the link to collective memory work. Whenever there is a connection drawn from collective biography to collective memory work, Haugs (et. al. 1987) collection on “Female Sexualisation” is used as reference. So collective biography (Davis’ and Gannons 2006) roots in the memory work research on “Female Sexualisation” (Haug 1987) and the contributions in this volume can be perceived as an application of the methodology of collective biography in the field of girlhood studies or, in some cases, as variations of collective biography. With one exception (Haug 2008), no reference to later research based on collective memory work is made.

In their initial outline of the methodology and its development Gonick and Gannon present the elements that collective biography shares with collective memory work and which reflect its solid foundation in feminist methodology: the starting point of the research is the lived everyday experience of women in the form of memories of specific situations. These memories are not used as “authentic” data to analyse phenomena in the life of an individual, but as an entry point to analyse social relations from the standpoint within this everyday life. This movement is facilitated by a collective process of writing and rewriting, sometimes performing, and analysing those stories. In this process the whole collective becomes the subject of research without distinction between researcher and researched.

One particular factor which distinguishes collective biography as conducted by the books’ authors from collective memory work as initially developed by Haug, is their use of a certain repertoire of concepts by theorists who are identified as “poststructuralist” (Butler, Deleuze, Foucault, Guattari) as a framework to analyse and interpret the experiential accounts and memories delivered in the research process. From the beginning the investigation of social relations occurs through the lens of poststructuralist concepts. Drawing on Butler, Gannon and Gonnick describe in their chapter on the theoretical foundations of collective biography, how girls perform into the social roles of a “girl.” Accordingly the analysis of the memories in the research projects documented in the book is performed within a certain “poststructuralist” conceptual framework.

The different applications and variations of collective biography in this volume provide a range of refreshing methodical approaches which can also enrich collective memory work projects. The fact that in collective biography the research process starts with verbal storytelling which leads into a collective writing and rewriting process, makes it more accessible to those less keen on writing. Through this dialogical approach affect, emotion and embodied knowledge are consciously mobilized in researching the processes of “becoming girl.”

The authors also integrate performative elements like participative theatre methods in the collective biography process to meet this goal. Generally, it is a great asset of the research

presented in this volume, that the projects do not follow a rigid guideline, but adapt the collective biography process to their topic and field of application.

Similar to collective memory work, collective biography is not just a scientific research method, but can also be used in the classroom. In the last chapter of the volume Byers and her students describe how they conducted collective biography in a methodology course at the university.

Theories and Topics

Different to Frigga Haug and her colleagues, who developed their analyses in dialogue with materialist feminist theories, the authors of *Becoming Girl* explicitly depart from this framework. Rather than using sociological theories in their analyses of collective biographical narratives, a particular set of post-structuralist theoreticians is drawn upon throughout the chapters of the book. With this move, the authors want to produce analyses that destabilize established dichotomies and categorizations and create conceptual space for new insights into identities and social realities of young women.

In a chapter on food, written by Byers and Rajiva, theories of subjectivity by Judith Butler are used to show the ambivalent dynamics between the power that forms subjects and subjects' own power as articulated in young women's eating habits. In a chapter on pop culture (by Gannon, Byers and Gonick), the authors put Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's thoughts on "happy objects" in order to show the subversive potential in young women's everyday use of popular texts and pop music. In another chapter, written by Davies, Gonick, Gottschall and Lampert, the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari are employed to analyse how teenage girls manoeuvre through sexualized situations. According to the authors, this theoretical approach can not only show how heteronormativity restricts young women's lives but also highlight processes of "deterritorialization" of flux and "multiplicity" in girls lives.

Particularly illuminating is Mythili Rajiva's chapter on the role of sexual violence in shaping girlhood. The author develops an analytical lens that combines a Deleuzian *ethics of becoming* with a discourse theoretical understanding of heteronormativity. Equipped with this lens Rajiva analyses the story of a girl who witnesses a male teacher sexually assaulting another girl. The ensuing analysis centers around the concept of "ordinary trauma" to show how even the experience of witnessing sexual violence has the power of shaping young women's sense of self and shape their expectations of a future where they themselves might become victims of sexual violence. Rajiva's careful analysis of the story shows how sexual violence works on many levels to destabilize young women's subjectivity and posit them as weak and attackable. The analysis thus shows how sexual violence is an integral part of the reproduction of patriarchal power relations. But Rajiva repudiates the notion that it locks women and girls in an all-encompassing position of victimhood. She argues that the threat of violence marginalizes women but it also creates "fear-based alliances" rooted in common bodily vulnerability. Rajiva argues that activism like "slut walks," which were held in reaction to Canadian police telling students not to "dress like sluts" to avoid rape, shows the political

potential of these solidarities “forged through both fear *and* anger” (p. 155). It is, the author argues, a politics of affect that brings together marginalized bodies in opposition to the normality of the thread of sexual violence and wider patriarchal power relations.

Conclusion

The book offers a new take on collective biography as a method for feminist research but might also spark wider methodological debates. It invites scholars and educators to reflect upon some of the foundations of the *doing* of collective biography as well as offering practical methodological inspirations. The book promotes fluidity and openness in doing collective biography and shows the benefits of a broad methodological toolbox that goes beyond mere text oriented work. It shows how theatrical, visual and other methods widens the range of insights that can be gained from collective memory work. This broadening of the approach beyond logo-centric methods might be particularly interesting for applications outside research and academia, as it might help reduce barriers to memory work and heighten accessibility for various communities. But the book also offers food for thought to scholars interested in questions of self-reflexivity and critique of empiricism, as the methodological approach promoted in the book is firmly situated in a constructivist understanding of knowledge production.

Bringing memory work in dialogue with post-structuralist theories invites us to go beyond the critique of social relations of dominance. With their insistence on analysing how power is always fraught with contradictions and met with multiple forms of resistance, the chapters in *Becoming Girl* can help us see change and subversion in the realities we critically analyse. But the language of post-structuralism and the cultural studies perspective that guides the analyses in the book might be frustrating to readers and scholars coming from materialist feminist traditions and might leave these readers searching for analyses that engage with more tangible manifestations of patriarchy in young women’s lives.

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