

# “TELL ME YOUR STORY, NEW NEIGHBOR”: NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY, INTERCULTURALITY, AND THE LIFE NARRATIVE

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## 1. Introduction

In 2015 millions of refugees mainly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan arrived in the European Union after unbelievable journeys of hardship. Most of them came via the Balkans route: From Turkey via boat to the Greek islands; from there by ferry to the Greek mainland; from there by train or on foot to Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and Germany.

Most of them wanted to come to Germany, Sweden, and Austria. From January 2015 until June 2016 about 1,900,000 persons applied for asylum in the European Union, about 850,000 of them in Germany alone (Eurostat 2016). In most of Eastern Europe, f. i. in Hungary the refugees were mostly met with hostility and also in Germany, especially in East-Germany, where I come from, protests against an alleged “Islamization” of Germany have taken place. This is especially noteworthy as the percentage of foreigners is especially low in the Eastern parts of Germany. In 2014 foreigners only made up 2.9 percent of the total population in the federal state of Saxony. In Berlin (14.3%) or Hamburg (13.9%) the percentage is more than four times higher (Statistisches Landesamt 2015). This leads to the conclusion that fears and resentments are especially high in regions where there is few contact between natives and immigrants.

A right-wing coalition called *PEGIDA* (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident, my translation) was founded and organized demonstrations mainly in Dresden with tens of thousands of followers. In the wake of the refugee crisis a new right-wing party, called *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) gained momentum and achieved in several state elections between 13% and 23 % of the vote. Also in our region and even in discussions with friends it was visible that the refugee crisis – in connection with the social inequalities produced by neoliberal capitalism before – has caused major divisions in German society and culture.

This is the background story for a course I developed in the summer term of 2016. I felt that as an educator and a Cultural Studies scholar I had to do something on a grass roots level to counterbalance the fears and the hatred that penetrated everyday life. The seminar titled “Tell Me Your Story, New Neighbor: Identity, Interculturality and the Life Narrative” aims at bringing together students of the university and refugees. In the seminar students analyze in a theoretical part in the beginning of the course how the stories we tell about ourselves contribute to the formation of our respective identities. Furthermore, these stories are an important tool to order and make meaning of the social world. In a second part, students listen to the life narratives of refugees who live in Mittweida and eventually decide with the refugees on a way of recording and presenting the life narrative.

In the remains of this article, I will discuss the aims and theoretical foundations of the course. Furthermore, I want to share some impressions from the first run of the seminar in the summer semester of 2016.

## 2. Aims of the Seminar

The overarching aim of the seminar is to promote intercultural understanding and foster the integration process, which is a two-way street. The refugees need to adapt to a heterogeneous, but still mostly ‘European’ culture, but also German culture will have to change over the next few years. Additionally, complementing these overarching aims, there are more specific goals for the individual groups involved in the seminar:

The refugees should be enabled to tell and retell their life story. They should see that people listen and care. The retelling and revisioning of their life stories may serve a therapeutic end, may enable refugees to cope with difficult life events in the past. I will elaborate on this in the section with the theoretical background below.

Recording these life stories, collecting them and ensuring that they are heard and not forgotten, serves a political purpose. In this sense the seminar takes part in the 'oral' history of everyday life. The focus of the course is on lived experiences and experienced history from the perspective of 'ordinary' people or marginalized groups. In the project, the story of the marginalized, often people without a voice, count – and I mean this quite literally, because some of the refugees speak neither German nor English.

In the German tradition of social work, the method of the *Erzaehlcafé* ("story café") has proven to be very successful for the collection of narratives and their discussion. The *Erzaehlcafé* is exactly positioned at the intersection of the two aims mentioned above: a) the telling and retelling of the life story for therapeutic ends and b) the collection of stories of 'ordinary' people for political purposes.

The method can take on several forms, but usually a contemporary witness tells his or her story in a pleasant and safe atmosphere to a group of other persons. The group shouldn't be too large and should fit the size of the room. Another person, usually connected to the organizers, chairs the event. This part is followed by a discussion of the narrative and other participants can share their story. Sometimes the whole event is recorded by video cameras.

My seminar takes up parts of this well-documented method. In the second part of the seminar – after the theoretical introduction – students meet with the refugees in the safe space of the university to listen to the life story of the refugee. This part will not be filmed to ensure a private and reliable atmosphere. Refugees and students then discuss how to present the life narrative of the refugee. Any available format – from classic interview situations to print texts, collages or video essays – are possible. The results will be published at the project web site <<http://www.tellmeyourstory.de>>. The concept of the seminar combines the method of the *Erzaehlcafé* with the possibilities of digital media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The last aim of the seminars concerns the education of our students. The design of the course enables students to have first-hand experiences with refugees. Having personal contacts to persons from different cultures, is the first step to get rid of prejudices and stereotypes. Through the work with the refugees and their individual life narratives students will be able to reflect in a very practical way on abstract processes such as identity formation and concepts like interculturality. Furthermore, their engagement will contribute to the inclusion and integration of our new neighbors.

Last, but not least our students learn about the reasons for terror and the new immigration movements. As a university, we have the responsibility not only to provide specific technical knowledge and expertise. We want our graduates to be critical thinkers and well-rounded persons, who develop social and emotional competencies as well. From the goals of the seminar I will move to the theoretical foundations of the project, which form the third part of this article.

### 3. Theoretical Foundations

The course is an example for lived interdisciplinarity. The theoretical approaches I use in the course come from narrative psychology, oral history, and 'political' Cultural Studies.

Narrative psychology is a label that is attributed to a wide range of approaches, which also differ in some regards. What they share is that they developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to positivist psychology. Narrative psychology has stressed the importance of story-telling and retelling for making sense of the world and the place of the individual. Furthermore, these approaches see a therapeutic function of the narration and renarration of a life story; the rearrangement and reevaluation of possibly traumatic life events.

Michael White and David Epston, two family therapists and scholars from Australia and New Zealand respectively, have been very influential here, especially with their monograph *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990) and their article "A Proposal for Re-Authoring Therapy" (1993). White and Epston also focus on narration and storytelling as they state in the aforementioned article:

[A] story can be defined as a unit of meaning that provides a frame for lived experience. It is through these stories that lived experience is interpreted. We enter into stories, we are entered into stories by others; and we live our lives through these stories. (Epston, White, and Murray 1993, 97)

It is through stories – our own and the stories others tell – that we construct meaning and an own identity. White and Epston are deeply influenced by the works of Michel Foucault on power/knowledge, discourse, and 'truth'.

It is nearly impossible to discuss the full scope of Foucault's theories in an article like this.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, it may suffice to state that in any given culture dominant narratives acquire the status of 'truth.' Foucault writes:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (1980, 131)

This does not mean that other stories do not exist. They are what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges." (1980, 81) However, they have not been 'normalized' as true, they do not count as true. White and Epston conclude that if people seek therapy they do so frequently because the dominant narratives "in which they are 'storying' their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience 'storied' by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience." (1990, 14) Moreover, the lived experience of these people may outright contradict these dominant narratives (cf. White and Epston 1990, 15).

The aim of therapy according too White and Epston is then, to generate or identify new and alternative stories "that enable them to perform new meanings, bringing with them desired possibilities – new meanings that persons will experience as more helpful, satisfying, and open-ended" (White and Epston 1990, 15). Everything that is outside the dominant storylines, the "subjugated knowledge" of Foucault, can be the raw material for these alternative stories.

In the seminar students and refugees work on possible storylines for the refugee's life narrative. Ideally, students and refugees should identify possible problems the refugees have with dominant narratives and try to offer alternative stories. Following semesters will show, whether this aim of the seminar can be reached.

The Belgian psychologist and psychiatrist Paul Verhaeghe has analyzed identity formation (and with it the specific dominant storylines) in the contemporary cultural and economic context that can best be described as neoliberalism. By neoliberalism I mean an ideology that holds that the free capitalist market is the best form to organize the economy as well as society at large. (cf. Steger and Roy 2010, 12) The state should interfere as little as possible with the economy. Moreover, representatives of neoliberalism are deeply skeptical of an allegedly inefficient and wasteful public sector and propose a dismantling of the welfare state (usually euphemistically called "reorganization" or "deregulation"). In neoliberalism every human being is first and foremost responsible for him/herself. The concept of what it means to be human is characterized by individualism and self-interest.

Verhaeghe calls neoliberalism "[an] economic system that rewards psychopathic personality traits" (2014). The dominant narrative of neoliberalism<sup>2</sup> is one of success and achievement:

We are forever told that we are freer to choose the course of our lives than ever before, but the freedom to choose outside the success narrative is limited. Furthermore, those who fail are deemed to be losers or scroungers, taking advantage of our social security system. (Verhaeghe 2014)

Immigrants cannot offer stories of success. Moreover, they are bombarded with messages and stories about them taking advantage of 'our' social security system. It is crucial to create an awareness with the students that these circumstances and conditions exist. Otherwise, the class room will not be a safe space for the generation of alternative narratives.

The second theoretical foundation of the course is oral history. Oral history – in contrast to more mainstream versions of history – is not so much concerned with the broad strokes and developments on the high planes of kings, prime ministers, and Presidents, but with the experience of 'ordinary', or also marginalized people who rarely make it into history books. Oral history focusses on the "structure of feeling" – to use Raymond Williams

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<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (1990) Michael White details the ways in which their approach was influenced by Michel Foucault.

<sup>2</sup> It has to be said, however, that there was room for narratives in capitalism, especially in more democratic phases, which created sympathy for fellow human beings, especially if they became victims of cruel deeds beyond their own control.

term (1977, 128) – of a particular period. The life narratives of the refugees can act as an alternative historiography focusing on the experiences and struggles of the “subaltern” to use Antonio Gramsci’s term.

The third theoretical foundation are ‘political’ Cultural Studies. What is the political in ‘political’ Cultural Studies? The ‘political’ refers to the sometimes hidden understanding that also academia is political, that ‘objective’ science or ‘objective’ humanities are a chimera. I see it as my responsibility as an educator to transfer this knowledge to my class room and create an awareness for the political struggles that determine everyday day life and also govern the “political economy of refugees” (Žižek 2016, 43).

Twenty-five years ago the American historian Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history” (1992). With the end of the Soviet bloc, liberal-democratic capitalism won once and for all. Since then a lot of contradictory things have happened: on the one hand, neoliberal capitalism really has performed a triumphant march around the whole globe, sometimes also without bringing democracy (if we look at China). On the other hand, the same capitalism experienced one of its biggest crises in history.

We have witnessed the destabilization of whole regions, a destabilization the West and to a smaller extent, Russia, is fully responsible for. First Afghanistan, then Iraq, Syria and Libya. Moreover, these destabilizations caused the fertile soil on which Al-Qaida, ISIS, and other terrorist groups grew. So who is responsible for the refugee crisis? In the last months, most of the refugees arriving in Germany came from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Also the Western world has suffered tremendously from the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. Social inequality has increased dramatically during the last twenty years and – to quote the Stanford Center of Poverty and Inequality – “wage inequality in the US is now approaching the extreme level that prevailed prior to the Great Depression” (2011). Nationalism and authoritarianism are on the rise: Erdogan in Turkey, the Orban government in Hungary, Putin in Russia, Le Pen in France, Petry in Germany, and – of course – the Grand Old Party, the party of Lincoln, recently nominated Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for the presidency.

These are difficult times and maybe, just maybe, Francis Fukuyama is wrong and capitalism is not the best way to organize society. Political cultural studies are needed, just as we are needed to educate our students about the reasons for displacement and people escaping their homes by the millions.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the summer semester of 2016 I taught the seminar for the first semester. Many challenges needed to be tackled. Most of them occurred in the course of the seminar and I was not prepared for them. Improvisation and situational teaching skills were important.

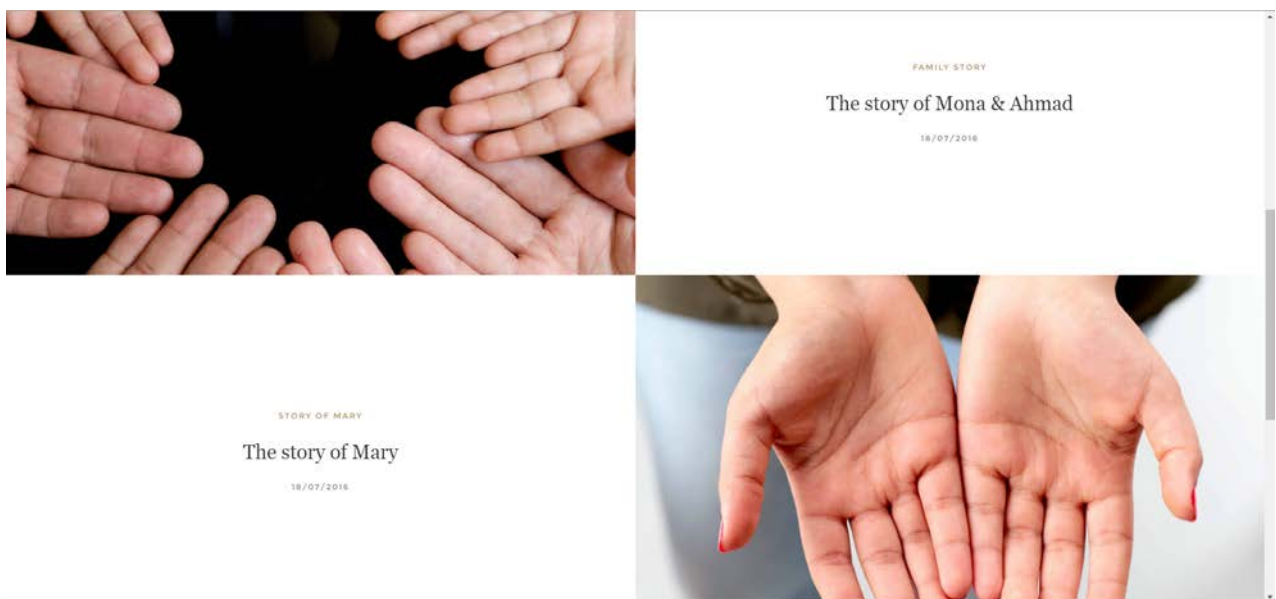


Figure 1: Page of the Project Website

By the end of the semester, three student groups (or rather two groups and an individual student) worked with a refugee family from Iraq and two individual refugees from Syria. Two stories are online on the website (Figure 1). Both of them are videos in a rather classical interview situation. The refugees in both videos did not want to face the camera, because they were afraid that their stories being online would endanger their relatives and friends in Syria and Iraq, respectively.

One group faced unexpected technical difficulties. After a very long interview situation that was filmed and in which the refugee detailed his extremely tragic and cruel family history, the audio track of the video was lost. As the interview was very painful and distressing – a situation that can always happen in narrative psychology, it could not be repeated.

In a conventional seminar situation this might lead the students to expect that they failed. However, I believe, especially in regard to the theoretical foundations of narrative psychology that this does not constitute a story of failure. To put it differently, the failure to provide a video does not mean that the students' interactions in the seminar, the work with the refugee, and their experiences with a human being, who went through unimaginable hardships, were failures. Reflecting on their experiences this group provided a video, which can also be found on the website (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Screenshot of the student's review video**

All students composed reflective essays, which were read by me. In the last sessions of the seminar we continued the reflection process in a group discussion format. Furthermore, the students evaluated the seminar formally. The refugees were generally enthusiastic about the seminar and confirmed that the concept and the process of the project are helpful to them. I intend to teach the seminar in the upcoming semesters and conduct a comprehensive assessment of the format. Moreover, I will keep in touch with our new neighbors and hope to detail the next, 'German' chapters of their life story on the project website.

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