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The Deconstructive Potential of Collective Biography Writing

Abstract

In this paper, I highlight the deconstructive potential of the collective biography writing (CBW) method, referring both to its selected theoretical assumptions and those elements of its research procedure which particularly favour sensitivity to dominant, normative discourses. Since the effectiveness of the method is determined by analytical practice, an important part of the article is devoted to recalling my own experience with its application. The use of "checkpoints" specific to the CBW method in the course of collective analytical work makes the relativity of dominant discourses more visible to the research team and thus also more suitable for examination and understanding. Therefore, a further inherent purpose of the collective writing procedure is to support the development of critical competences in research participants, which results in showing the method presented herein also as a method of learning critical thinking. As a context for investigating the "invisibility" of discourses and the discourse boundaries in which we are enclosed, I choose the phenomenon of cultural obviousness.

Key words: collective biography writing, cultural obviousness, critical thinking, deconstruction.

Introduction

In the literature, Collective Biography Writing is considered to be a research method (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 777; Davies & Gannon, 2005, p. 318; Trahar, 2013, p. 307; Wihlborg, 2013, pp. 379, 387) which, with some modifications,

may also be a method for learning, including learning of critical thinking (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 5; Trahar, 2013, p. 307; Wihlborg, 2013; 2015; Zbróg, 2017a)[1].

I describe in detail the origins of the CBW, its theoretical basis and the course of the associated research procedure, including the specificity of data collection and analysis, in several publications (Zbróg, 2017a, 2017b). It is not possible to recapitulate all important details in this article. As information on the CBW in Polish (methodological) studies is lacking, I will only reiterate that it concerns collectively constructed narratives based on the memories of a single biographical episode. In this procedure, these memories are not treated as remnants of a past that has already happened, but as elements of a past "that enable us to work in the present with the ways we have been (and are) moved in particular moments of being" (Wyatt et al., 2017, p. 741)[2]. These memories are first told, then written down and reedited on the basis of discussions with team members. Collective analyses of the stories, which are then theorised, lead to their new meanings, because meanings are negotiated "in interaction with others — both then at the time of the episode and now in reflection" (Onyx & Small, 2001, p. 776). That which is usually taken for granted must be subjected to critical reflection and explained as part of a specially designed research procedure.

CBW differs from the discourse analysis methods that have been used thus far (Howarth, 2000; Rapley, 2007; Ostrowicka, 2014, 2015); this difference arises primarily from the ("internal", intra-group) data collection (in traditional qualitative studies, the researcher most often collects external data, e.g. through observation, interviews), from the collective form of work that gives rise to the written-down and (re)edited memories detailed by the research group, and from the specific methodology of *language-in-use* analysis with references to specific elements of everyday social practices, cultural knowledge and personal

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[1] In this paper, I use *CBW* as the abbreviation for Collective Biography Writing.

[2] The co-creators of the CBW method, Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon, have developed a concept of mo(ve)ment that can be explained as a concept that pays particular attention to the moment of change of the locus (point of view for a biographical episode), i.e. the moment of change in the position of a subject during research analyses. Based on this idea, it can be explained – by directing the collective work – where the rational choice (decision) of the subjects in the event being told and originating from their individual biography came from (see example of such an analysis in: Zbróg, 2017a). This requires a "shift from the rational possibilities of deconstruction to the embodied subject decomposing itself . […] We focus on the specific remembered moments and on the movement that becomes visible in the particular mode of memory-writing" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 172).

stories, justifications for our beliefs and everything that has shaped them – with reference to the "archive of discourse" understood as "a collection of views and principles of thinking, accepted by default in a group, without any evidence of their validity, based on a sense of obviousness" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 54).

In my opinion, CBW as a new, productive research method, which can be considered a critical analysis of discourse[3], has a specific deconstructive potential resulting from the methodology of discovering what is culturally imposed as obvious for the purposes of understanding. In the footsteps of Jacques Derrida (2007), I explain deconstruction as the process of constituting the whole and reconstructing it in another field or context, thereby determining its affirmative nature. An essential element of such deconstruction is precisely understanding.

In this article, I intend to highlight the deconstructive potential of the CBW method, referring both to its selected theoretical assumptions and to those elements of its research procedure that are particularly conducive to shedding light on thought patterns and to sensitising participants to dominant, normative discourses. Therefore, I will focus my reflection on the "invisibility" of such discourses in the context of cultural obviousness, a concept which is considered by Kwaśnica as a synonym for the archive of discourse.

"Archive of discourse" as cultural obviousness calling for critical analysis

Each discourse has its own archive, which sets its boundaries, its themes and its narrative scheme. Each archive of discourse is usually culturally obvious, and this obviousness is applicable to a particular social group. Moreover, it is a group precisely because it uses the same archive of discourse (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 54).

In my investigations, I refer to the expression "cultural obviousness" as originally used by Robert Kwaśnica (2014) because it effectively defines the phenomenon which, in publications on CBW, is presented in a rather descriptive manner, drawing attention to the role of the social discourse of which we are part. Social discourse plays an important role in understanding the world because it creates its own realities and understanding of these realities. Discourses that are normative and dominant in the public sphere lead us to think that we

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[3] The critical approach to CBW is discussed by, among others, Davies et al. (2006, p. 89 et seq.), Wihlborg (2013, p. 385), referring to Foucault's critical analyses and post-structuralist discourse.

know what is happening in reality, what is reality and what is not, and which perspective is real and which diverges from (our) truth. They also cause us to feel entitled to criticise others, to correct the opinions, judgements, actions, etc. of others and to assess the correctness of others' views.

Remaining in cultural obviousness in the sense of "a deformed visibility of the world, [...] fixed in language and cultural patterns of thinking, making the world accessible in a perspective built of proper [...] rules and – which is extremely important – showing itself as an objective, natural, universal and unconditionally binding visibility" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 11) causes us to see what is real and the reality of our actions on this basis. "From it, we draw the patterns and categories of thinking, as well as the language and principles that form our global discourse" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 12). While remaining in its power, we see the world only in one perspective, experiencing the "invisibility" of a layered reality.

According to Kwaśnica (2014), the way to deal with invisibility and inevitability of discourses is hermeneutical reflection, a discursive sensitivity built by "[s]ensitizing to the fact that none of the circulating dictionaries is final, because each one comes from some kind of prior knowledge to which it is inherent" (p. 248). As such, the realisation that we are stuck in a monoperspective is a kind of release from mental enslavement. Part of the solution is to become aware of the existence of cultural obviousness, to notice that our perception of the world is passed through its filter, and to think about how we perceive it, because it "determines whether and how, and what power it has over us" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 244). If we do not realise or understand that the world has been established by cultural obviousness, then its power over us has no boundaries, and we are fully obedient to it (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 245).

According to the assumptions of CBW, it is only the collective "initiation", the realisation of the existence of cultural obviousness in the group of co-researchers, that affords a better opportunity to access the multiplicity of perspectives available for perceiving reality, to understand reality differently, and to identify numerous conditions determining our point of view[4]. It is about

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[4] In CBW, cultural obviousness is not discussed as such. What is discussed instead is social discourse that frames subjects and manipulates the "frame" (field of vision). The manipulation of the frame determines what frame (field of vision) has been selected for observation by the recipient, thus it determines what is revealed and what is hidden, what is important and what is less important (Ostrowicka, 2015). If we use the same frames all the time and tell the same stories in the same context, then it becomes difficult, if not impossible to understand what is happening in the world as well as to understand ourselves (Wihlborg, 2015).

capturing cultural obviousness as something "that determines our ability to experience the world" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 245). Therefore, during CBW, the full effort of the group is focused on the search for various conditions, patterns and schemes for explaining a given biographical event, and on the search for the causes of such a behaviour or decision. Control of critical thought regarding the fact "that our world and we ourselves are established by these very possibilities" is required on a constant basis during the process (Kwaśnica, 2014, pp. 245–246).

As such, it is not a question of setting oneself outside the metaphysical discourse, because that would be impossible. Instead, as Derrida (2007) says, we must examine the margins and limits of our confinement.

Investigating the limits of our confinement in discourses during CBW

Margins of discourse

The main task of CBW is to understand that both one's perception of oneself and all one's actions and emotions (one's understanding of the world) is entangled in and created by discourses and is caught in the trap of circumstances and conditions. The image captured in the biographical narrative developed during CBW never presents a static and stable reality, but a complex set of mutually interacting mobile forces (material, affective, conceptual) and mutually looped processes, phenomena and situations (Davies & Gannon, 2012). Working together in a team gradually reveals meanings and enables us to gain access to different understandings of ourselves, the world and life, whereby such understandings have been negotiated within social institutions and communities and shaped by historical and cultural forces. Such team working therefore makes it possible to explore the margins of our confinement in the various discourses.

The purpose of deconstruction during CBW is to question and then jointly work out the space for what is different, and what previously – by virtue of the archive of discourse – was obliterated and suppressed. A specific research procedure makes it possible to uncover unknowingly adopted assumptions, to sensitise co-researchers to search for differences and to facilitate the discovery of previously blurred ideas. No one is neutral towards discourses, so the challenge for co-researchers participating in CBW is to discover to what extent we are "blinded by discourse" and are unaware of possible ways of understanding what is happening.

In CBW, critical analysis of discourse is practised in a way that combines the analysis of text and speech with a determination of the strength of influence of individual interest groups in the society, an examination of cases of domination and inequality occurring in discourses and the exposure of discrimination and subordination. The aim of the critical approach is – in addition to observing, systematically describing and explaining – to change the reality described by discourse. Among other things, this is to be driven by critical reflection on how the creation and setting of specific knowledge and values impairs the consideration of alternative possibilities and the questioning of what appears necessary and universal (Fairclough & Wodak, 2006; Ostrowicka, 2015).

During a meeting of the research team, CBW participants directly express their critical position, attempting to reflect, demystify or in any other way undermine the structures of domination. They analyse how texts, practices and events are shaped by power relations. Researchers using CBW focus on a thorough analysis of the language used and on how language and discourse, viewed as an element of power, effects social changes in the world and changes the culture of a given community. They argue that imposing one/a perspective on others and setting it in opposition to another/another person's vision of the world leads only to replacing one obvious with another obvious. It is therefore not the right path to change.

Deconstruction practice in CBW

As the relativity of dominant discourses becomes more visible in the course of collective analytical work, it also becomes more researchable and understandable. However, this requires great cognitive and organizational effort. In my first empirical attempts with this method, I experienced various difficulties. Most of them were related to the main idea of CBW, concerning the need to look critically at the surrounding reality and to constantly be aware that a change in our thinking necessarily involves a change in the language we use to describe reality. The use of everyday language, which we learn unknowingly and unconsciously, leads us to function within a cultural framework that does not allow us to think of and understand the complexity of the world on many levels.

Understanding that a communication act as a discursive act is never innocent, because it creates reality, identities and stereotypes regulating collective awareness, is a starting point for CBW research work.

If students (the research group or co-researchers) fail to realise that they live and act in the complex world of cultural obviousness which "deforms" our

thinking, actions, emotions, "darkens" reality, conceals, excludes elements of the description of reality – there is no point in continuing the research using the proper procedure.

Ultimately, not everyone is able to move to a level of thinking that allows a different/open perspective on a range of phenomena, nor does everyone like to participate in detailed, personal inquiries. Therefore, participation in CBW workshops must always be voluntary. This applies all the more so because CBW requires a lot of time and intellectual effort, openness to other points of view and the courage to share one's own experiences, opinions and assessments of a situation with other members of the group.

In Polish (academic) conditions, workshops usually take place outside of compulsory classes, e.g. at research circles. As such, practice shows that it is better for the issues of research analyses to be negotiated between participants in individual workshops. A group will only want to delve into a specific topic if it is personally interesting/acceptable for all its members. Regardless of whether or not these principles are followed, several participants will drop out during the analytical stage anyway – not only because of lack of time or insufficient interest in this type of research work, but primarily because of shyness or reluctance to speak out in public. At the beginning, students forming a research group are not aware of cultural obviousness. It appears, to them, that their thinking is unconditioned. Meanwhile, "[t]hey are completely dominated by it, they think with its questions, its language, according to its logic, and yet they do not notice it at all, they do not see it as something that defines them". (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 245). Therefore, collective analyses of memories of biographical episodes are not easy. Firstly, students are not used to sharing their experiences in a group. Secondly, revealing things – even if only ideas – makes them feel uncomfortable. For as long as they remain unconvinced of the sincerity of their workshop leader or co-researchers (whereby 'sincerity' equates to everyone sharing important memories on an equal footing), their full involvement in the work is subject to fluctuations. It stabilises only when their willingness to discuss honestly exceeds the resistance of self-restraint. Therefore, the process of becoming accustomed to group work requires time to learn together and encourage open-mindedness, supported by, among other things, mutual praise for the most interesting – in the opinion of members of the group – fragments of statements analysing meanings, ideas for justifications, interesting arguments, etc.

This is precisely the most difficult step in the evolution of a team in the process of collective writing, not only in the preparatory but also in the analytical phase: creating a group that is capable of exchanging ideas, takes responsibility

for emerging problematic situations and the results of analytical work, a group that is capable of accepting problems that, after all, constitute input to the CBW process, and can invent alternatives and deal with tensions that arise during creative work.

The entire process of collective analysis is highly demanding for all team members. Indeed, focusing on detailed descriptions of biographical episodes requires co-researchers to be sensitive to the constant susceptibility of humans to normative discourses and practices. It also requires us to become aware not only of our own rooting in them, but above all of the thoughtless manner in which they are developed and sustained. It obliges all members of the group to be attentive; to note even the most minimal visual, auditory, sensory and tactile sensations that determine people's tendency not to recognise those who think differently and thus to deny them the qualities that we consider appropriate for (our) truth and for the perspective that we define as (better, more valuable, true) "reality".

The task of a CBW workshop leader is to change this view of reality, because the cognitive value of the method lies in gaining an appreciation of *how* the discourse constructs ourselves and the world around us, *how* we produce the meanings of objects, processes and phenomena, *how we agree* on behavioural patterns, *what knowledge* and *what actions* are involved in our everyday lives so as to cause us to see ourselves and the world in this way and not in another. The idea is to see *what* the socio-cultural and historical *specificity* of our knowledge and our actions actually is.

These basic requirements render the CBW method difficult, and the meticulousness of its research procedure does not facilitate tasks connected with the deconstruction and reconstruction of analysed meanings. For this reason, my attempts to work with the method have not always been successful, since there are many junctures in the methodology of the research procedure that can determine the inability of a given group (students) to participate in the CBW process.

The first such moment is the preparatory stage for the proper research – the time before the start of the actual research procedure – when all participants in the CBW process are required to prepare themselves adequately by studying the materials on post-constructionist theory, collective memory and the method itself, and then discuss and critically reflect on them.

At this stage, it is the group's task to jointly realise and permanently adopt a vision of reality which, in post-structuralist discourse, is based on the conviction that perceiving reality is far more complicated than we think because we do not see that we are stuck in cultural obviousness. In this phase of discussion,

the social situation of all actors necessitates a long process of recognising their own position in the world of existing discourses. Inevitably, a certain intentional effort is required to realise the need to expose the tools of power and domination hidden in the discourses and to critically understand the various conditions of cultural obviousness that demand recognition and understanding.

At the further stages of the CBW research procedure, it is necessary to constantly pay attention to:

1. A very precise, "molecularly" detailed analysis of language when describing a biographical episode, which allows for the capturing of stereotypes, cultural interpretations and patterns. Each member of the group reacts to phrases, generalisations, contradictions, cultural imperatives, metaphors, etc. Everyone tries to identify what can be taken for granted and what can be explicated within social and cultural understanding. Concepts, popular sayings and images related to the main topic or research object are also discussed in order to re-identify those imposed as obvious, socially conditioned explanations of meanings around the topic. Anything that constitutes a ready-made, immediately emerging explanation that falls within the collective perspective of seeing and understanding situations, events and experiences should be revealed and critically analysed at this stage.

   Thus, the inability to "see things differently" is aided by developing the practice of careful analysis of language and the experience of perceiving it as a complex construct through which reality is discursively constructed and understood. Working collectively – by speaking, writing, reading and asking questions – makes visible the discursive patterns and habits of thinking and talking about the world; the patterns in which we are immersed and to which we are attached by virtue of belonging to a specific cultural group.

2. Exposing tangled discursive networks – during CBW, this is not achieved using (self)reflection or hermeneutical reflection, as Kwaśnica proposed (2014), but using diffraction. Taking its name from the physical phenomena that occur with the change of direction of wave propagation when a wave encounters an obstacle, in the method under discussion, diffraction refers to the moment that is crucial for the course of a given situation and that causes a change in the course of a given event (see footnote 2). In each of the narratives developed as part of CBW, the group indicates the moment that has been decisive for selecting one solution to the problem over another or that is crucial for the interpretation

of a memory. The described biographical episode is then analysed and interpreted by the group not in terms of an individual, specific, isolated being, but in terms of the external forces that co-construct our biography (Barad, 2007, p. 50).

3. Inventing alternatives to what is obviously obvious, to apparent inevitabilities and to stereotypes that seem unchangeable. In this way, we can explore how we have become (mentally) entangled in what appears to be inevitable (Zbróg, 2017a). This is done by the practice of distorting points of view and multiplying perspectives; by distorting certainty and mental habits so that history can begin to "move between tellers […] without trying to find its original truth, meaning, or owner" (Gannon et al., 2014, p. 183).

On the basis of my own experience, I consider these three elements of the CBW research procedure to be "checkpoints" for discovering what is culturally imposed for the purposes of understanding[5].

Critical thinking in the CBW procedure

Understanding the various discourses in which we operate is intrinsically linked to developing critical competences that require a specific intellectual discipline. Jennifer W. Mulnix (2012), on the basis of her own experience, established that in her work with students, it was necessary to focus on the careful use of reasoning skills, to relate the analysed meanings to schematic beliefs and to commit to accepting the results of this reasoning. Learning to think critically also requires the ability to justify one's position, to explain one's point of view, and the ability to capture – by means of inference – the links between individual statements. Therefore, learning to think critically obliges students to engage not only in the process of critical thinking itself, but also, if real results are desired, in theoretical knowledge about learning critical thinking. Other ways – as shown by the analyses referred to by Mulnix (2012, p. 477) – are ineffective.

Research indicates that critical thinking is a skill, which means that it can be learned (Paul & Elder, 2008). Thus, on the one hand, CBW is an excellent, "natural" way of training critical thinking in a natural context and a situ-

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[5] I chose the term "checkpoints" because, on the basis of the attempts to work using the CBW procedure, I believe they are fundamental to the effectiveness of deconstruction as part of the CBW. Their use in group work increases the effectiveness of efforts to go beyond the monoperspective, regardless of the composition of the group.

ation that requires this type of thinking. On the other hand, in student groups – where it is difficult for us to conduct a discussion when students cannot see the framework of cultural obviousness – CBW will not succeed. Indeed, there is a risk that we fall into the trap of the superficiality of analysis and that during the reconstruction stage, we stop at the same motives and threads that were imposed on us by the discourse (public, social, educational) using its archive. During CBW, therefore, we neither aim to establish facts nor to evaluate them according to the adopted normative criteria, but rather seek to "take a broader perspective so that we become aware of the cultural specificity of our values, beliefs and sentiments" (Baert, 2006, p. 22).

To grasp, based on a critical view, how we function in the public or private sphere of a "better truth" perspective (represented, of course, by "our group", "our people", "us") is the first step towards reflecting on the recognition of others' perspectives. By understanding that there are different points of view, we can free ourselves from the power of those elements of discourse that condemn us to cultural obviousness and to seeing only simple and unique solutions.

It was easier to explain the problem in question to the students I was working with firstly through references to concrete, life examples[6], and secondly through reflecting on the words of American philosopher Judith Butler (2004, pp. 43–44): "Consider that the struggle for recognition [...] requires that each partner in the exchange recognise not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition, but we are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition, that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition".

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to present the deconstructive possibilities of the CBW method, which for obvious reasons, was possible to a minimum extent. Thanks to the procedure used as part of the proposed method, one of the most difficult tasks in the critical discourse analysis process becomes achievable:

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[6] The examples cited during the workshops with students most often had a political dimension – I have not chosen to quote them on purpose. During the classes, discussions on the opposing experiences and perspectives emerging in a particular group are the most valuable aspect.

making visible the dominant discourses and practices and areas of hegemony of the discourse. Highly critical reflections on why we reason under the dictates of cultural obviousness, describing truths as dogmatic and fundamental (without justifications or seeking explanations), are a valuable result of analytical work. Thinking more consciously, we suspend our previous certainty, "understanding that our conviction of what is obvious [...] is not timeless, unconditional and unchangeable, but temporary, conditioned and subject to change" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 252).

Thus, on the one hand, the group work is about understanding the cultural relativity of the obvious in order to broaden each participant's understanding of the world; on the other hand, it is about accepting that it is a utopia to think about freeing oneself from the power of the obvious. Thus it is not a matter of "deciphering it – to make it fully transparent and control it or to free oneself from it. This would be a delusion" (Kwaśnica, 2014, p. 246). We cannot go beyond cultural obviousness and we cannot go beyond the current discourse, for we lack a new dictionary that would allow us to evade the conditions of discourse.

However, the very act of identifying social and economic contrasts and bipolar oppositions works to foster the autonomy of individuals and social groups, to liberate them from confinement and open to the otherness and diversity in all forms of their existence.

Working on CBW not only broadens our perspectives on the world and others and our ways of seeing ourselves and understanding reality, but allows us to realise that we, too, are not "completed", stable, known entities; that we can actively participate in the process of getting to know ourselves, others and the world through constant deconstruction and reconstruction of discourses that are decisive for us, which, by their normative power, lock us into stereotypical, automatic patterns of thinking and acting. While we may not be aware of them, we can consciously work on them, because they are not unchangeable. Indeed, all the new elements that emerge in explaining the world require a collective effort to negotiate the right place for what is new, including what is known and agreed upon as the group's world (Zbróg, 2019, p. 466). Admittedly, such patterns are similar in nature to habits and "are generally experienced as the only way things can be within their own culture" (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 188). However, the methodology of the research procedure within CBW (especially "checkpoints") allows us to liberate our thinking from the monoperspective and the rhetoric of inevitability and, ultimately, to free ourselves from ignorant behaviour according to the schemes that guide us. It enables us to learn to think

critically while at the same time working to develop reasoning to achieve the more distant goals of emancipation and autonomy of research.

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