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Social work students doing autobiographical narrative interviews with people who experience(d) discrimination

Autobiographisch – narrative Interviews von Studierenden Sozialer Arbeit zu Diskriminierungserfahrungen

Abstract:
A 4th semester seminar for students of the B.A. in Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences in Frankfurt am Main focuses on issues of social inequalities and experiences of discrimination. In the initial block week of this seminar, the students are introduced to qualitative-interpretive research and they learn about doing autobiographical narrative interviews. In our paper, we explain why we consider this as essential knowledge and practice for social work students and we also go into some other aspects of teaching and learning in this class. We discuss a particular question that frequently comes up among the students, namely how to approach a person for a life story interview whom they suppose to have experienced discrimination without directly asking about his or her discrimination experiences. As we try to explain, it is important not to label a person's experience but instead to allow for the subjective expression of whether and in which ways discrimination was experienced and encountered.

Keywords:
B.A. social work students, qualitative-interpretive research, autobiographical narrative interview, issues of social inequalities, experiences of discrimination

Zusammenfassung:
Ein Seminar für Studierende des vierten Semesters im BA für Soziale Arbeit an der FH Frankfurt konzentriert sich auf Fragestellungen von sozialen Ungleichheiten und Diskriminierungserfahrungen. Die Studierenden werden im ersten Blockseminar in qualitativ-interpretative Forschung eingeführt und machen sich mit der Durchführung autobiographisch-narrativer Interviews vertraut. In unserem Aufsatz erläutern wir, warum wir dies als wesentliches Wissen und wesentliche Praxis für Studierende der Sozialen Arbeit ansehen, und beschäftigen uns auch mit einigen anderen Aspekten des Lehrens und Lernens in diesem Seminar. Wir diskutieren außerdem eine bestimmte Problemstellung, die häufig unter den Studierenden auftaucht: nämlich wie es gelingen kann, eine Person, bei der sie Diskriminierungserfahrungen annehmen, um ein lebensgeschichtliches Interview zu bitten, ohne sie direkt nach ihren Diskriminierungserfahrungen zu fragen. Wie wir zu erklären versuchen, ist es wichtig, nicht die Erfahrung einer Person zu etikettieren, sondern es zu ermöglichen, dass subjektiv zum Ausdruck gebracht wird, ob und in welcher Weise man mit Diskriminierung konfrontiert wurde und sie erfahren hat.

Schlagworte: Studierende der Sozialen Arbeit in einem BA-Studiengang, qualitative-interpretative Forschung, autobiographisch-narratives Interview, Fragen sozialer Ungleichheiten, Diskriminierungserfahrungen

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present our reflections on teaching a seminar on "Empirical findings of social inequalities and discrimination experiences" to social work students at the University of Applied Sciences Frankfurt am Main.[1] We actually teach only the initial part of this so-called transversal module during a block week at the beginning of the semester. The module has a complex design and altogether involves around 25 teachers of different subjects and around 200 students in their 4th semester. We set the stage so to speak by introducing, on the one hand, critical perspectives on issues of social inequalities, studies of prejudice, dimensions of discrimination, intersectional approaches, anti-discrimination measures and further topics in the morning plenary sessions. On the other hand, we introduce interpretive methodological approaches, especially biographical analysis to underline the importance of subjective accounts of experience to be able to understand effects and consequences of undergoing discrimination. In the following, we would like to discuss our experience with interpretive approaches in the context of this seminar.

In this initial week, during the afternoons the plenary splits into seminar-size groups and we read and interpret documents such as a news media article to see stereotypes and prejudice "at work", as well as a transcript of an autobiographical-narrative interview. By doing interpretive work in the setting of a research workshop, we try to instill a sense of doing qualitative-interpretive research (Riemann 2011); obviously, time during this week is very short. We involve the students from the beginning by asking them to develop their own research question within the topic of social inequalities and discrimination experience, in other words, to think about what kind of a case they would want to discover and analyze. We explain "what kind of a case" as a person they will find whose life history, life situation and conditions seem to make it likely that there have been experiences of discrimination. At the same time, we cannot expect that such experiences actually happened; neither would we know in which way they did occur nor how they were experienced and responded to by the person. Each student's case study will be based on an autobiographical-narrative interview, and we explain certain concepts such as "trajectories of suffering" when we read the interview transcript together. The students also do some exercises to try out being an interviewer, an observer, and an interviewee.

The students raise many questions and doubts and we also ask ourselves, whether there might be better ways of translating our approach into teaching. We will discuss these questions later on in connection with our teaching experience. Mostly, we would like to mention how much we learned from the empirical materials that the students collected over the last three years and their case discussions at the end of the semester when they conclude the module. We will refer to our concrete teaching experiences, showing some main difficulties that occur when we teach students to challenge their everyday beliefs and unquestioned assumptions and to develop a kind of methodically structured "hermeneutic of suspicion" towards their own expectations (Simms 2005, p. 166). We share the opinion of Jill Brown and Daniel Foy (2008, p. 199) who argue that "conducting qualitative research with undergraduates requires instructors to not only teach the methods involved, but place the methods within a framework, often in contrast with quantitative research".

We begin by reflecting the practical relevance of qualitative-interpretive research methods for the professional education of (future) social workers by assisting their clients to tell their own personal story and "by strengthening their biographical abilities of working through their experiences of severe suffering" (Betts et al. 2007, p. 2). On this basis, we will also attempt to formulate the relevance of qualitative-interpretive research practice for the everyday work of professional counselors. By describing the contents and didactical aims of our seminar we will focus particularly on the link between social work, on the one hand, and qualitative-interpretive research methods, on the other hand, to show the meaning of research for the professional practice of social workers. We will specifically point out the link we see in our understanding of social work and our approach to biographical research. By making this link visible, we emphasize the importance for professionals to gain biographical analytical skills in order to cope with apparently "chaotic" and "confused" life histories towards understanding the quality of clients' experiences and to make sense of what they say during counseling sessions (Betts et al. 2007).

2. Social work as communicative practice

Social work basically has a communicative structure and is essentially a communicative practice. The first impression you get when you read narrative interviews with people who experienced counseling during a very hard time of their life is that the need to be understood spreads through everything they say to professional helpers (cf. Howe 1993). For this reason social workers are supposed to be able to structure a trustful narrative space, to make interpersonal understanding possible.

We all have different biographically determined interpretations of situations and purposes and Alfred Schütz (1972, p. 99 qtd. in Howe 1993, p. 79) considered the idea as "absurd" that people could observe the subjective experience of a person in the same way she or he would do this. But this is the fundamental challenge of everyday mutual understanding in general, and of counseling in particular. As a first aspect of the problem of the "reciprocity of perspectives or the structural socialization of knowledge", Schütz (1962, p. 11) explains that in common-sense thinking people perform two idealisations to overcome obstacles in mutual understanding:

1) "The idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints": "I take it for granted – and assume my fellow-man does the same – that if I change places with him so that his 'here' becomes mine, I shall be at the same distance from things and see them with the same typicality as he actually does" (Schütz 1962, pp.11–12),
2) "The idealisation of the congruency of the systems of relevances": for all practical purposes at hand I and my fellow-man disregard the differences originating in our private systems of relevances until counter-evidence is offered, and "that '*We*' interpret the actually or potentially common objects, facts, and events in an 'empirically identical' manner, *i.e.,* sufficient for all practical purposes" (Schütz 1962, p. 316).

These insights are quite important for social work because thanks to these two idealisations people can transcend their own experiences and establish a common world (Howe 1993). This is also the basis for professionals to develop a way together with their client on how to regain control in his or her everyday life.

However, this dynamic and communicative basic structure of social work produces a very fragile basis of interaction because of structural organizational constraints and because of the external forces which drive clients. In many situations of marginalization and suffering, which can also be caused by discrimination experiences, people need to gain a better, deeper understanding of their life and to produce "a sense of seamless continuity of identity" (Strauss 2008, p. 99) by doing biographical work. Social workers may have to consider the person's life history in order to establish a new mutual trust basis and in order to be able to encourage their clients to come to terms with their trajectory of suffering and to recast their biography as far as this may be possible.

The concept of trajectory of suffering has become very important in our seminar. It originally goes back to Glaser and Strauss' work on processes of dying, but in line with Riemann and Schütze (1991, p. 337) – who suggest a generalized concept of trajectory – it describes a biographical process of disorder and suffering. In a trajectory of suffering, a person loses orientation and is overwhelmed by external forces which limit the possibility to carry on an intentional action scheme. In such situations, people need to do practical work on the trajectory in order to be able to overcome it as much as possible. Riemann and Schütze (op.cit.) suggest that people try to handle their trajectories in different ways, by fleeing their present life situation or by reorganizing their life situation in order to live with the trajectory or by doing biographical work and trying to eliminate the trajectory potential. Professional trajectory processors such as social workers and lay biographical caretakers – as Riemann and Schütze (1991, pp. 351f) call them – are important resources to bring about new meaning in life and to give new directions to a biography.

3. Why qualitative-interpretive research is important for social work students

In a quite common approach to social work, students are taught to be able to apply theories and "received wisdom" (Rojet/Peacock/Collins 1988, p. 44) in their practical work, such as in counseling. However, there is plenty of empirical evidence about the negative consequences of being overly confident in pre-stated "theoretical patterns" and about submitting the client's perspective to a categorical scheme (Riemann 2001, 2006). In fact, it is a "strange" situation that social work clients as well as professionals encounter in their interaction (Schütze 1994). Different "cultural" systems that come to bear on their encounter may eventually lead to difficulties when both parties try to establish a common ground to communicate with each other. What can prove helpful in such a constellation is that professionals develop a methodical feeling for the symbolical representations of their clients' marginalization (Schütze 1994), for example, when clients talk about or implicitly refer to their experiences of being discriminated.

A methodical sense of grasping symbolical representations of the other can be gained through knowledge and practice of biographical analysis because this offers a sensitive framework also for counseling through an immanent ethnographical attitude towards communication and interaction. This is why we believe that students should have the possibility to collect and analyze a life history of a person who experienced discrimination in order to develop an analytical view of biographical processes (Schütze 1981). We would argue that "there is a sympathetic connection" (Kohler Riesmann 1994, p. ix) between qualitative research and the arc of work of social workers or, to use a remark of Shaw and Gould (2001, p. 15): "they share the same puzzle". It could thus be useful with regard to both professionalization and processes of self-reflection to stimulate a consciousness of inquiry among social work students by using qualitative methods as interpretive tools to systematically understand the "reality" of social work clients and in this way contribute to a "politics of hope" (French/Swain 2006). Bettina Völter (2008) describes qualitative methods not only as tools to accomplish scientific research, but as well as methods that social workers can use to structure and make sense of their encounters with clients ("Handlungsmethoden").

Riemann (2007) has clearly shown that professional practice has a strong biographical orientation and that an important part of the activities of social workers should consist in the attempt to understand the lives of their clients. This often happens in the context of counseling situations or generally during conversations with clients. During such talks social workers are often faced with "chaotic", "confusing" stories which linguistically reflect the "structural process of cumulative disorder" dominating the present and/or past life situation of the client. Under these circumstances social workers require high analytical skills to gain proper insight into the inner world of the client, without being irritated by the complexity of the stories (Riemann 2001). It is not always easy to do this. Fritz Schütze (2000, 2002) has shown, for example, the difficulties which arise when trying to bring together the complexity of the arc of work within organisational settings and the dynamic of social and biographical processes of clients. Paradoxical problems inevitably originate out of these irreconcilable structures and – if they are not the object of self-reflection or supervision (Schütze 2002) – may eventually lead to serious mistakes at work in different ways (Hughes 1984).

We consider our seminar as a contribution to expect and cope with such mistakes, which can be considered as a "natural" part of the logic of professional work.

Our aim is to raise the awareness of students about the complexity of biographical case exploration and about the complexity of communicative activities involved in daily practices, to encourage them to learn to listen patiently and to avoid using diagnostic categories without questioning them.

For this reason and doubtlessly also because counseling practice itself can sometimes contribute to the emergence of a trajectory (Schütze 2002, pp. 143ff), social workers need to be equipped with analytical tools to properly understand the problems which they have to face and to reflect their own practical experiences and their own communicative contributions to the unfolding processes of suffering.

Gerhard Riemann and Susanne White have recently written an interesting article about the research of practice. They argue that there is an intrinsic affinity, as they call it, between the activities needed to reconstruct single cases

in social work and processes of social research (2010, p. 83). By referring to the sociological style of Mary Richmond's "social diagnosis" – as already Schütze (1994) extensively did – they clearly show how a defamiliarization of practice has to be considered as the starting point of a process of social work students becoming "researchers in their own affairs". Making the familiar "strange" essentially means to refute thinking about social work as a ready-made normative practice and it also means to continuously question shared professional expectations and common theoretical assumptions through the reflection of empirical data. The setting of our seminar, for example, gives students the possibility of writing a structural report of a narrative interview in order to make biographical process structures visible (Schütze 1981), to understand the formal features of the text and to gain an analytical distance to it. By doing so, students learn how to identify bias in their own analytical attitude. In an article about the "Uses of Qualitative Methods for Practice, Reflection and Research", Völter (2008) recently defined "research" generally as a search for a better collaborative understanding of the life-world and of the clients' inner experiences. She also reflects on the difficulties to teach the necessary competencies and to reach these basic didactical aims because of the present process of the "Bolognisation" of academic studies in Europe. We would also like to mention that such a politically arranged "teaching and learning trajectory" nowadays sometimes interferes with the willingness of students to seriously engage with qualitative-interpretive research methods. However, we find it impressive how students in most cases develop and gain an analytical understanding and interpretive sense of their interview partner's biography and experience of discrimination.

4. The block seminar: "Empirical Results of Social Inequality and Experiences of Discrimination"

The backdrop of our seminar consists of the anti-discrimination legislation which was passed in Germany in August 2006, several years after the European Union passed antidiscrimination laws (between 2000 and 2004) and also obliged the member states to follow suit. The German anti-discrimination legislation (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz, AGG*) aims to prevent and prohibit discrimination on account of "race", ethnicity, gender, religion or beliefs, disability, age, or sexual identity. In our transversal module[2] we formulated these dimensions as "ethnicity and culture of family background", "old age", "disability", "sexual orientation", and "gender". As part of the module, students choose a seminar in which they will take part in after the initial block week during the semester, focusing on one of these dimensions. Also throughout the semester and as part of the transversal module, anti-discrimination law and different aspects of its application are taught. A fourth component of this module is a 3-day-block seminar on communication and interaction in the middle of the semester, in which students discuss their interview experience, based on their protocol of the interview situation. The students' case presentation and discussion in their exam at the end of the semester is based on aspects of all of

these components, including professional implications and possible legal aspects of their case. Some of the lecturers of the initial block seminar take part in the exams and we will point out some of our observations on the case presentations later on.

In short, the core of our block seminar consists of the discussion of empirical data and praxis situations in which discrimination is a central theme. Our aims are to initiate learning about different conditions and life situations of underprivileged social groups and the consequences of inequality in society, about theories of discrimination and about anti-discrimination law. The aim is also that students can understand how their knowledge of these subjects will enable them to study how discrimination experience can come to bear in a concrete single case. This involves learning about qualitative-interpretive approaches, how to plan and conduct an autobiographical-narrative interview as well as how to document it with an ethnographical protocol of the interview situation and a sequential report of the interview.

To exemplify methodological issues, we chose materials that combine the application of research methods with substantive issues connected to the topics of our seminar. As an example for ethnography, students thus read the ethnographic field notes of an Italian social work student conducting participant observation in a German nursing home during a short internship, focusing his attention on the everyday "bed-and-body" work – as Gubrium (1997) would say – of the care staff. In the seminar groups, we read and also quite intensively analyse an autobiographical narrative interview with a young Bosnian woman who tells her life story in Germany some years after fleeing her country during the war in 1992.[3] The prolonged trajectory of suffering she experienced as a child and what her family members went through, their severe traumatization, her own efforts of coping, the discouraging conditions during her family's stay in an asylum institution in Germany, her own biographical project of becoming a professional in the field of nursing, as well as everyday discrimination experiences she encountered but also the support she received exemplify these experiences for the students. At the same time, reading and talking about the interview transcript together familiarizes students with certain aspects of the autobiographical narrative interview such as the activities of narrator and interviewer, their interaction and constitution of a working alliance, that is, a basis of mutual trust and joint interest in the topic, towards compensating differences and power asymmetries between them.

We give students a short introduction to biographical and ethnographic research methods and outline the steps which should be carried out in order to collect and interpret empirical materials. In this way students are prepared to conduct and collect their own autobiographical narrative interviews with people who as they assume have experienced discrimination intersectionally related to prejudice against gender, color of skin, ethnic background, disability, age, sexual orientation and/or other dimensions.

We emphasize that discrimination is not tied to characteristics of people, of what they are or are not, but what they are seen as or taken for. We also point out that very often several dimensions of discrimination are intertwined, for example, when prejudice is directed against a person with a disability and a lesbian or homosexual orientation. And we discuss how structural inequalities of education and social status, disadvantaged situations of low income or an illegalized status can increase vulnerability to discrimination. At the same time, we

underline that we should look at the ways persons cope with distress, or attempt to do so to regain agency. This is also an important reason why we ask the students to look for *possible* cases of discrimination, so as not to miss how persons have actually dealt with difficult life situations in which they encountered prejudice and discrimination. We thus say "possible" discrimination because we cannot know a person's experience beforehand, and also because we do not want to label experience in a specific terminology but rather understand it contextually and in our interview partner's own words and frame of reference.

During the afternoon sessions, different phases of the qualitative-interpretive research process are introduced so that after the block week, the students will know where to go to find an interview partner. (During the semester, they will take part in seminars focusing on dimensions of discrimination of gender, ethnicity, disability, age and sexual orientation, as well as seminars on legal aspects of discrimination, and they can also ask the respective lecturers for further advice during the semester.) But during the first week, because of all the new topics, the complexity of the qualitative-interpretive approach and the openness of the procedure of doing biographical research, students obviously have many questions and hesitations concerning their interview.

In the first phase and throughout the block week, students are asked to 'define the case', which means finding a research topic for their interview focusing on, for example, gender, age, etc. The concretisation of the research topic is helpful for getting a first idea of the phenomenon under study and of potentially related issues. Defining the case also helps in eventually finding someone to interview, since it guides student in their selection process.

As a next step, we develop an opening interview question together. In an exercise in groups of three, students take turns in playing the role of interviewee, interviewer and observer, and in another exercise they have the opportunity to test their opening question. Through the exchange of roles students get the opportunity to see things from the other person's point of view and to reflect their different positions in the interview situation. The exercise interviews they conduct focus on different subjects, for example they might ask for the history of the family name or experiences with discrimination at school. In this way students are confronted with possible difficulties and learn what they can expect in real life interviews. During the discussions after the interview exercise, students talk about their different experiences when taking various roles. As interviewer, they face the challenge of listening to someone and jotting down key points at the same time and of asking open instead of "why" questions. We explain that the latter would engender the communicative scheme of argumentation that is more discourse related and is likely to preclude narratives, which are more closely connected to recalling what was experienced. Students also become sensitized to power asymmetries and how to establish more of a balance during the interview situation, as part of the working alliance.

In the next phase of the research process, students 'localise the case' and try to consider where they could find a potential interview partner. We recommend going via friends and acquaintances and some of the students also decide to go to social meeting places, to counselling centres or other institutions to ask for an interview partner. Students also suggest possible contacts to each other. Important ethical questions are raised: How can I ask someone for an interview without discriminating again him or her by "doing difference" (West/Zimmermann

1987)? In other words, how can I ask someone who has a disability to give me an interview and not reduce him or her to the category "disabled person"? In this case, we try to explain to our students the very fluid but important boundary between treating someone as a different kind of person – "doing difference" – and being sensitive to difference (Inowlocki/Herrera-Vivar/Herrschaft 2004, p. 320) because of existing inequalities in society and constructions of difference which imply or lead to discrimination.

Because of this issue, during the block seminar the students learn how stereotypes and prejudice develop from social categorization and subsequently can cause discrimination and stigmatisation if they are not part of a constant process of reflection on the adequacy and ethics of categorization. On the basis of empirical data and literature, we first show and discuss social categories as cognitive schemes that guide us in the world, in our everyday lives where we categorise everyone and everything. To categorise something means to name and to abstract it, which happens as soon as we use language. No one is thus free of stereotypes and prejudice. Through language, these categories exist in each individual as a mental structure. We do not develop categories to begin with but "naturally" refer to an existing normative order (Sacks 1992). Our field of perception during conversations is based on the existing knowledge of culture which is formed in processes of communication. This constitutes our everyday knowledge and, at the same time, the basis for our action.

It is important for students to know about and become sensitive to the use of categories and the impact of social structures, because these influence their attitude toward the research topic, as well as toward the interviewee and their interaction. On the basis of the data we look at in our seminar, students have the opportunity to recognise stereotypes and prejudice which exist in society and to reflect on their effects on individual biographies. The necessity of reflecting their own attitude is a sine qua non for a successful interview.

In explaining their request for an interview, we recommend that the students tell about their studies and the research focus of the seminar on the subjective experience of social inequalities. They should also explain that they would like to understand their interview partner's experience over a long period of time and in a detailed way and therefore would like to ask for his or her life story. We recommend not asking directly about discrimination in order to respect the subjective experience and relevancies within the life story, which might be very different from what we expect. Also, our focus on discrimination may result in the exclusion and neglect of other kinds of experience of our interview partners. Students learn, importantly, to rephrase their research question when they explain their interest to their interview partner.

In the seminar, we develop and try out the introductory question and possible open questions during the interview when the interview partner signals that a question would be helpful to keep going with the narrative. The introductory question asks for the life story. But, the students object, how can I ask someone to tell me their whole life story if I don't know the person? Should I really ask for the whole life story if I am only interested in discrimination? These questions and doubts are of course comprehensible. During the seminars we as lecturers refer to our own research experiences; we talk about our own fears and mistakes and also of ways of resolving them. In this way we try to support students in spite of their fears, by convincing them about the important, complicated but instructive experience of doing biographical interviews. On the one

hand, telling one's life story from one's own perspective is an opportunity to present one's own biography; it can become visible and important. For the interviewee, it might be a unique opportunity to present him- or herself as a whole person. In everyday life, we usually communicate very quickly and don't have time to direct our attention to other people and listen to their whole life story. On the other hand, it is an honor and an expression of trust for the researcher to be allowed to listen. The reduction of power asymmetries and structural inequalities through the discovery of similarities and differences is the next step in developing a trustful communication.

In this context, other kinds of questions come up: What happens if my interview partner did not experience any discrimination? Or if he or she does not want to talk about being discriminated? Will my interview not count in such a case? In our replies to the students, we confirm that in many cases interview partners will not describe themselves as being discriminated. They might not think of themselves or of their experience in such terms, or avoid inflicting such negative terms on their self-presentation. It can be a way of coping not to acknowledge discriminatory experience. We encourage students to analyze their interview in terms of what is being said, how it is being said and how either might contrast with the self-presentation of their interview partner. Possibly, their perception of their interview partner might differ from his or her own perception. In any case, if they have chosen their interview partner on comprehensible grounds of *possible* discrimination experience, this is what counts and they need not look for another case.

We also mention that in the previous semesters students collected very many impressive life stories that show what people have to go through, on the one hand, and how they have attempted and sometimes even succeeded to transform difficult life situations and regain agency.

Finally, we explain to the students how to sequentially summarize their taped interview. A transcription would take too much time, given the students' tight schedule and that we have no possibilities to conduct interpretation workshops to present and discuss the transcripts. Many students regret this, and so do we. However, with the recommendations for a "sequential report" according to the guidelines of Fritz Schütze[4], students can methodically control their data presentation. An advantage is also that if an interview is conducted in another language, the sequential report can be in German.

5. Some observations based on the students' case documentations and discussions

At the end of the semester, the documentation of the interview in form of an ethnographic protocol and a sequential report is the basis for the students' presentation of their case and the discussion of possible aspects of discrimination, also of the implications for social work and legal counseling.

In their reports, the students describe what their interview partners experienced and how they told them about it. Rarely was 'discrimination' explicitly mentioned, actually only in those cases when support or counseling had been

sought and by some interview partners who had become active in support groups after suffering discrimination, mostly on account of their gay or lesbian sexual orientation. In their reports, the students distinguished perspectives, between how discrimination was described by their interview partners and how they themselves discussed the accounts of experience in analytical terms and, whenever applicable, in legal terms.

Lecturers teaching this module read up to 40 case documentations each semester in preparation of the exams, in which always two lecturers take part who teach in different parts of the module. Each exam takes about 20 minutes. Students are asked to begin with working hypotheses they have developed out of their case, and the discussion goes from there.

In the following, we would like to mention some findings of interviews with counselors that were documented by the students. We will conclude with some observations on what students might have learned from doing an autobiographical-narrative interview with a person who possibly experienced discrimination.

6. Conclusions

We consider it an important aspect of our seminar that everyday communication and also biographical accounts of describing discrimination experience are very different from the analytical and theoretical terms of discussing discrimination, as well as from the legal discourse and its terminology. For students, professionals, and researchers, this finding can help to raise awareness and sensitivity towards phenomena of discrimination that are beyond and different from already established categories. In fact, what is characteristic of being mobbed, for example, is that for a very long time persons subjected to such treatment will not have a concept of what is happening to them. It seems that the discourse on discrimination is so recent that it has not yet been 'translated' into meaningful concepts that grasp subjective experience.

Some of the students were also interested in counselors' perspectives on discrimination. We advised them to conduct narrative interviews with counselors to gain an understanding of their actual practice and experience. This was also part of a study of some of the lecturers for the German Anti-Discrimination Agency in Berlin (Bernstein et. al. 2010). We cannot go into detail here, but one important finding was that in very many cases when clients complained about unfair treatment (again and again, of their children in school), counselors typically chose to take a position different from their clients, by explaining the experience in an 'objective' way to them. In their view, as they pointed out in their interview, this is to support their clients' sense of agency, so as not to reinforce the sense of being a victim. However, this professional stance does not recognize and respond to the expectation of clients to be understood and supported in what they experienced.

In conclusion, the 'need to be understood' which was mentioned at the beginning of our paper comes out in the wish to be regarded "as a full person". This is denied by acts of non-respect, non-recognition and disrespect. It cannot be grasped from a legal perspective by itself and it runs counter to some professional social work counseling strategies. It can be discovered, however, by doing

autobiographical-narrative interviews and we see it as an important learning experience for the students, also as future social workers. As the findings from the students' interviews show, they provide sound empirical grounds for doing research on experiences of discrimination and towards creating more knowledge, awareness and sensitivity in the social sciences and in public discourse about what unequal treatment and discrimination feel like and can imply in consequence.

Notes

1 This paper is based on a talk we gave at the Joint Conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA) and the Section on Biographical Research of the German Sociological Association (DGS) on Applications of Biographical Research at Georg-Simon-Ohm-University of Applied Sciences in Nürnberg, September 18 to 20, 2010. Our talk is based on several years of joint teaching and reflection of the seminar discussed here, also together with Julia Bernstein, Chris Schwarz and Andreas Kempf. We would also like to thank Gerhard Riemann for his comments on our talk that helped us towards this paper. And we are grateful for the (anonymous) reviewer comments of this journal.
2 We would like to acknowledge the ideas and initiative of Dagmar Oberlies to bring this module about.
3 The interview was conducted by Brigitte Reger. Special thanks to her and to Gerhard Riemann, who encouraged us to use it in our seminar.
4 The recommendations for a "sequential report" were developed by Fritz Schütze and have proven very useful and reliable in different European research projects. They are so far unpublished and we would like to thank Fritz Schütze for the possibility to use them.

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