

METHOD:

Same event – different stories

**PROJECT**

"Once upon today..." in Europe

**AUTHORS**

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**PARTICIPANTS**

flexible

**DURATION**

2,5 hours

**KEYWORDS**multi-perspectivity, narratives, history,
collective memory, identity**Objectives**

- Participants elaborate on the concepts of memory and history and set it into context with the notions of identity, community and narratives
- Participants become aware of the fact that history and memory are two opposing concepts and that the way history is narrated often serves the current needs of a community and its self-image
- Participants get to know that there is not only one story connected to a certain historical event, they learn that different communities (families, regional or national communities) narrate history in different ways and that it is always important to consider the entanglements that are created by that
- They learn about their individual identity and the community's identity they have been raised in
- Participants become aware of the self-perception of other countries and become able to listen to narratives that fundamentally oppose one's own narrative

Overview

Participants are asked to analyse different stories and narratives related to one historical event. Participants first split up into working groups of 4-6 people, consisting of an equal number of people from two different communities or countries, e.g. 2 from Germany and 2 from Poland. Then they select one historical event that they consider important either on a global level, for both countries or from their personal point of view. In the first round every group splits into national subgroups; every subgroup has to agree on a dominant narrative about this particular event in one's own country. In the second round both subgroups come together, share their narratives and compare them. In the end all groups prepare a presentation and report about differences and similarities as well as on aspects that struck or surprised them most. Finally, the group as a whole can try to identify characteristics of how narratives are constructed in each of the countries, pointing out concepts such as power, hierarchy or the creation of boundaries.

Background

"Same event – different stories" deals with the concept of collective memory and the relation between history and memory as well as oral tradition and a created cultural commemoration. According to Maurice Halbwachs, memories are no objective reflections of past perceptions of a certain reality. Memories are very much selective and dependent on the situation in which they are recalled by someone. The so called *cadres sociaux* are very im-

portant for the collective memory. This means that the preconditions for individual memories are social frames of references, most importantly fellow human beings, but also media such as books, images, knowledge etc. Without any social group that is bearing the collective memory, memories cannot be passed on. A social community teaches the contents of the collective memory and gives them a certain perspective.

The activity follows Halbwachs' approach that the notions of history and memory are incompatible. In contrast to memory, history is ideally something universal and neutral and includes entire events that happened in the past, so it is especially focused on the past. Memories are sectional. Its bearers are grading certain events and giving them a hierarchy. Their most important function is to build up a group's identity. This means that events have to be remembered in a way that they are fitting to a group's self-image and support its interests. Consequently, the notion of memory is very exclusive and not focused on the past but on the present. It fulfils current needs of a group. Actual events that happened in the past are distorted and can lead to complete fiction.⁵

Participants of the activity "Same event – different stories" are investigating the backgrounds of their memories in a method that focuses on self-awareness. After carrying out the activity they will realize that events that they considered as important for their own identity and the identity of a certain community can be remembered in order to serve a certain self-image as well as a policy of a certain country. By comparing different narratives of the same event the participants become aware of the fact that memory has nothing in common with history and while being taught about certain historical events, actual facts are not as important as serving a certain ideology.

Preparation

As for the practical preparation, the following is needed:

- Pieces of paper for taking notes (DIN A4) and pens
- Posters for the presentations of different narratives and markers in different colours

Course of the workshop

Phase 1:

Introduction (10 minutes)

The trainer explains that the session will give the participants the chance to learn more about different perceptions of history and prepare them that the activity probably leaves more questions than answers.

"Today we are going to focus on the stories of your countries, that means the countries you were born in, raised and socialized. In case you are born and raised in different countries, chose one you feel strongly connected to. The method that we are going to do is called *Same event – different stories*. It works this way:

You will split up into working groups of 4-6 people, consisting of an equal number of people from two different communities or countries. Then you will select one historic event that you consider important either on a global level, for both countries or from all of your personal points of view.

⁵ Halbwachs, Maurice: La mémoire collective. Paris: Presses universitaires de France 1950.

Every group splits into national subgroups; every subgroup has to agree on a dominant narrative about this particular event in one's own country.

Both subgroups come together, share their narratives and compare them.”

Depending on the group's previous knowledge, it might be necessary to explain the term “narrative”.

Phase 2:

Forming groups (10 minutes)

First step: Everybody needs to find a partner that has a similar background (coming from the same region/country).

Second step: Each pair needs to find another pair (depending on the group size maybe two other pairs) with a different background.

Phase 3:

Group work part I (20 minutes)

The trainer presents the first part of the task to all groups:

“Now it is time to decide within your group on one historic event you want to go on working with. That historic event needs to be considered as important either on a global level, for both countries or from your group's point of view.”

Group work part II (30 minutes)

The trainer presents the second part of the task to all groups:

“Every group splits into national subgroups. In your subgroups, please think about a dominant narrative about this particular event in your own country.”

Group work part III (30 minutes)

The trainer hands out markers and flip-chart paper for each group and presents the third part of the task to all groups:

“Both subgroups come together again, share your narratives and compare them with each other. After that, please prepare a poster that shows differences and similarities of your narratives and everything else you found out about it, so that you are able to present it later to the other groups.”

Phase 4:

Presentation of group work (20 minutes)

In the plenum, participants report of differences and similarities as well as on aspects that struck or surprised them most.

Phase 5:

De-briefing (30 min +)

In this phase, the trainer initiates a deeper discussion on the experiences the participants made during this activity.

“After reflecting on different narratives of the same historic event in different settings, we would now like to invite you to share some of your experiences with everybody.”

The trainer could ask the following questions:

- How did you like the exercise?
- After this exercise how would you define history and memory?
- What do you think is influencing history and memory and how is it connected to your individual identity and the identity of your community/ country?
- What do you think about the misuse of the term history especially for political purposes?

Recommendations for implementation

Part I of the group work might take more time than 20 minutes, because your participants are unsure which historic event to choose. Walk around and try to get an impression how the decision is proceeding and if some groups might need your help. Depending on the structure of your group you could already think of possible topics that might be interesting for your participants in advance. If there are groups that have difficulties in finding a topic, you could give them some ideas. It may also be helpful for the discussion not to choose the most obvious topics such as most controversial events.

The trainer should be aware of the fact that participants might react very emotional towards the narratives of other participants. It can lead to harsh discussions as well as positive reactions. The most challenging aspect of the activity might be listening to each other and tolerating opposing narratives.