

**Why does the library collect immigrants' memories?
A study of a multicultural memory group at a public
library in Oslo**

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ABSTRACT

The paper contains a presentation of the work of a multicultural memory group at the Torshov branch of Oslo public library, the reasons why the library initiated this work, and the expectations connected to the results. The memory group is part of a larger project at Oslo University College, Department of Journalism, Library and Information Science, PLACE, aiming at investigating the library as a physical meeting place.

Immigrants in Norway use public libraries frequently, but there is little communication between them and native Norwegians. Libraries can be important arenas for integration when groups of people from different cultures meet and communicate. Activities organized by the library, like this memory group, can make a change. It is considered especially important to recruit women. This paper aims to show that a memory group situated in the library can contribute to the building of bridges between people with different cultural backgrounds. Other effects of the work can be the creation of stronger feeling of belonging in the local community, increased self confidence and language skills. All this is important to obtain information literacy and thus be able to take part in the society. This paper emphasizes on the importance of public libraries as physical meeting places.

The method used by the memory group is reminiscence work. Reminiscence is the act or process of recalling and sharing one's memories. Using the library as an arena for reminiscence work among immigrants is new. If successful, the work can be a model for other public libraries.

The group has not yet completed its work, but is aiming at an exhibition as a visible documentation of the work.

KEYWORDS: Immigrants, Refugees, Memories, Reminiscence Work, Public Libraries, Integration, The PLACE Project, Social Capital

1. WHY DOES THE LIBRARY COLLECT IMMIGRANTS' MEMORIES?

First I am going to reformulate the question of the title, "Why does the library collect immigrants' memories?" into "Why should the library collect immigrants' memories?", or even "Should the library collect immigrants' memories?" I am not longer sure that the answer to that question will be yes.

This is a story of a project that is not yet completed, and that might turn into something different from what was intended at the beginning. That does not necessarily mean that the value of the project will be reduced. We still do not know what the outcomes might be. More and more clearly however, we do see, that we are walking along a new road, and we have to build the road while walking. Neither the project, nor the research is completed, nobody knows yet how it will end up.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF ESTABLISHING A MULTICULTURAL GROUP

Let me take you to the Torshov branch of Oslo public library. In January last year a group of women from different countries came together here, invited by the library. The library's purpose was to collect memories from the women's earlier everyday life in their home countries and their impressions from their meeting with Norway, their new home country. The library wanted to establish a so called memory group, with meetings every second week. Ten women from five different countries turned up at the first meeting, the second and third time only three came, and for the fourth meeting, nobody turned up at all. As the library really wanted this group to succeed, losing the participants was considered to be a problem, or rather, a great challenge. Several questions arose: Why did the participants disappear, how could new participants be found, and what could be done to make them stay in the group? Instead of collecting memories, the library's first challenge was to collect people, in this case the library particularly wanted women.

Three persons started out working with the group. The head librarian of the Torshov library initiated the work. An expert on the method of reminiscence work, with broad experience in the field, was engaged to be the leader of the group. I take part in this work through my involvement in a larger

research project, the PLACE-project. My role was originally an observer's, but eventually I was recognized by the participants as one of the leadership of the group, as I can't avoid taking part in the conversations. Later on, we found, that to obtain a real exchange of memories, the more Norwegian participants the better. Therefore I now both take part and observe.

In this paper I will first present the PLACE project, of which the memory group has become a part. Secondly I will give a closer presentation of the Torshov library and its surroundings, and thirdly, a short presentation of the method reminiscence work, before I get around to the actual work and activities of the group, the challenges we meet and how we cope with them, the aims of the work, and what we believe, or hope, will be the outcomes of this work.

3. THE PLACE PROJECT

The PLACE-project is a research project going on at the faculty of Journalism, Library and Information Science, of the Oslo University College, the letters of the name meaning Public Libraries – Arenas for Citizenship. The PLACE-project contains different smaller projects. The memory group at the Torshov library is one of them. The PLACE project aims at investigating the possibility of developing public libraries in multicultural local communities into arenas that can function as meeting places in the community. We consider the public library as a public space, and a place not only where information, knowledge and culture can be found and distributed. It is also a physical meeting place in a society, where the number of arenas for meeting other people in an informal way, are decreasing.

The public library has in our opinion a potential for being a vital part of a local community. We know that all kinds of people use the library, and the percent of immigrants using the library is found to be higher than the percent of native Norwegians. The library is used both for leisure and entertainment, and for education, work and business. Therefore there is a potential of meetings both with friends and with people different from oneself, from other classes or cultures. Common arenas are necessary to make people identify with their local community, to strengthen the feeling of belonging, prevent social exclusion and build social capital. We define social capital in the same way as

Robert Putnam (2001), as the glue of trust, common values and norms, stable social relations and involvement in activities binding society together, including activities at the public library. That is the background of establishing a multicultural memory group in a library.

4. THE METHODS

There are two different levels of methods, the methods used for studying the group, and the methods used in the actual work of the group. The methods used for studying the group's work can be characterized as participating observation. We also intend to interview the participants of the group and the librarians. The method used in the work of the group itself is called reminiscence work. Reminiscence is the act or process of recalling and sharing one's memories. Originally the method was developed to recall elderly peoples' memories, to combat isolation, and obtain cultural integration, stimulation, empowerment, friendships and community building. Objects, music, smells, and tastes can be used to recall memories from earlier life. This way of working has also proved useful to other groups of people, but this is the first time, as far as I know, it is used in a multicultural group in a public library. The central person in the European Reminiscence Network is Pam Schweitzer (2001), and we rely on her theories and experiences.

The work is also inspired by the method called memory work, first developed by the German feminist and sociologist Frigga Haug to study female socialization. This method focuses primarily "on the process whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations" (Haug 1987). The method of memory work and the method of reminiscence work both aim to improve the quality of life of the persons participating in the work.

5. THE TORSHOV LIBRARY

And now, let us go to back the public library of Torshov and its particular activities. The library is situated in an inner city district which used to be a working class area. Now the factories, where many of the senior citizens used to work, have closed down and demographic changes have taken place. The district has more social clients than city average, and it has also a relatively high proportion of immigrants.

The library at Torshov is known for its close relations to its local community, and has for many years organized services and untraditional activities to meet the needs of the different groups of

inhabitants in its district. In 1996 the library was awarded the prize of Library of the year, due to its ability to adapt its services to the community needs. At that time I had the pleasure of evaluating the different projects, which among others included literary groups and internet groups for immigrant girls, homework help for school children, memory groups for elderly people and conversation groups for immigrant women (Ulvik 1997). The library is also at the present time involved in teaching immigrant women Norwegian language, to help them to obtain better life quality, to build new networks and to prevent isolation. There are, as you will understand, at the Torshov library long traditions of noticing and understanding specific needs among its users. Organizing a memory group for immigrants keeps up this tradition.

6. THE AIMS AND ACTIVITIES OF THE MEMORY GROUP

The original title of the project is “Memories build bridges between cultures”, and the aim was formulated like this: “We wish to use memories from the past to achieve good cooperation in the present”. To obtain this aim it would be necessary to create an active dialog and respect between persons with different cultural backgrounds. The intension was to collect, keep and mediate the participant’s memories and experiences, making an exhibition at the end of the year, as a visible documentation of the work.

But as you will remember, after the first three meetings in the spring last year, there were no participants left in the group. Asking for the reasons, they were many. The women were not part of stable social networks, they had children and lots of duties to keep up with in their everyday life. Even if they apparently enjoyed being in the library, there were too many distractions. The lack of common language made it difficult, or even impossible, to exchange memories. There were women who had lived in the country for nearly 30 years, who only knew a small amount of Norwegian words. When the common understanding was so poor, the activities offered by the group, probably were not interesting enough to make the women wanting to come back.

The solution was to contact the local language school, and “borrow” a class in the school time. Before the summer holiday, a new and more stable group was established, this time consisting of both

men and women. They now come regularly to the library together with their teacher, who also cooperates in the group.

We have tried different ways of recalling memories. We often set a subject for a meeting, like cooking, eating and kitchen equipment, school days of the childhood, toys and games, wedding customs. A set subject does not necessarily mean that we stick to that particular subject through the entire meeting, but it often makes a good start. The method of reminiscence work, recalling memories by the means of different everyday objects from the past, has turned out to be successful. Objects like pipes, old coins, photos, books, clothes, even bottles containing smells, some of the objects common to people from different cultures, start lively conversations. Participants also bring their own objects, music and photos from their private lives to share with the others. Songs can bring forth memories, lullabies and songs from the childhood normally contain pleasant memories. Singing is an activity we can easily share. We also sing some Norwegian songs together. Because of the new stability of the group, the feeling of safety is growing, and some of the participants sing for us songs they know from their home countries. But many are still too shy to dare to sing alone. Food is an arena shared by all cultures. Women sometimes bring food from their home countries, and serve it with great pride. There is always a lot to be said about food.

We have asked the members of the group to write down certain memories, and asked their teacher to help them. So far, we have got very few written memories.

We now put more weight on *sharing* memories than *collecting* them. Everybody takes part in the conversations, at least we try to get everybody to say something. And we find it important to listen carefully, even to low voices. Thus the group provides social practice as well as language practice. We have not quite given up the idea of an exhibition, but do not consider it as important as when we started out.

As coffee, tea and cakes are served at every meeting, the meeting appears more like a party, with invited guests. This is a way of loosening the atmosphere, making the participants feel at home, preparing the ground for good conversations.

7. THE FINDINGS SO FAR

We observe that “our” immigrants enjoy coming to the library. Even if they do not attend the school each day, according to the teacher, they are likely to turn up on the days of the group meetings. We observe growing trust and safety, as the group now has become more stable. We get more and more familiar with each other, we are about to remember the names of the group members, which I believe is of importance to strengthen the feeling of belonging. We notice expectations regarding the next meeting, and expressions of satisfaction. But the remark “Thank you for your interest in us”, we can choose to interpret as gratitude, but it also without doubt indicates a distance between them and us. We realize that building bridges is a long and continuing process. But what we are doing in the memory group might turn out to be the first step of building a bridge. We believe that we so far have succeeded in providing an arena where every single one of the immigrants participating is seen and heard, we try each meeting to make everyone feel valuable, by asking, by listening. By sharing also our own lives, experiences and memories with them, a real exchange is taking place, which makes this group valuable and important to us as well. What we are given by “our” immigrants provides for us a new dimension and greater understanding.

There are also questions for books, and the library can provide books in many different languages as well as books written in easy Norwegian language for grown-ups. Books for children and youth are also suitable for learners. Reading will strengthen both language skills and information literacy.

8. NEW CHALLENGES

As the group has changed, new challenges have turned up. Asking for childhood memories was not a problem in a group consisting of Pakistani women, who came to Norway to marry Pakistani men already living in the country. But now, as the group contains a class at language school, there are among the members refugees with heavy war experiences, their past might consist of war and terror only. Some of them have witnessed their entire families to be killed. Therefore all memories from the past, even from the time before the war, are painful. A strategy to go on living, to manage the new life in a new country, is to close the door to the past, trying to forget the past completely, so it seems. They tell us that they have no memories at

all, as they have chosen to forget. We understand quite well the reluctance or unwillingness to recall painful memories. We have to accept this fact, we have to learn to be careful. We realize that those memories would be too difficult for us to deal with, as librarians we are not trained to cope with this kind of problems, memories from a traumatic past will be too dangerous to recall in a group like ours. But we still hope that the group might contribute positively to the new life even of the refugees. We hope that the including atmosphere and the friendly conversation in the group will make them feel better, and make them want to keep on attending the group.

9. WHY AND HOW TO GO ON

I reformulated the title of this paper, and I am also going to redefine the aim of the memory group a bit. There is naturally no reason at all why the library should *not* collect immigrants’ memories. But more important than a collection of documented memories, for the library to keep, I have come to believe, is simply the process of *building of trust*. That will be the most important outcome of the group, as far as I can see at the present time. According to Putnam, trust is a part of the social capital needed to build stable social relations, involve in social activities, to take part in a democratic society. Trust is also important to obtain multicultural communication and understanding. Without trust, building of bridges between cultures would not be possible.

My intention at the starting point was to use interviews as a method, as well as observations. I cannot document the changes I have observed, but I believe the right time has not yet come for interviews, that might confirm the observations. But I hope that the process of trust building will facilitate interviews later on.

One of the aims of the PLACE project, establishing the library as a meeting place in a multicultural society, I consider as fulfilled, as for the members of the memory group. From the library’s point of view that is quite an important achievement. Many of the immigrants were not aware of the library before they were brought there by their teacher, but now they know the way. They know persons working there as friendly helpful people. A new door has been opened, a new and valuable dimension is added to the life in the new country.

Therefore I find the work with the memory group important and worthy to be continued.

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