



PROBING INTO NORMALITY IN A
SUPERNORMAL SETTING
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I was born in 1961 into a family of white-collar employees – a pharmaceutical chemist and an engineer. From 1980 to 1986, I studied Philosophy – first at the University of Sofia, then at the University of St. Petersburg (at that time Leningrad). Later, post-graduate studies at the University of Sofia followed (1989–92). I got a Ph.D. in 1993. Since then, I have worked at the Department for History and Theory of Culture, University of Sofia: first as an assistant professor; from 2002 on, as an associate professor. I am married with two children, one born in 1987, the other in 1994. My research has been mostly in the field of oral history and biographical research, everyday life and life courses during socialism in Bulgaria. With colleagues and students, I have been engaged in collecting life stories for almost ten years. At the very beginning, the initiative had something in common with so-called “salvage anthropology”: it aimed at “rescuing” ways of thought and action that had seemed only natural, but were beginning to disappear by the early 1990s. An archivist impulse rather than a specific research objective gave the start. No specific age cohorts or categories of persons were selected. The material, however, proved helpful in addressing a range of topics: everyday life and modernisation; the experience of war and repression; family and kinship; self-presentation and identity, etc. – Address: Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sofia, 15 Tzar Osvoboditel blvd., 1504 Sofia, Bulgaria.

The potential of oral history and the life-story methods for the study of marginal groups, for the pluralisation of perspectives and “giving voice”, has been widely recognised and used. (To limit myself to one example: the first volume of the proceedings of the XI International Oral History Conference, Istanbul 2000, contains 50 papers: 35 of them on minor-

ities, migrants, women, workers in specific branches and victims of repressions; four on peasants; seven on methodology; and four on other topics.) My Wiko project, however, was concerned with a different set of questions: Whose voice do we hear when we “give voice”? What about the tension between independence and typicality that Luisa Passerini, a former Wiko Fellow, termed the “doubleness of subjectivity”? What do our interviewees mean when they say that their life has been “just normal” and therefore not worth a researcher’s attention? During my three-month stay at Wiko, I tried to focus on the notions of “normality” to which people (mostly implicitly) referred in the stories of their lives, and to uncover the ways they had come into existence.

Normality is a hard nut to crack; it is the criterion against which people measure the events and achievements of their lives without ever making it explicit. In respect to the life course, it disguises itself as part of the “natural” order of things, the natural flow of life from birth to death. I was, however, convinced (and still am) that the normal life course is in fact a social and historical product. Like Lutz Niethammer (another former Wiko Fellow), I discovered that many stories followed the patterns accepted for presenting one’s life and oneself in socialist institutional settings. For instance, interviewees would often tell first of their education and career and then go back to their family, as I just did in my short c. v. above; they would as a rule begin by presenting themselves as if filling in an administrative form: date and place of birth, social origins as defined by the officially established categories (“family of white-collar employees” in my case); they would launch into explanations of what they perceived as deviating from the “normal”. So I came to see my project as an archaeology of the normal revealing “normal life” as a construction, to which institutional settings, social milieus and cultural patterns had contributed one way or another. That meant – as I imagined – that I had to examine the ways in which the notions of normal life surfacing in the life stories had come into existence in modern Bulgaria, how they changed following the great societal transitions in the 20th century.

What is “normal”? On the one hand, “normal” has a calm descriptive connotation referring to statistical averages, to what is widespread and usual. On the other hand, “normal” refers to a model, to the norm as something to be achieved or preserved, and has thus a normative connotation as well. The word not only describes the actual state of things, but also points to how things should be, i. e., to a desirable state. Thus the concepts of “norm” and “normal” contain a hidden tension between description and evaluation, fact and value. I found this ambiguity a fruitful starting point for probing into the “normal biography”. The latter is therefore “normal” first because it is widespread and highly predictable. But it

is also normal (i. e., widespread and predictable) in terms of the ideas of what a “good life” should be like, to which interviewees implicitly refer when narrating their own lives – that is, it has a normative dimension as well. So I found myself dealing with both compliance to standards (normality) and setting standards (normativity). Drawing on authors like Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking, James Scott, and others, I looked for a conceptual framework that could accommodate both of them, one that could account for the relationships between modern statecraft and normal life course.

Thus, a considerable part of my time was spent in finding out how the modern Bulgarian state (1878–1980s) designed through its legislation the life course of its citizens and in what ways it provided for the implementation of its project. I focussed on education acts, labour legislation, poor relief laws, the introduction of identity documents and other legal arrangements that contributed to the making of the individual and the citizen, to the construction of a standard life course and to the invention of categories to describe life situations. I think I thereby managed to some extent to outline what might be called, after Ulrich Beck, the “institutionally designed” normality, i. e., the institutional project of the normal life course. To my mind, this is important and justifiable by the fact that 1) in socialist settings, the inventions of lawmakers and apparatchiks could organise people’s daily lives because an alternative to the reality they created was hardly possible and 2) even before that, the state in Bulgaria, as in other Balkan countries, was the main modernising agent, much more influential than any other factors. Thus “the state’s earlier fantasies” (Anderson) were gradually given a real social life.

Normal for whom? This is a legitimate question, because, if we stick to the “state imaginary”, we can only arrive at thin descriptions. The reason is that institutional thinking not only has the capacity of transforming life, but can also itself be modified, subverted or even blocked in everyday life. Individuals not only accept, interiorise and try to live up to the models and the categories imposed on them, but often re-negotiate them and sometimes resist and even overturn them, following other models of normal life that have been handed down through tradition or acquired from peers, media, etc. Thus notions of normality may differ, depending on factors like age, gender, social group, occupation, place of residence, etc.

As a next step, though limited to one case only, I tried to look for the divergences between “institutionally designed” and “socially valid” normality as they appeared in the life stories of two women. The narratives depicted two strong and independent women who had succeeded in really “owning” their own lives. However, the way they edited their

stories for publication – each adding a “conclusion” stating that the real meaning of their lives had been their children and grandchildren – raised certain questions, in my view. On the one hand, questions about the ways life stories are guided by the “rules of genre”, that is by ideas of what constitutes a good story. On the other hand, questions about the normative ideas of “womanness”, i. e., notions of what is normal or appropriate for a woman and the actual life strategies of real women. It seems that in this case a kind of socially valid normality has been at work, i. e., notions of what is appropriate, desirable or permissible to a woman, of what women ought to do and how they ought to feel – notions deeply grounded in every culture and not readily visible to those immersed in that culture. As a result, two women whose actual experiences have gone far beyond the traditional women’s sphere have thought of them in very traditional ways because they are unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to others. Even though they have acted beyond their culturally constructed “nature”, they opt for “normality” as soon as their actions are to be solidified in texts meant to last.

Supernormal. This is not a concept employed in my research. Ken Cheng suggested it after my presentation, though he didn’t know if and how it could be used (neither did I). Supernormal means exceeding the normal in a positive way. Supernormal is the bright red gape of the cuckoo compared to that of the other nestlings as a stimulus for foster parents; sugar compared to natural sweet foods; aided vision compared to normal eyesight; gifted children compared to normal children.

Now I have an idea of how to apply the concept. This is the right word to describe the conditions for work and the life at Wiko: the library services, the language editing, the computer department, the *Sprachkurs*, the Tuesday colloquia ... and, above all, the atmosphere created by the whole Wiko team and the Fellows. Now, four months later and almost 2000 km away, it seems that the list of ideas and suggestions is not the most important, but the responsiveness, the encouragement and the challenges. Now I realise that maybe I was selfish, talking of my own work much more than taking interest in that of others. This is a chance to apologise. And to thank once again. I am grateful and happy to have been part of that wonderful community, and hope not to leave it entirely in the future ...