DYSKUSJA
DISCUSSION

PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE BIOGRAPHICAL METHOD
within the Polish Sociological Association's Biographical Research
Section Conference *Biographical method in the social sciences.*
Trends and controversies
with the participation of Fritz Schütze, Gerhard Riemann,
Marek Czyżewski, and Kaja Kaźmierska as the host
December 9, 2023

KK: Welcome, everybody. My name is Kaja Kaźmierska, and today I have the pleasure to be part of the panel discussion that was planned to be held in person, but due to some technical problems, we decided to move it online, and we are very happy to have our special guests join us virtually. That is, Professor Fritz Schütze and Professor Gerhard Riemann, who will take part in this panel. This was the first idea to use the opportunity to have them in Łódź. And I would like to welcome the third panelist, Professor Marek Czyżewski, who is here in person in Łódź. So, we have this hybrid formula for our discussion, which is quite common these days after the pandemic. It's fortunate that you, Marek, can participate in this room. Naturally, if we had our guests on-site, we would only continue in the offline format. Our conference focuses on issues of current dilemmas, risks, and controversies related to the biographical method, the biographical approach, and biographical research.

For the last two and a half days, we have had a lot of very interesting discussions related to specific problems that are being researched and analysed by different scholars but that are also related to more general issues, such as ethical issues, like the problem of the anonymization of different kinds of materials and different kinds of research. These discussions were very lively and sometimes even very heated, so we are still in this mode of reflecting on biographical research.

Today we would like to continue in a more international context, taking advantage of the presence of our guests and our friends, and we would like to spend about two hours discussing these more general issues. So, my role is to moderate the discussion. I will suggest some topics and ask the participants to reflect on them. However, I think it is worthwhile for the audience to join us actively as well. First of all, those who are here in Łódź, but also those who are on the Internet, who have connected with us, I think it would be good to give you a voice to ask some questions. Of course, it is up to you to react to the main problems, which I would like to describe in a very general way.

The first problem that I think might be interesting and worth discussing is the role of biographical methods and biographical research in contemporary sociology, as well as in other kinds of social sciences because now the biographical method is also used in other disciplines such as pedagogy, history, social work, and many others. The background of my reflection is that perhaps we can get the impression that it is a very fashionable method at the moment and that almost everyone is using it. Perhaps this is a false impression, but in any case, at least in Poland, we have this impression that the method, which was rather a niche method, is now a kind of a mainstream method. So, I would like to ask our panelists to comment on this. What do you think about the role of biographical research today? Perhaps we can start with Fritz.

FS: Of course, what I will say is very personal, but my feeling is that the biographical approach is much more common in Polish sociology than in German sociology. Of course, this has lots to do with Florian Znaniecki, with Józef Chałasiński, with Antonina Kłoskowska, and, of course, with all these people in Łódź and elsewhere who have been working within this tradition, which is more than 100 years old. It is different in Germany. Max Weber was not a person who was as interested in biographies as Znaniecki was. It's different if we look at other social sciences in Germany. In educational science, it's very common, and in the German context, I feel much more at home in educational science than in sociology with regard to utilizing the biographical approach. I am sad to say this because I strongly feel I am a sociologist, and I am disgusted by the peripheral position of biographical research in German sociology.

This is different in other traditions and disciplines: biographical research in social anthropology, ethnology, and history, of course, too, is held in high esteem. However, the stance, the epistemic function and the methodological ways of biographical research in different disciplines are a special chapter which we could talk about. For example, the tasks historians would see for their biographical research are different from sociological tasks in dealing with biographies. So, there are lots

of misunderstandings regarding biography research between the two disciplines. But in historical studies it is perfectly acceptable to conduct biographical research. And even the sociolinguists in Germany have once again started to become interested in biographies. There was a lot of interest 30 years ago, then it vanished, but these days it is making a comeback. Two months ago, I went to a conference in Essen, which was financed by the German Research Foundation. And there, to my astonishment, I found all these people from the various social sciences, linguistics, and historiography working wonderfully together. I must admit, even lots of sociologists were there, and they, the sociologists, actually organised this conference. So maybe something will change now. But my personal experience in the last thirty years has been that biographical research has little influence in German sociology and has remained on the margins.

KK: Okay, so let's move to Gerhard Riemann.

GR: Well, Kaja, you mentioned at the beginning that you have the impression that nearly everyone uses the biographical method in Poland. When I think of the current situation in German sociology, I don't see such dominance and coherence. I think that the field of qualitative research in German sociology is quite heterogeneous and that colleagues who identify themselves as biographical researchers are only one segment (even if it is well-established and highly visible). There are other branches that are attracting a lot of interest right now. Biographical research itself is marked by a large diversity. For example, there are "biographical case reconstructions" as developed by Wolfram Fischer and Gabriele Rosenthal (by fusing elements of the approaches of Fritz Schütze, Ulrich Oevermann, and Aron Gurwitsch) or research on "narrative identity." There are also colleagues who orientate themselves toward the so-called "documentary method," which was designed by Ralf Bohnsack (drawing on the work of Karl Mannheim) who make contributions to biographical research. I think that the type of studies that Fritz, I, and others have conducted (studies in the style of a sociolinguistically based analysis of social processes) are not as common in current German biographical research as they are in Poland, even if the research steps of this approach are presented in relevant textbooks and introductions to qualitative research. This has to do with different conditions that would be too extensive to discuss here.

One interesting development in biographical research and in other fields of qualitative research as well has been the cooperative work done in research workshops (*Forschungswerkstätten*). This has become quite common in different disciplines and professions in Germany. Fritz, Thomas Reim, I, and others started to work with students of social work and supervision at the University of Kassel in the early 1980s (at that time, mainly working on narrative

interviews that students had collected for their theses). And this style of doing things together – and of generating new insights together – became quite influential. Marek Czyżewski, Andrzej Piotrowski, Kaja Kaźmierska, Katarzyna Waniek and Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas also took part in such workshops during their stays in Germany and later on in the context of European research projects. A similar development can be seen in Objective Hermeneutics. In recent years, Fritz and I often ran such workshops together with colleagues from Objective Hermeneutics (including Ulrich Oevermann until his death) at the Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg, Institute for Advanced Study, in Northern Germany, and it went quite well to do case analyses together without glossing over our different approaches. It was important to spell out such differences. It would be a worthwhile project to engage in interaction analyses of different types of research workshops in order to empirically discover the communicative processes involved in gaining new insights. (Fritz conducted such an analysis a few years ago by focusing on the communication of a research team of Anselm Strauss. He took part in these team meetings while he spent a year with Anselm Strauss in San Francisco at the end of the 1970s.)

Different types of qualitative and reconstructive research have been integrated into the training of future professional practitioners, especially social workers, in quite a few professional schools in German universities and universities of applied sciences. Biographical research has been important in this regard. When I taught research skills and supervised students' empirical research, I mostly dealt with students of social work in different places in Hesse and Bavaria. I never had problems trying to get across to students that collecting narrative interviews and trying to understand biographical developments on that basis is a valuable resource for their professional socialization and the acquisition of skills for practical case analyses. You have to learn how to listen carefully; you have to be self-reflective about how you go about communicating with people and how you develop trust in your relationship with people so that they can open up and tell about themselves. Such ideas are quite common in social work education in Germany. And in some places, students are also introduced to biographical research and do their own research projects in an unpretentious way (also in the context of research workshops). I don't know what it will be like in the future, but such things are still going on. I spent a lot of my time encouraging and supervising social work students' biographical research (and also other kinds of reconstructive research), and Fritz did so, too, while we worked together in Kassel. He also

published a book a few years ago in which he focused on biographical research as a foundation for social work case analyses.[1]

I think it is important to take such developments in professions like social work into account since biographical research is not confined to sociology.

KK: Great. Thank you very much.

MC: Thank you for the privilege to take part in this panel. My suggestion would be to move on to a more abstract, I would even say, *metatheoretical* dimension of the role of the biographical method in contemporary sociology and other non-sociological academic disciplines like education sciences or history, and also in some other, relatively new interdisciplinary fields of research like gender studies, ethnic studies, post-colonial studies and cultural studies. So, I think that this issue could be discussed with reference to the tension between the metatheoretical assumptions of interpretive biographical research on the one hand, and the social-philosophical mindset of post-structural and postmodern currents in social sciences and humanities on the other, especially in those relatively new interdisciplinary fields of research I have just mentioned.

I am aware that we are going to discuss the question of basic assumptions of the biographical method later on, and I intend to make some additional points then. Still, I would like to present right now just an outline of how I see the important question of the place and the role of the biographical method, as well as the problem of metatheoretical assumptions.

So first, as we all know, interpretive biographical research, with its emphasis on qualitative methodologies, includes partially divergent tendencies, such as the grounded theory approach and the preference for single-case analysis. Putting aside the differences between grounded theory and single-case analysis, it seems evident that interpretive biographical research as a whole has decidedly positioned itself at a significant distance from all kinds of quantitative methodologies. This distantiation continues to this day and is two-sided. However, what may seem inconspicuous to the followers of both qualitative and quantitative methodological options is the metatheoretical convergence between them, which becomes apparent from a third point of view. By this third point of view I mean the aforementioned poststructural and postmodern mindset, which emphasises the deconstruction of the idea of individual subjectivity.

Even if quantitative research is looking for general patterns of individual profiles, it still takes it for granted and assumes the self-evident truth that individual

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[1] Fritz Schütze. 2021. *Professionalität und Professionalisierung in pädagogischen Handlungsfeldern: Soziale Arbeit*. Opladen, Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

subjects are a substratum of social life. In fact, despite the important differences between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the same basic metatheoretical assumption underlies major segments of qualitative methodologies, including interpretive biographical research.

And it is this very assumption that is questioned and put under scrutiny by poststructural and postmodern modes of reasoning, which have become influential, especially in gender studies, ethnic studies, post-colonial studies, and cultural studies, and which try to promote what is sometimes called the "anti-foundationalist approach". At the core of this anti-foundationalist thinking is the postulate, which Joan W. Scott formulated as follows: "We need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience."[2]

To my understanding, interpretive biographical research has two options. The first option is to avoid engaging with anti-foundationalists and continue to do its own job, especially if anti-foundationalist rhetoric tends to use derogatory means of persuasion and does not seem interested in a debate whatsoever, viewing the standpoint as an obsolete merry yarn. The second option involves the decision to pick up the gauntlet and engage in a debate with the anti-foundationalists, even if they are not specifically interested in an exchange of arguments. I would say the choice between these two options represents an important dimension of the place and role of biographical methods in contemporary sociology and some other academic disciplines and fields of research.

KK: What is your proposal?

MC: The latter version.

KK: Would Fritz Schütze or Gerhard Riemann like to comment on what Marek has just said?

FS: Because I was distracted by the technical obstacles of hearing using electronic devices, it was too difficult for me to understand everything that Marek Czyżewski said. I would be very interested to read it and then to comment on it. (And maybe, after I read it, we could start a metatheoretical discussion.) I just wanted to add to what I said at the beginning. Of course, I believe that the biographical approach is very important in all social sciences all over the world. I was just intrigued to compare Poland and Germany. And therefore, I said that in sociology as a discipline, biographical research is viewed as significantly more important in Poland than in Germany. But of course, just to take the line of

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2　　Joan W. Scott. 1991. "The evidence of experience". *Critical Inquiry* 17(4): 779.

Marek Czyżewski, if you were to ask my opinion on the future of biographical research, I would say that it's central to sociology and all the other social sciences because ultimately, any type of social data is only interesting when related to the biographical situations of individuals' lives.

KK: Thank you. Gerhard, would you like to comment?

GR: Marek's comments reminded me that in recent years, many biographical researchers in Germany have indeed become fascinated with poststructuralism and discourse analysis (as developed by Foucault and others), and they have tried to build a bridge between biographical research and discourse analysis. This is currently an influential trend. However, I am not convinced that this import (which is often announced with great rhetorical effort) is really helpful in enhancing the empirical analyses in particular studies. In such studies, the researchers' interest in their informants' biographies and self-presentations is often restricted to how they "position" themselves with regard to a discourse that is relevant to them. There are so many more interesting things that may have happened in their lives and that can be discovered in their narratives. However, they escape the researchers' attention or are deemed negligible due to the researchers' prior theoretical decisions and overriding thematic preferences. What's the point of collecting life histories when you are primarily interested in a very small segment of people's biographical experiences?

I also find the current trend somewhat disconcerting because interest in how discourses are reflected in biographies has always been a somewhat inconspicuous feature of biographical studies since the 1980s. We have the analytical tools to track down such phenomena – especially the analysis of argumentative sequences in which informants deal with discourses and overpowering theories that affect their own selves. I have always been interested in this kind of thing since my study of the biographies of psychiatric patients.

KK: Okay, thank you. Perhaps before I ask Marek Czyżewski to respond to this issue, I will ask Fritz Schütze again to comment on them because when we were preparing this panel, this was one of the issues that you also enumerated as important: the interplay between discourse analysis and biographical experiences. From what I understand, this is also a question in Germany, especially among young German scholars who think that biographical processes are basically shaped by discourse topics. Could you please comment on that?

FS: Of course. the relationship between biographical research and discourse research is very important, and it can be handled circumspectly. But if one were to assume that biographies are centrally shaped by public discourse, *basically* shaped by public discourse, I wouldn't agree. It is an empirical question: some

biographies are deeply shaped by public discourse, others not. And therefore, we have to empirically find out how much certain biographical processes are really shaped by public discourse. There was a research project (it was financed by the German Research Foundation) conducted by Maria Kontos.[3] She took the books of Thilo Sarrazin, who declared that the high number of immigrants – especially Turkish- and Arab-Muslim people – in Germany would be detrimental to German culture and the cohesion of German society. And she asked what the impact of these books and the public discourse about them on the biographical orientation and the life courses of immigrants in Germany would be. She conducted autobiographical-narrative interviews with Muslim immigrants and descendants of Muslim immigrants to find out how much of this "Sarrazin discourse" would shape their biographies. And, of course, while the informants faced significant problems due to this public discourse generated by Sarrazin's books, this impact was not central to their biographical development, as revealed in their autobiographical accounts.

For me, part of the basics, what we have to look at within the autobiographical-narrative renderings, is: How are the topics, features and structures of personal identity (such as future orientation, making sense of one's own history, relating to significant others and biographically relevant collectivities, and their obligations, as well as self-theorizing about one's own dispositions to make repeated mistakes of the same kind and to take creative chances) shaped within the autobiographical renderings, especially by biographical work? Basically, we focus on informants' personal identity by analyzing the argumentative parts of their autobiographical accounts – in contrast to the narrative sequences. Such argumentative parts also reflect elements of the public discourse that are relevant to their biographies. And then, by looking at the whole narrative presentation of the overall structuring of their life histories (Ger. *biographische Gesamtformung*), we can observe in what ways and to what extent the features of public discourse (as incorporated in the argumentative parts of the autobiographical account in terms of biographical work) have an impact on the development of their biographical selves. For me, it is just an empirical question rather than a metatheoretical statement of an a priori assumption.

In terms of method, the impact of public discourse on autobiographical rendering can be precisely analysed. You could analyse it with certain styles of

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[3]   Maria Kontos. 2020. *Die desintegrativen Folgen des öffentlichen Integrationsdiskurses. Eine biographieanalytische Untersuchung mit Migrantinnen und Migranten.* Opladen, Toronto: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

argumentation analysis. It is a pity that we cannot show it here, although it works quite well. However, what I don't believe is that we would find out by circumspect empirical analysis that the ways people organise their biographical identities are totally shaped by public or arena-specific general discourse. This assumption is not true. And I am somewhat afraid that some young researchers (and perhaps even some older ones) would assume that studying autobiographical renderings, since it is quite time-consuming work, can be accomplished much easier through discourse analysis by, for example, examining how subjects position themselves within discourse fields and how they navigate or shift within these discursive processes. And then we would know right away what happened to that subject or is worth knowing about that subject. I think that such a shortcut is wrong.

KK: Marek, would you like to comment on that?

MC: Well, I think I will try to explore this in more detail later on, but at the moment, I would just say that if, in the role-taking manner of George Herbert Mead, we take the perspective of the poststructural approaches, which does not necessarily include the acceptance of this perspective… so if we take this perspective and look from this perspective at biographical research, then I wouldn't say that the question of the scope of the influence of the public discourse on autobiographical rendering is relevant. I think that what is vital from this perspective is more a general metatheoretical way of reasoning, a mindset that has some empirical consequences as well.

KK: We have actually moved on to the second problem that I would like to visit in our discussion: the underlying methodological assumptions and analytical approaches within the biographical method. And I think that this tension between discourse and lived experience is one of them. I would, therefore, like to ask whether anything has changed since contemporary methodological approaches to biographical research were developed. What transformations has the biographical method undergone in the last 30 or 40 years because the circumstances in which we live are changing rapidly? Of course, while theoretical reflection in social sciences has developed during these decades, there have also been notable technical advancements. We have more and more sophisticated ways of recording and transcribing; lots of technical means that really help us with this work. Also, we have computer analysis. I know that both Fritz Schütze and Gerhard Riemann are somewhat reticent about the capacity of computers to analyse biographical data; both simply do not practice it. Therefore, I do not expect you to comment on the matter. But still, I think that there are lots of different perspectives or different kinds of circumstances, even technological developments, that make a lot of people think that the biographical method should also somehow change or

somehow develop. I say "somehow" because it's very difficult even for those who propose these changes to identify and reflect on them. And this is also done in the context of constant development and constant improvement of everything – both social reality and also methodologies. So, should we be in this constant mode of development? How would you comment on this? Does the biographical method need some corrections, developments, or changes?

GR: Well, I think there have been constant changes looking back over the past few decades. Everything is in flux. But there has also been a remarkable stability in the basic ways in which we conduct narrative interviews. And the steps of analysis, as explicated by Fritz at the end of the 1970s remain basic elements for our studies.

What comes to my mind when thinking of changes?

Just a few impressions: Nowadays, the narrative interview is often equated with the autobiographical-narrative interview. You can also find this in textbooks. We did the first narrative interviews (in the first half of the 1970s) in a community power study when we asked local politicians to tell us about their experiences and involvement in certain collective developments and crises in their communities. At that time, we did not yet think of biographical research. However, when we gradually discovered how much the narrators were personally or existentially involved and "entangled," we became more and more interested in life histories as such. We then started to do autobiographical narrative interviews, i.e., interviews in which narrators recount the development of their whole life histories. The sequential and comparative analysis that Fritz developed at the end of the 1970s, and the discovery of processual structures of the life course – trajectories of suffering, biographical action schemes, institutional expectation patterns and creative metamorphoses – all of this contributed to the renewed interest in biographical research, its shape, and its research fields. (And as already mentioned, different styles of analysis emerged.)

Thinking of the way in which we have presented our analyses (based on structural descriptions of single cases and contrastive comparisons): A feature of our studies has always been the inclusion of "portrait chapters" in order to present single-case analyses, i.e., the analyses of "cornerstone" cases, which were especially important in terms of theoretical variation of the collected data. At the beginning, and for a long time, we always included comprehensive structural descriptions of whole interviews (and some colleagues still do) in order to make our ways of analysing transparent, i.e., to give readers the opportunity to control and criticise our interpretations. At the same time, the reading demanded a great deal from them. Over time, we have shifted towards a more selective presentation

of certain segments and their exemplary structural description. Thereby we still try to show the features of formal-substantive data analysis, i.e., an analysis that also stresses the analytical relevance of formal features of *ex tempore* narratives (e.g., background constructions, extended sequences of argumentation etc.). Of course, these more selective presentations are still based on careful sequential structural descriptions of whole interviews; I am merely talking about the style of presentation. Such things are not carved in stone.

I think one important change has been the re-assessment of the value of single-case analyses, emphasizing that it is possible to arrive at far-reaching insights by focusing on just one case. While an important feature of the studies we have conducted or supervised has always been the orientation towards contrastive comparisons, we have tended to emphasise (now more so than in the past) the importance of generating knowledge via (socio-linguistically based) case studies. I think that Anselm Strauss also had trust in the value of single-case analyses (see Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, *Anguish. A case history of a dying trajectory.* Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press 1970), but this remains somewhat hidden in his and his co-authors' methodological writings. The appreciation of single-case analyses – and the detailed analytical procedures that are necessary in this context – is something that we share with colleagues in Objective Hermeneutics. This is something that completely contradicts the standard reservations about the limited significance of individual case analyses (reservations that exist not only among quantitative social researchers).

We are still confronted with simplistic attributions, for example, that people like Fritz and I focus exclusively on storytelling and devalue other schemes of communication (argumentation and description). Such misunderstandings persist, and they derive from a superficial reading of early methodological presentations of our approach. The way we have worked on our data has always been marked by intensive analyses of argumentation, too – either argumentative commentaries, which remain embedded in a dominant narrative, or argumentative sequences, which become dominant in the course of an *ex tempore* presentation. And contrary to what some people believe, we never looked at argumentative sequences as an "aberration," as "second-class data," or as "something that unfortunately happened". For a long time, we did not care to give a name to our approach – and this might have contributed to such misconceptions. Maybe it will help if the term "socio-linguistically based analysis of social processes", which Fritz suggested a few years ago, stressing the epistemic importance of formal textual ("socio-linguistic") features of the autobiographical rendering, catches on.

I think one important extension of our work has been the use of narrative interviews for the study of professional work. In recent decades, there have been quite a few studies based on narrative interviews in which professionals were asked to talk about the history of a working relationship with a client or patient, a family, or a group or community (a history of a relationship that was especially significant for them for different reasons). I think that such data is very rich in shedding light on the experience of work, on arcs of professional work, and on recurring professional paradoxes. The term "narrative interview" is often used synonymously with "autobiographical-narrative interview", but this does not do justice to the matter.

Kaja was right when she mentioned our "reticence" regarding the use of computer programs in biographical research. If you look at the job advertisements for qualitative social researchers, you get the impression that mastery of the relevant programs is what makes a good analyst. I have my doubts about that. I know that the programs can be very helpful in dealing with large amounts of data, in selecting relevant text passages to support work on certain concepts, or in enabling contrastive comparisons. But I cannot imagine how such programs would relieve me of doing structural descriptions, of pondering over certain narrative segments and textual structures, and how my structural descriptions could thereby be improved – although I know that some colleagues are striving for something like this. (I just read an article by a colleague from the "documentary method", Burkhard Schäffer, who sympathises with the use of AI in his methodology).

Many colleagues would probably smile and shake their heads when they heard something as antiquated as what I just expressed – especially in view of the current hype surrounding artificial intelligence in qualitative social research. I believe it is more important (a) to focus on how researchers *de facto* proceed in their work on data, i.e., regardless of their claim to membership in a particular "school", and (b) to discover how the participants in different research workshops go about discovering something new – or make it unnecessarily difficult for themselves to do so. But I think it is important to observe closely (like a good ethnographer) how such programs and especially the fascination with artificial intelligence transform the work of qualitative researchers – how they change basic assumptions, shift the standards of "good research," and create new problems and dilemmas.

One last comment on transcribing. I know there have been huge technological advances in this field. It appears more and more to be a matter of course to relieve yourself of the work of transcribing. I remember that in conversation analysis – at least in the early phase of conversation analysis – transcribing was regarded as important work; it was part of the analysis. (I don't know if conversation analysts

still share this assumption.) When transcribing by yourself, you get a sense of what is going on, you get a sense of the interaction, and you get very interesting first insights. And if you delegate this process of transcribing to electronic programs, something gets lost. But I agree that it is convenient to do so.

KK: Okay, thank you very much. Fritz Schütze?

FS: I always had plans over the last six or seven years to get experience with computer analysis, and I even have a young colleague who agreed to do this with me, in order to find out about the elementary research activities involved. I couldn't do this up to now for private reasons. Of course, I have some general opinions about it. And I would say that computer analysis can be effectively used to a certain degree in all the research steps of contrastive comparison. I have always assumed that it could be very helpful for these research tasks of contrastive comparison as elementary steps in epistemic arcs of research work. On the other hand, contrastive comparison is not the only source for the creative development of our analysis and our theorizing.

The other general source is the focus on individual cases, on the sequential order of social processes (with logical relationships of conditioning and consecutive outcomes), as well as on the overall biographical structuring of the life course (with the process-logical shaping of general forms of social and socio-biographical processes). And, of course, in looking at those "process-logical" or "real-logical" relationships of evolving process structures – the old Chicago sociologists would use the term "natural history" (of social or life-historical processes) – you are very much concerned with formal text and language phenomena and their process-logical relationships in the ongoing autobiographical *ex tempore* narration. I would argue that even with the latest advancements in computer analysis, it may not be possible to capture all the essential aspects of text-formal expressions related to single-case social and biographical development when you use such programs.

Actually, we would have to find out about it – that means the step-by-step handling of the computerised text analysis – in an empirical research process. This would be similar to Harold Garfinkel's work studies on scientific research. In terms of biographical analysis, if we talk about the basic theoretical thinking about it and about the general methodology, my focus has been on the formal structures of autobiographical rendering – on all the textual phenomena of ordering practices, on the one hand, and phenomena of textual disorder, or even chaos, on the other. Complex background constructions are fascinating ordering devices of chaos in dealing with unexpectedness, dissolution of everyday order, enigmatic creativity, and overwhelming suffering in life courses. And I don't see that these textual and linguistic phenomena have been adequately addressed by computer analysis up to

now. I don't even know if today, the developers of computer analysis programs are sufficiently aware that there is this knowledge about the formal structures of biography (including orderly and disorderly phenomena) and biographical work. A work-study approach to the practices of using computer programs in qualitative research should focus on phenomena of textual order and disorder.

Anyway, we would need to explore this through empirical research. Yeah, this is what I can say right now about it. Hopefully, somebody will do this type of qualitative research on epistemic work steps in biographical analysis using special computer programs for this purpose. Perhaps I am too old to accomplish this (there are still other "construction sites" waiting for me). But a younger person – together with a specialist in empirical studies of scientific work – should do this.

KK: Thank you very much. Marek Czyżewski – what is your opinion?

MC: I'll try to comment in more detail on the issue I raised previously. But first, I think I should stress very strongly that I'm not interested in disqualifying interpretive biographical research at all. What I am really interested in would be a kind of, let's say, a kind of intermediary work between interpretive biographical research and other perspectives, especially poststructural and postmodern ones.

However, having said that, I wouldn't go so far as to suggest that some of the methodological assumptions of the autobiographical narrative interview method should be modified. Still, I would say that some of these assumptions could remain open for discussion instead of being taken for granted and effectively forgotten. The incentive for a constant self-critical methodological attitude may come from taking the perspective of anti-foundationalism or some other theoretical sources as well. But it may come from simple common sense considerations, too.

Let me mention some of the points that hopefully may foster a productive discussion about the real outcomes of methodological practices in interpretive biographical research. First, it seems indisputable that the biographical experience that "we consider crucial to our definition of self is always decided in retrospect."[4]. If I may quote more from Keith Moxey, a rather subversive historian of art: "The Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* [in English: afterwardness or retroaction] suggests that what our memories call experience is subject to a continual process of change, as those memories are recalled in the ever-changing circumstances of the present." If this is the case, the autobiographical rendering or autobiographical narrative interview conducted with the same person at different stages of their life is likely to yield different images of structures of this person's biographical

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[4]   Keith Moxey. 2001. *The practice of persuasion. Paradox and power in art history*. Ithaca, NY, London: Cornell University Press; pp. 135; in reference to Joan Scott.

experience. It's quite a commonsense idea, but I think it's also indispensable to be confronted with such observation.

Secondly, even when an autobiographical narrative is produced *ex tempore*, that is, without preparation, it still relies on the cultural resources that the narrator or person narrating has at their disposal. We do not need to invoke the late Wittgenstein's rejection of private language to recognise that autobiographical narratives are shaped by interpretation patterns of that narrators are able to mobilise when recounting past events and experiences. This raises a familiar and, to some extent, hackneyed question: What do we get from an autobiographical narrative interview – the picture of the *then*-lived biographical experience or a current life story? Or, moving beyond this "either-or" question: Do we really have sufficient analytical means to separate the components of the *then* biographical experience from the components of the current life story? And in the framework of this question, it seems plausible that different people may produce similar life stories in their autobiographical narrative interviews.

There is a third, anti-foundationally inspired point. For the original sound of the politicised version of the anti-foundational perspective, let me just quote again from the old paper by Joan W. Scott with the title *The evidence of experience*[5]: "It [the word «experience»] serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge that is «unassailable». Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyse its operations, and to redefine its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of «experience» and on the politics of its construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward. It is always contested, and always therefore political."

The fourth and final point is this: Classical ethnomethodological conversation analysis is definitely at odds with the politicization of social research, with poststructural and postmodern theorizing, as well as with discourse analysis. However, it is within classical conversation analysis that we can observe a true "anti-foundational" mindset regarding the status of the individual. Here's the original conversation analytic wording: "we […] refer to persons not as standing outside the discourse, but […] as found and oriented to in the conversation itself. We consider persons as persons-in-the-talk, persons *as* talk, talk as constituent persons, or characterizations of (some) persons-for-the-present-purposes-of-the-conversation,

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[5]   Joan W. Scott. 1991. "The evidence of experience", op.cit.: 797.

as an eminently practical matter for the interlocutors. Persons are conversational productions that have conversational uses." This excerpt comes from an old paper by Rod Watson.[6]

So, these are the more detailed points that I think deserve consideration as we attempt to build a bridge or develop intermediary work between the divergent mindsets of interpretive biographical research and anti-foundationalist approaches.

KK: Okay, thank you very much. Gerhard Riemann or Fritz Schütze, would you like to comment on that?

FS: Okay, I can say a little bit about it, but maybe Gerhard would like to start.

GR: Marek raised important issues; I just want to refer to his first two points. I think it is obvious that the way in which narrators look back at their experiences and talk about them in retrospect is not frozen in time. Of course, their outlooks and presentations change. I totally agree with Marek. We have some data that can be compared from this point of view: narrative interviews that were conducted with the same speaker at different times. (However, it would be problematic from a research ethics perspective to conduct *large-scale* studies on this question. Such large-scale studies would have an experimental character. And how can a researcher credibly combine such an experiment with a genuine interest in the particularities of the other person's life history?) But when comparing such narratives that already exist and that were told at different times, it is possible to ask: What is changing? What remains stable? And I think that our kind of analysis has the virtue of facilitating the discovery of the same processual structures of a life-course and other social processes in interviews that were conducted at different times.

Of course, narrators' autobiographical theorizing, their kinds of evaluations and re-evaluations, what they emphasise and leave out – all of this can change, and sometimes it can change dramatically. In order to distinguish between the discovery of how a person's biographical experiences have unfolded over time vs. how they look at these experiences and at themselves in retrospect, one can resort to resources of the aforementioned analysis of argumentation. The discussion of such basic issues would benefit from a stronger focus on the empirical material and the methods of analysis used. In Germany, this discussion suffers from the fact that the same objections are raised again and again on the basis of a distorted

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[6]   Rod Watson. 1995. Some potentialities and pitfalls in the analysis of process and personal change in counselling and therapeutic interaction. In: *Professional and everyday discourse as behavior change. Towards a micro-analysis in psychotherapy process research.* J. Siegfried (ed.), 320. Norwood: Ablex.

or exaggerated interpretation of early methodological writings – without regard to the analytical work that is made visible in empirical studies. But maybe you would like to go on, Fritz.

FS: Okay. Of course, Marek used very elementary ideas, and listening to him, I felt that I should go back 30 years in order to tackle these basic questions again. In those days, for a certain time, I had to overcome serious epistemological doubts, but then I started to concentrate on analyzing the formal structure of *ex tempore* autobiographical narratives as some sort of empirical answer to these basic questions. And I just want to remind us of two or three very basic assumptions I then developed, and I feel justified in sharing them because I saw the empirical evidence for them. The autobiographical narrative interview shows the layering of biographical experiences, *Erfahrungsaufschichtung* in German. Maybe it is not the right translation. I have to think about it. And, of course, if you do an interview with the same informant one or two years later, then the layering of biographical experiences has become more complex, generally speaking, as you look at the general picture.

But of course, in the new interview, in the second autobiographical rendering, you can see the former layerings, too. I don't want to go too much into this idea of doing autobiographical narrative interviews several times with the same person. There are lots of additional difficulties, even ethical difficulties, connected with it (e.g., I felt that sometimes the second interview could cause disturbances in the basic layers of remembering one's biographical identity formation). But firstly, I would say that the *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering reveals the layerings of biographical experience which are, in one way or another, important for the informant who tells about it. It is the constant overall experiential framework of the biography incumbent, characterised by specific overall features. (I know that such terms like "biography incumbent" – in German: *Biographieträger* – sound awkward and weird, but I think they are necessary in order to sufficiently differentiate between important phenomena. The term "biography incumbent" refers to the continual identity of the persons (who tell their life histories) during their overall life course, although many features of their biographical identity constructions and the dominant process structures of their lives are changing. The "quality" or sort of identity of the biography incumbent must be differentiated from the "quality" or sort of identity of the actor and sufferer within the situations of the life history to be told. – Such differentiation of terms might be some sort

of deconstruction of abstract notions like "individual", "personal identity" and "subject".)[7]

And this brings me to the second assumption: biographical processes that are shown in *ex tempore* autobiographical narratives (produced in autobiographical narrative interviews) are also ordinary social processes like other social processes. Of course, they are mostly remembered as *past* events and personal involvements in those past events. (But even ongoing interactions and collective events carry the weight of past experiences that partially steer the present phases of ongoing events; however, we tend not to reflect on it or study it in qualitative social research.) And my basic understanding as a sociologist or social scientist is that we are basically studying social processes, not just reflective discourses with oneself. (Of course, the latter are also important as empirical phenomena with an impact on life courses) This naturalistic perspective might be seen, to a certain degree, as quite naïve. But this is the research perspective of the Chicago tradition of sociology, and we got a lot of results from this epistemic attitude of "realistic naïveté" when dealing with the interconnection and merger of biographical and social processes.

Thirdly, coming back to the various types of thematization and self-theorizing of one's own biographical identity as shown in *ex tempore* narratives, we are perfectly able today to differentiate between these self-theoretical concepts that autobiographical narrators develop in the course of their autobiographical rendering and the basic layering of biographical experiences through the detailed analysis of *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering – biographical experiences, which are partially, even predicatively, un-categorised or "unknown" (or: "seen but unnoticed" in the wording of Harold Garfinkel). The powerful methods we have today for examining the self-theorizing of the biography incumbent as a reflective self-identity might cause some additional analytical difficulties, but at the same time generate new empirical insights, since better than in former times we now can differentiate between the argumentative figures during the past and during the ongoing biographical work, as remembered or even just currently developed within the course of *ex tempore* autobiographic storytelling.

These analytical difficulties arise, but they are worthwhile to tackle, when trying to discern between the different argumentative structures in the course

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[7]   "Biography incumbent" and other basic-theoretical concepts are defined and empirically illustrated in: Fritz Schütze. 2009. "Biography analysis on the empirical base of autobiographical narratives: How to analyze autobiographical narrative interviews. Part one and two." *European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion* 1/2: 153–242, and 3/4: 5–77.

of past and of ongoing biographical work, whether remembered or currently unfolding within the course of *ex tempore* autobiographic storytelling. It is really possible to perform a circumspect empirical analysis of the different autobiographical self-thematizations and self-theorizing activities over the course of the life history up to the present of the *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering during the interview. One can accomplish it by combining some elementary research steps or epistemic activities of conversation analysis and the sequential analysis of ongoing empirical argumentation with all its "disorderliness" (in contrast to *idealised* argumentation as analysed by studies on logic and rhetoric). Although this combination of epistemic and methodical steps requires further development, one can observe some improvements in recent years.

KK: Okay, thank you very much. Before we move on to the next topic, perhaps someone would like to ask a question. Piotr Szenajch, there you go, I give you the floor.

PS: My name is Piotr Szenajch, from Łódź University. I wanted to comment on this tension between discourse analysis studies, which means the perspective of discourse studies, and the perspective of biographical studies. And I would like to remind all of us that there are other types of discourses and, respectively, other huge fields of discourse studies *apart* from these narratological and/or conversational *formal* approaches to the analysis of current public discourses. What I'm thinking of is, of course, post-Foucauldian discourse analysis in the tradition of Edward Said, Judith Butler, and so on. So, we are not only concerned with contemporary text forms in the media and their formal analysis. Rather, we are more interested in discourses as those massive old rivers of words and text practices, including their corporeal and material aspect, which is the material condition and the material content of them such as the condition and content of the penitentiary or psychiatric discourse, and so on. Then we can look at the life histories and life stories involved and/or their material substratum, and then we can analyse how the discourses and their material substrata influence those life histories, right? So, I agree with Fritz Schütze that it is an empirical question. And I'm also sympathetic to his lack of trust, perhaps, in how extensively and intensively public discourse shapes biographies. At the same time, I would say that autobiographical narrative interviewing is especially well suited to answer this empirical question because the researchers themselves control the moment of questioning and its thematic focusing on the research questions with all of their theoretical notions, right? They generally try to *minimise* imposing their own notions or interpretations onto the overall definition of the situation of the interview. It is from this methodical circumspectness and careful reservation that

we can start to reason about the biographical impact of public discourses and the theoretical notions within them. Through this methodological interviewing approach, we can discover which discourses guide an interviewee's thinking and how and in what way specific discourses influenced them.

What I'm saying is grounded in my interviews with contemporary artists. Remarkably, they vividly remembered and spontaneously described the biographical moments when the old discourses of modern art entered their lives in their childhood. Thus, it is a very interesting question for me about how those old discourses shape socialization and how they sediment into layers of biographical experiences, right? And how are they deposited within those layers of biographical remembrance, and how do they shape subjectivity, or build a person, as mentioned before? So, that was my comment.

KK: We have one question in the chat from Dariusz Kubinowski. I will read it: "In Polish human and social sciences, sociology, educational science, history, ethnography, etc., the following attitude of inquiry as a research method is increasingly popular. You are discussing the relationships between biographical studies and discourse analysis. My question to all panelists and the audience is, what do you think about the scholarly and scientific status of autoethnography in human and social sciences and its usefulness in constructing or producing valuable knowledge?". So, we have two questions, and perhaps you'd like to comment on them. One from Piotr Szenajch and another from Dariusz Kubinowski.

GR: If I understood it correctly, I could say something on the second comment. I myself feel uncomfortable with a lot of the writings of autoethnography, of researchers turning their most private experiences and inner states into data, of commenting on it, and of sharing all of this with the world. I also have the impression that some authors are somewhat careless in dealing with ethical issues (when, e.g., writing about painful personal relationships). Some of the articles I have read also appeared as writings in which the authors (at least partially) coped with personal problems, e.g., painful memories of family relationships. I think self-therapy and social science should be kept apart.

That said, I think it is very important in biographical research to be as transparent as possible about yourself as a researcher conducting the research. I always encouraged students to write their chapters on field research in a personal way, kind of like a research autobiography, in order to reveal to the reader how they worked on establishing trust, to convey the traps they had fallen into, to make visible how they became uneasy, how they solved certain problems and how they couldn't solve others. When being as personal or transparent as possible about these things, you contribute to new insights. I think it is a very sterile exercise

when you just present research experiences in a cookbook style: "You have to proceed in such and such and such a way. I have faithfully tried to follow these recipes and apologise for little deviations." You contribute to new insights when you are as explicit, personal, and self-critical about yourself as a researcher without (autoethnographically) turning your very private things, which have nothing to do with your research work, into something available for public consumption.

On the other hand, the open attitude of research-autobiographical writing regarding one's own research work with all its descriptions of wrong first assumptions of being astonished when discovering that they were misleading, of "mistakes at work" (in the sense of Everett Hughes), of being disappointed by reactions of powerful persons in the field etc., is really enlightening. But, of course, I also know that younger researchers, who are expected to demonstrate their mastery in their theses, might risk something by exposing their naïveté, their mistakes, and their vulnerability. (And, again, we have to remind ourselves that these recollections of "mistakes of research work" and their reflection are totally different from turning to the very private things, which have nothing to do with one's ongoing research.) I find it tiring and also self-destructive when you always have to carefully hide your own weaknesses in academic contexts. Nothing new emerges if you always have to pretend that you have always been able to manage your tasks effortlessly.

FS: I will start with the *second topic of autoethnography,* too, the question of Dariusz Kubinowski. For me, autoethnography is quite a useful instrument – or better, a productive attitude of open inquiry. But, first, you must always be aware that there is the permanent danger that the people in the research field you are dealing with will get forgotten because you are so focused on your own experiences as the ethnographer, which you feel you must take into account so intensively.

Secondly, I just want to mention another, more traditional understanding of autoethnography. I believe that, for example, the two famous articles of Alfred Schütz titled *The stranger* and *The homecomer* are, to a certain degree, a sort of autoethnography because in those famous articles, he was tacitly dealing with his own biographical experiences of establishing his life in a foreign country. However, what is important about Alfred Schütz's two famous articles is that he was dealing with his own experiences with the generalizing and abstractive attitude of a social philosopher. He had pondered how his personal experiences, as well as his own social-scientific categorization of them, would be comparable to the experiences of the vast numbers of other immigrant strangers and (visiting or permanent) homecomers. And, of course, he would develop a specific method

of not just adopting the natural attitude of everyday life as a stranger and home-comer. He also used the abstracting perspective of the phenomenological social scientist at the same time. (This dual epistemic attitude of Alfred Schütz's studies should be analysed more closely in the future.)

Alfred Schütz had an outstanding gift of abstractive observation. However, all social scientists encounter very interesting events in their lives, and they have to deal with them, which are "just ordinary affairs of everyday life" at first glance.

For example, if you, as a very old guy, are used to your old car, and then you are suddenly forced by your daughters to buy a new car, what will happen then? How would you deal with all these difficulties you would have with such an electronically highly advanced car – loaded with all these unknown electronic gadgets you have never seen before? Should you somehow learn about their features and finally use them effectively, or should you attempt to use your car without all these irritating gadgets? The latter is partially possible but will cause new difficulties for you. - In addition, to your astonishment, and totally unexpectedly, you experience the pain of farewell and a guilty conscience about parting from your old car, which was something like a cozy home and interaction partner, although you had never thought about it at all. Of course, this is – generally speaking – a common experience of the ordinary citizen within the everyday world using the terminology of Alfred Schütz.

On the other hand, you can start to use your own experiences as a starting point for qualitative social research to analyse your own and your fellow-citizens' experiences of being confronted with technology, which at the same time is very familiar and strange – especially to old people. What about the quasi-liveliness of such "home technology" and how to handle its new tasks if old stuff is skipped for new stuff – and on the condition that we ourselves are already very old?

Continuing with inquiries like that, you would use the abstracting perspective of the phenomenological social scientist while seeking, encountering, and observing everyday affairs in the existential world of mundane life. So, self-ethnographic observation, description, and analysis are relevant not only for the individual researcher but also for others. It is of ethnographic interest to search for, narrate, describe and abstractly analyse the difficulties of how to deal with new technical stuff, whose forerunners we were familiar with, and how we would handle and tackle their difficulties.

You always start with self-ethnographic experiences and observations of your own everyday encounters, which may become disorienting or strange due to various technical or – generally speaking – heteronomous reasons. And, of course, your own personal experiences and feelings of these types of strangeness and

your personal reactions to them are pivotal for the management of your everyday life, and you start to ask: is this similar in the lives of other people?

This latter question is extremely important: While engaging in self-observations, it is essential not to overlook the experiences of fellow citizens – including individuals from culturally different backgrounds – as they confront similar perplexing challenges. And then you start to compare your experiences with those of others and, in addition, to abstract your experiences and those of others by generalizing categorization. Thus, in this sense, I would say that autoethnography is worthwhile even for very deep-digging social science. My example was just from my own society and my own social milieu. Examining strange situations in other milieus and societies might even lead to richer insights.

Now to the first question of the relationship between discourse and autobiographical narrative interviewing that was raised – the one from Piotr Szenajch. I'm not sure if I understood everything correctly. This is my preliminary understanding: here is you, the young researcher, and in your research, you deal with artists by conducting autobiographical narrative interviews with them. I really would like to look at and listen to what you laid down more closely and understand it better. However, it intrigues me to say something that might be quite to the point if we think about the relationship between discourse and autobiographical images of the self, the theoretical self of the narrating informant.

My *first remark* refers to the people you would have to deal with in biographical analysis. Of course, there are all these people who are interviewed in the general framework of oral history done by modern historians. Basically, they would see themselves as *historical-contemporary witnesses*. Almost all of these people are eager to be interviewed, and of course, they have often thought about their life history and how to present it. They tend to focus thematically on what they have to say and what they *have a responsibility* to reveal. They have contemplated the impact of history on their own life and how this would shape their personal identity. Encountering these contemporary witnesses as a researcher and interviewer, of course, you will find that any type of relationship between their biographical experiences and public discourses and, more closely, the *various layers* of public discourse that would shape their personal outlook as contemporary witnesses is very important as objects of study; these relationships warrant careful methodological examination.

Secondly, there are all types of artists and writers in their personal and milieu-typical biographical development. Of course, they work in special social worlds, of artists and writers. In these special social worlds, there are lots of discourses regarding the work of creating art or writing and regarding the style of life and

milieu of living that fits the art work or literary work. These discourses of special social worlds of professional art work or professional writing work shape the lives of artists and writers to a considerable extent.

Therefore, as a working artist, you would compare what you yourself did in your artwork with the work of other artists. You would ask yourself what could be creatively new in your own work or what could be seen as weaker from the perspectives of other artists, art critics, and public connoisseurs of art (the public auditorium). Thus, in the life and work of artists and writers, these social-world discourses, including the discourses of art critics, literary criticism, and even public reception, can be of great importance and very worthwhile to analyse.

As Piotr Szenajch put it, researchers minimise their own theoretical notions as interviewers and researchers in the course of conducting autobiographical-narrative interviews. Thus, the informant would not tend to take over the theoretical notions of the interviewer/researcher; and, therefore, the interview transcripts mostly reveal, in addition to very personally developed theoretical notions by the informant, elements of topics, notions and theorems that are shared or disputed in public discourses (as seen and understood by the informant). The informant may take over aspects of these discourses while also offering adaptive and productive reactions to central notions. Additionally, she or he may introduce personal critiques of them and new topics starting from these critiques. Moreover, there are elements of theoretical biographical orientation that the informant develops independently of public discourses. On the other hand, – as Piotr Szenajch alluded to –, some theoretical notions and biographical orientations were developed and worked out by the informant in confrontation with old public discourses of modern art that entered the life of the present-day artist and informant in her or his childhood and adolescence, and they, then, turned into "second order" quite personal theoretical notions of biographical guidance of one's own art work and life as artist.

As Gerhard Riemann noted, we had not anticipated – nor envisioned – doing biographical analysis in our community study. Nevertheless, we had to start biographical analysis in our community study since the interviews with community politicians about the collective history of the merger of local communities were soaked with autobiographical narration of personal suffering and unexpected personal development. This was something which we had not expected and which we originally found difficult to analyse.

Therefore, we first had to find out how *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering works (we did not know this, and nor did other sociologists in Germany in those days). However, when we started to work on biography proper, we constantly encountered the theories and bold assumptions of literary scholars, literary critics

and researchers focused on literary storytelling, especially autobiographical storytelling, regarding the flexibility of personal identity construction. They believed that you could do it one way on one day and differently on another and that the development of your own personal identity would be solely shaped by the ongoing self-theorizing within and outside general discourse. I think that this notions of extreme flexibility and discourse-sensitivity of the construction of your own self-identity is not sound when looking at empirical data revealed in autobiographical narrative interview.

[*The following paragraphs have been added by Fritz Schütze after the panel discussion:*] Today, some theorists of conversation analysis would adopt similar positions, positing that biographical identification is part of the positioning within the sequential order of conversation. When we started to develop our type of biographical analysis, these more recent notions of conversation analysis were not known at all, although there were similar ideas in literary studies. Nevertheless, we gained important insights from Harvey Sacks's type of conversation analysis. We learned the precision of analysis from him for our type of interaction analysis, guided by his notions of local production of the order of speech and interaction, as well as of the enormous importance of the sequential order of conversation. We applied this meticulous, analytical approach to our analysis of *ex tempore* autobiographical narratives based on personal experiences. (I told about the significance of Harvey Sacks for our type of analysis in an autobiographical narrative interview which was conducted with me in the Hanse-Wissenschafts-kolleg, Institute for Advanced Study.[8])

I would like to say again: I don't believe in the assumption that the construction of personal identity – as produced in *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering – is totally flexible in its grit structure of several biographical process forms and their interfaces. By using the term "grit structure," I would like to refer to the complex relationships between (the positionings, impact powers and potentials of) the four basic biographical process structures: biographical action schemes, trajectories of suffering, institutional expectation patterns and creative metamorphoses. The biographical grit structure is the process-logical base of the overall biographical structuring that shapes single life courses and is – at least partially – known to the biography incumbents. The sequential and/or simultaneous occurrences

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8   This interview was published in: Detlef Garz, Klaus Kraimer, Gerhard Riemann (eds.). 2019. *Im Gespräch mit Ulrich Oevermann und Fritz Schütze. Einblicke in die biographischen Voraussetzungen, die Entstehungsgeschichte und die Gestalt rekonstruktiver Forschungsansätze.* Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

of the four basic biographical process structures and their other process-logical relationships are deeply ingrained in each single life course and partially not changeable. The basic biographical grit structure also shapes the autobiographical *ex tempore* rendering and reproduces the mentioned basic relationships of biographical process structures on the textual level of autobiographical rendering. Based on the basic theoretical notion of biographical grit structure, I would like to state that I don't believe that the elementary shape or the basic grit structure of one's own autobiographical rendering can be flexibly changed in reaction to all types of ongoing interactions and discourse situations. I think, there's much more stability in one's own autobiographical experiences and recollections; more precisely, there is a considerable stability in the layering of biographical experiences that can potentially be re-activated in *ex tempore* biographical narration.

In interdisciplinary discussions today, the basic assumptions about the flexibility or stability of the basic grit structure of the interplay between the four biographical process structures as revealed in autobiographical rendering appear to be shifting once again. Many psychotherapists deal with the stable, often even tragic, grit of biographical process structures and their interfaces, exploring how to do biographical work to address these issues. Some literary scholars are also beginning to realise the tragic stability of the kernel structure of life courses and of its recollection in autobiographical *ex tempore* narration ("récits de vie" or *Lebenserzählungen* – as it was aptly named by Daniel Bertaux).

I maintain quite regular contact with some literary scholars and even more with psychotherapists, and we share the basic assumption that there is some sort of biographical stability as rooted in biographical process structures (trajectories of suffering, biographical action schemes etc.) and their interconnections and combinations. We also discuss the importance of biographical work in order to deal with the often quite difficult mutual impacts of the four basic biographical process structures within an overall biographical grit structure. There seems to be a new sensitivity for the "inertia" of biographical processes and their overpowering character. However, in sociology and in conversation analysis, the earlier convictions held by literary scientists of 40 to 50 years ago regarding the flexibility of autobiographical *ex tempore* rendering are still very much at the forefront and seem to become even stronger. Nevertheless, I can only state that I'm not personally impressed by the latter; in many important respects, it is a wrong conception.

KK: Thank you very much. And Marek Czyżewski?

MC: Let me just address two points. First, I would like to come back for a moment to the discussion about one of the four points I made about methodological assumptions. Gerhard and Fritz were talking about the empirical question of

what is changing in autobiographical renderings of the same people collected at different times. My association goes back to the early 90s when a lot of biographical interviews were conducted with young Polish business owners. And in terms of the analytical apparatus developed by Fritz and Gerhard, there was a dominant structure of a biographical scheme that was evident in those narratives. I could imagine that if we interviewed the same people, let's say 30 years later, they would probably confirm the idea of *Erfahrungsaufschichtung* (of layerings of biographical experience). And they probably would say: "Okay, in the early 90s, I was optimistic. I thought I could change the world and my life, and so on, but now I can see how much suffering it was connected with that time and how much I lost in my life during that stage of my life".

But I think that still, this is *just one kind* of narrative that could develop such a self-reflexive attitude and reveal layerings in their autobiographical rendering. But what about, let's say, unreflexive narratives? I mean, people who would deliver the narrative following the biographical scheme of the early 90s, but 30 years later, they would not refer to the former rendering and talk only about trajectorial experiences. This raises the question: How do we render the "then" biographical experience? It is possible there are cases where no clear additional layerings of biographical experience occur, where, instead, there is a change of the very basic biographical structure of experience.

Another point refers to autoethnography. I attended all three extended sessions on autoethnography organised by another section of the Polish Sociological Association, and if we had time, I would continue to express my reservations about this approach until tomorrow morning. But I will just limit myself to four short points. Paradoxically, my reservations seem to be the basic sources of fascination for autoethnography among its followers.

The first reservation is that, in contrast to interpretive biographical research, which is focused on hearing the other (moreover, its mission, if you like, consists of hearing the other), autoethnography is fascinated with hearing oneself. So, the very basic moral aspect of interpretive biographical research gets lost. This aspect, rooted in the ethics of Lévinas, emphasises the subordination of the first speaker towards the person sharing a story and promotes the ethics of openness toward the lesson one gets from that other person. This is totally lost in autoethnography.

Another reservation that, paradoxically, seems to be a source of fascination for the followers of autoethnography is its status as a cultural phenomenon. Contrary to claims made by the proponents of autoethnography, this approach does not provide genuine insights into individual, private experiences. Instead, I would say it aligns more closely with mainstream cultural development and the

prevailing tendencies in current popular media culture. As Foucault observed as far back as the early 80s: "Western man has become a confessing animal". In these terms, autoethnography is just a tiny part of the broader spectrum of confessional practices within the different aspects of contemporary social life.

The third reservation is that, if I may say so, the followers of autoethnography probably didn't read Theodor Adorno's *The jargon of authenticity*. If they did, they would probably understand that they are practicing their own version of this jargon. The fourth and last reservation is that, in contrast to interpretive biographical research, especially to the approach developed by Fritz and Gerhard, autoethnography lacks any comparably advanced, strict, and formal apparatus of data analysis.

KK: I will give the voice again to our three panelists. Would you like to add any comments on what has been just discussed? This will conclude our meeting because I don't think we have the time to introduce other issues.

GR: I agree with what Marek Czyżewski just said about autoethnography. These are also my impressions from reading some of this literature. I just want to refer to one of his remarks when he said, "autoethnography is fascinated with hearing oneself. So, the very basic moral aspect of interpretive biographical research gets lost." I agree, but I want to make the point that there is a difference between being absorbed by hearing yourself, on the one hand, and sharing with others how you hear yourself, on the other.

Let's think about the latter phenomenon. When I worked with students of social work, I encouraged them to write self-reflective ethnographic field notes on their own work experience. (Later on, I also asked them to freely narrate important or difficult work experiences, to transcribe their narratives, and to analyse them together with others. I am not dealing with these oral narratives here; I want to stick with the fieldnotes.) The field notes most often dealt with experiences during internships: when they were "greenhorns", when they were experiencing something new, and were wondering about what happened in certain situations that they had not known before. And I encouraged them to write in the first person, to explicate their inner state at different biographical times (at the time of the events, which they recalled in their fieldnotes, and at the time of the writing), how they felt, what worried them, how they were insecure or confused, and so on. And I created situations in which they shared and discussed these fieldnotes with each other, e.g., regarding how much they were able to listen to the voice of others, such as the people whom they had met as clients. The idea was to write down, share, discuss, and analyse such fieldnotes in the context of work, in the context of learning to become a professional. It was also a matter of discovering blind spots, hang-ups, or dispositions to be superficial in trying

to understand, for instance, difficult people, strangers, and so on. I think it was also a way of being very personal, but – in contrast to dominant trends in auto-ethnography – in being so very personal in your writings that you also reveal how much you are attuned to the other.

KK: Thank you. We have one more question from Sylwia Męcfal.

SM: Okay, thank you. Thank you for the discussion. I'm glad that you made it possible for a broader audience to join in. It was a pleasure. But I have one comment and one question. A comment about autoethnography during the pandemic. And also, the return of the biographical method, also during the pandemic. By the biographical method, I mean the diaries. Together with my colleagues, we conducted a study with Polish qualitative researchers about their research and ethical decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we also analysed the literature on the subject. And it turned out that in the Anglo-Saxon literature and in Anglo-Saxon research, researchers were turning to autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography as a method of research during the difficult times when research with co-present social contact was almost impossible. And in Poland, one of the most popular methods was diaries, a very classical kind of biographical research. There were in Poland quite a few competitions for diaries about the abortion protests, the Women's Strike, the experience of the pandemic itself, and so on. There were three or even four competitions about that. This raises an interesting question about how the research methods worked in those days. Therefore, my question would be: What do you think? How do you think biographical research or the autobiographical narrative method should change during polycrisis times? When we have the experience of multiple crises, the crisis might be experienced in a completely different way. Therefore, while one crisis might be traumatic, another might build a person. Fritz Schütze mentioned the layers of analysis, but I am interested in your opinion about whether or not the method should change or adapt to these new, polycrisis times. Thank you very much.

KK: Thank you, and I propose we finish with this question.

FS: Yeah, I'm not really prepared to answer this question because I have never really given it much thought. But basically, I would assume that the methodological approach, with all the techniques involved, would be basically the same. We will find lots of autobiographies with the dominance of the biographical process structure of trajectory of suffering and misguided biographical action schemes. On the other hand, if we were to imagine that there are several different crisis experiences with various experiential features during the same time or period, we would have to find out that the topicalization or the thematization in the autobiographical rendering could become more complex. And it would be very

interesting for me to think about this and to study it. However, I cannot give you any really helpful comment. But I would assume that this development of types of trajectories (and even of *collective* trajectories and of *simultaneous* collective trajectories with their accumulated peculiar impacts) and how to deal with them would reveal quite complicated narrative structures. And I would be very intrigued to deal with them analytically.

Probably we had almost the same mass occurrences of crises at the end of the People's Republic of Poland and at the end of the German Democratic Republic. Therefor let me mention the GDR situation, which I know better than the collective situation at the end of the People's Republic of Poland. Regarding East Germany, in those days, you could see a variety of trajectories of suffering emerging. You could even formally encounter (and analytically differentiate) them with lots of background constructions and other phenomena of disorders of presentation on the textual level. It sounds some bit cynical: these formal "disorderly" phenomena of autobiographical *ex tempore* rendering could really be a joy for the text analyser[9]. Sorry, when I say "joy," it was, of course, very difficult for the informants to live through these new dangerous biographical experiences, which often resulted in significant suffering. I just meant "joy" in terms of doing the difficult analysis of such complex autobiographical narratives using textual structures of narrative disorder (for example, complex background constructions or split codas at the end of the main storyline). We did this type of analysis with our GDR material of autobiographical narrative interviews in quite an elaborate way. The basic insight is that overwhelming biographical experiences in times of rapid collective-historical change result in conspicuous phenomena of "disorderliness" of *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering, which reveal deeper layers of the distorted basic relationship between the individual identity of the biography incumbent, on the one hand, and the overall collective societal formation (Ger. *Gesellschaftsformation*) that is in total transformation, on the other.

[*The following paragraphs have been added by Fritz Schütze after the panel discussion:*] Regarding the interesting research projects of Sylwia Męcfal, I have

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[9]   Bibliographical information regarding my more recently published articles on topics such as "narrative disorderliness", "laconic narration", "social collectivities without a we-shaped orientation structure", "heteronomous system conditions", etc., can be found in: Fritz Schütze. 2024. Eine soziolinguistische Argumentation zur Verbindung von mikro- und makroanalytischer Betrachtungsweise in der Biographieanalyse der rekonstruktiv-qualitativen Sozialforschung – unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der vorgestellten Wir-Gemeinschaft der Nation und der auf sie gerichteten rechtsextremistischen Deformationsversuche. In: *Autobiographien von überzeugten Nazis und von vertriebenen Deutschen. Neue Ansichten auf zwei Forschungsprojekte aus den 1930er Jahren.* D. Garz, N. Welter (eds.), 21-82. Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich

to add that collecting and analysing written diaries is a classical method of Polish biographical analysis, one of the most highly esteemed cultures in qualitative social research. Most of us in Germany are not as used to working with *written* autobiographical materials as the Polish tradition has always done. We would have to learn how experiences of suffering, disorientation, fading-out and/or loneliness are expressed in *written* autobiographical texts. And, of course, it is absolutely not the case – as most qualitative sociologists in Germany would tend to believe – that oral *ex tempore* autobiographical narratives always have a higher text validity (in terms of expressing biographically experienced social processes without the various concealing instruments of refurbishing, smoothing and harmonizing that can be utilised in *writing* autobiographical statements) than autobiographical written texts. Such a quick assumption is not correct when writers exhibit a strong writing ability. It would be a joy to look at these written diary materials of biographical experiences.

Finally, I just want to respond to Marek Czyżewski regarding what he said about the research he and other researchers in Poland did in the early 90s and about what would happen if one could interview the same people again. From my perspective, it would be epistemically and theoretically very worthwhile. I know that I'm almost too old to personally follow it up or even to be part of such a research project; alas, I'm a Methuselah, but it would be extremely worthwhile. But not being able to wait for the outcome of such a "repeat project" in terms of new interviews and their translation, I anticipate that it would be, as Marek Czyżewski said, very interesting, that people would reflect on their previously optimistic outlook on life in the early 90s, and how they would express their disappointment later on.

On the other hand, there would be people who would not mention disappointment and personal struggles at all; as "laconic narrators" they would not draw on historical-political circumstances in general self-theorizing terms. However, I'm sure that in the second interviews thirty years later, we would find reported phenomena and textual expressions that in some sense hint to mechanisms, which originally influenced the layering of biographical experiences during the course of the life histories of those "laconic" people, too, who had not given elaborate commentaries to the structural conditions and the impact of them on their auto-biographical rendering in the early 90s. There are certain formal phenomena of laconic rendering that I dealt with in an article by focusing on what they reveal about the experiences in the informants' lives at the time.

In addition, I would like to refer to what I have always called "heteronomous system conditions." Those societal phenomena (for example the incremental

devaluation of money or the slowly increasing shortage of work positions) cannot be experiences in terms of social identities, the biography incumbent can intentionally deal with as a sort of co-interactant. If you were to attempt to analyse heteronomous system phenomena, you must understand that they have no "we and I" identity structures with their typical textual shapes, as you would regularly find them in certain interview passages of the narrative or argumentative text sort; they take specific positions and functions as bodily or abstract co-interactants within the overall structure of the life story during the course of *ex tempore* autobiographical rendering. By contrast, the occurrence of heteronomous system phenomena is quite differently seen in *ex tempore* autobiographical renderings - for example, dealing with the change of time through abstract comparisons as "then" and "now"; doing hidden argumentative positioning, such as "what I was encountering over the last few years"; or doing framing with *verba sentiendi,* such as "what is nagging me". In recent years, I again started to deal with heteronomous system conditions as I did 50 years ago.

I would be happy to do such an analysis, or at least to discuss it, with Marek Czyżewski in the near future. Thank you very much.

KK: Marek Czyżewski, would you like to take the floor?

MC: Okay, let me just briefly refer to the question raised by Sylwia. I can see the connection between this question and the issue that we won't discuss for time reasons; I mean the ethical aspects of interpretive biographical research and ethical aspects of anti-foundational perspectives. If there is a visible trajectorial experience in autobiographical renderings, as we might have sometimes, or even quite often, there are some elements of prejudice and theories that are mobilised within such narratives. And in this context, I would say that an anti-foundational perspective does not necessarily exclude moral argumentation. A moral evaluation of the narrative is possible via critical discourse analysis of phenomena such as prejudice and conspiracy theorizing, to name a few examples. So, I think it's not valid to say that only classical interpretive biographical research is connected with the possibility of morally evaluating the narrative. If we take an anonymous perspective, it is also possible, but not in terms of a person and their attitudes, but in terms of speech patterns.

KK: Thank you very much. I'm sorry, we have to finish. I would like to thank our guests, Professor Fritz Schütze, Professor Gerhard Riemann, and Professor Marek Czyżewski, for taking part in this discussion. I could read in the chat that at least some of the online audience expressed satisfaction and found the discussion interesting. So, thank you very much for your participation via the Internet and also here in Łódź. I hope we will have another opportunity to meet again.