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Biography and society in transnational Europe and beyond
An Introduction

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1. The beginnings of biographical research

During the past forty years, biographical research, which had significantly declined in post-war sociological inquiry, has gained new visibility and has become an established field within social scientific research. This revival has allowed biographical analysis to expand its scope and move beyond disciplinary borders while exploring new research perspectives and innovative methods, integrating narrative, ethnographic, visual and discourse approaches. The core question of biographical approaches aims at understanding how changes in society are connected with varying organisations of the self and family, work life, gender and generational relations, as well as institutional settings. Thus, biographical analysis has found one of its preferred research fields in social phenomena such as migration, also confronted with increasingly globalised societies, and new forms of communication.

In this regard, it can be recalled that biographical research started in sociology at the turn of the 20th century with the famous study of William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki on the
The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918-1920), which was formative for the evolving Chicago School at that time and destined to become a classic in sociology. Their investigation, informed by the assumption that understanding social reality requires a profound knowledge of how people experience and interpret their social reality, was largely based on biographical data gathered from Polish immigrants living in Chicago, but also on materials collected in Poland, the country of origin of most immigrants living there at that time. It started – so the legend – with a garbage bag that was thrown out of a window and almost hit Thomas while walking down a street in Chicago. Fallen apart, a letter written by a Polish immigrant appeared from it: Thomas bent, took the letter and got intrigued by reading it. Consequently, together with his colleague Znaniecki, they started to gather as much biographical material as possible – such as so-called bowing letters, documents from different institutions, and a 300 pages long «life record» written by Wladek Wiszmewski, a Polish émigré to Chicago – and developed a study which can be regarded as the first approach to address transnational communication under the condition of a far and almost unbridgeable distance (see also Stanley 2010).

Core aspects of that study still remain relevant up to today. Thomas and Znaniecki pursued a process-oriented research in which decisions on the importance of facts, aspects or correlations for the topic researched were made in the course of the investigation and based on empirical findings. They did not decide in advance whether migration was primarily determined by the economic situation or by political, historical, biographical and other contexts. Instead, they tried to grasp the complexity of intertwined situations and processes in which migration constituted itself as a context of action.

This path was followed by the Chicago School in investigations like Clifford R. Shaw’s The Jack-Roller (1930) or William F. Whyte’s Street Corner Society (1943) where single case studies were carried out as part of community studies. Their perspective emphasised that individuals should not be merely regarded as victims of objective social processes but also as actors, albeit struggling ones, who try to cope with difficult situations by seeking and developing solutions that do not appear as such at first glance. Furthermore, these studies implied a socio-political dimension, since, by exerting political pressure, they were calling for
a mitigation of the consequences of rapid and explosive growth of the city that had resulted in precarious living conditions for many people, segregation and general social tension. Pragmatism and symbolic interactionism were the main theoretical references providing the rationale of turning to action patterns and interaction in everyday life (Peirce 1997; Mead 1934; Blumer 1969).

After World War II the kind of biographical analysis first introduced by Thomas and Znaniecki almost vanished from mainstream sociology, which was then largely dominated by Parsons’ grand theory and quantitative methodologies. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the ground-breaking impulses launched by the various generations of the Chicago School were taken up again more systematically both in methodological discussions and in particular in the field of biographical research which was actively developing at that time (see, amongst others, Bertaux 1981; Kohli 1981; Bertaux, Kohli 1984; Macioti 1985; Denzin 1989; Fischer-Rosenthal 2000; Chamberlayne et al. 2000; Miller 2005; Rosenthal 2004; Breckner 2015). Principles such as entering the social field of interest without any pre-formulated hypotheses, as well as the principle of empirically grounded qualitative case-reconstruction based on abduction, in contrast to theory-driven approaches based on deduction, find their roots here. In addition, it was the study of Thomas and Znaniecki that set standards in terms of understanding the complexity of migration processes, standards that have remained pioneering and instrumental up until today. Finally, yet importantly, it demonstrates an empirical reconstruction of a context, delineating the way in which individual, familial and generational orientations are interwoven with social and historical processes – a path which was destined to be further explored in the following years, given the opportunities and challenges posed by an increasing transnationalisation of people’s lives and the emergence of transcultural spaces and practices.

2. Lessons from the past

As already became clear in the early beginnings of biographical research in sociology, processes of making sense of one’s life are particularly intense in times of profound social change, when institutionalised ways of interpreting and orienting oneself in social
situations and the world are challenged and new ones must be built. The question of how societal changes are connected with an altering organisation of the self, together with processes of reorganising family and work life, gender as well as generational relations within changing institutional settings, has become more and more crucial in biographical research in the last decades. In this respect, biography may be regarded as a field in which social processes of continuation and transformation take place constantly, while the analysis of doing biography, in taking the perspective of the actors, has to consider both explicit as well as implicit practices (Breckner 2015). Therefore, biography constitutes one of the most significant areas of interference between institutionalised social reality and the experiential world of individuals.

This new awareness has been reflected in a number of studies which have made wide use of biographical methods during the past few decades. Although it is beyond the scope of this introduction to provide a literature review on the topic, some of these pieces of research shall be remembered briefly, especially for their ground-breaking impact. One of these studies was carried out by Daniel Bertaux in the 1980s on the development of bakeries in France, which was based on individual as well as family interviews, and which emphasised the connection between family histories and processes of generational transmission (Bertaux, Bertaux-Wiame 1981). These work-centred studies – that had been already carried out since the early 1960s by both sociologists and oral historians in Italy (Montaldi 1960; 1961; Passerini 1978) – were later extended by investigations on class positioning and social mobility (Bertaux, Thompson 1997). Simultaneously, biographical researchers were taking up concepts of life course, showing that, in modernity, «normal biographies» (Kohli 2007) are characterised by a structuring around work life, framed by the preparation period of education and the subsequent period of retirement. It became apparent that the structure of a «normal biography» was oriented towards a male breadwinner model, which increasingly was criticised from a feminist point of view. It also became apparent that for migrants to achieve such a «normal biography» was and still is quite difficult in case the migration takes place after they had already established a professional career in the country of departure. Thus, the biographical phase of entry in the receiving society is crucial in terms of the possibilities to achieve a «normal biography» and for the structuring
of the migrants’ further life, especially in terms of resources and opportunities. When, for example in times of crisis, in the lives of a generation of young adults the entry into the labour market is extremely shaky or hardly happening at all, the difficulties in achieving a «normal work biography» become even more visible. The new forms of intra-European mobility processes that emerged in the past few years and the impact economic crisis has on the decision to leave one’s country of residence as well as, even more crucially, on people’s whole lives, clearly become apparent in three Spanish young migrants’ biographies that were analysed by Me-Linh Riemann in her article in this issue. Their experiences as well as their biographical patterns differ, the latter ranging from struggles for autonomy to attempts to escape suffering and achieve professional recognition as well as better working conditions. But in all the three biographical experiences the role social macro-structures and collective processes play in shaping biographical developments becomes evident.

More structurally oriented approaches in biographical research were complemented by concepts based in social constructivism and in newly emerging narration theories (Ricoeur 1984; Bruner 1987; Kohler Riessman 2008; Stanley, Temple 2008; Andrews et al. 2013). The life story and other biographical documents were not considered a mere mirror or even copy of a life taking place independently from its articulation. Instead, telling or narrating a life is regarded as the realm in which the formation of a biography actually takes place. While narrating, experiences of different kinds are related to each other and formed in a way that a biography can be constructed for oneself as well as conveyed to others in a meaningful way (Schütze 1983; Jedlowski 2009). Therefore, specific ways of narrating, linguistic structures and cultural patterns became the topic of interest. Here, essential methodological foundations took place with the development of the narrative interview (Schütze 2008). Inspired by the work of Anselm Strauss (Strauss, Glaser 1970; Strauss 1993), Fritz Schütze created the concept of «biographical process structures» (Schütze 2008, 188-202) and, together with Gerhard Riemann, the concept of «trajectory» (Riemann, Schütze 1990) with which processes of suffering could be grasped. These terms refer to the processual character of biographies and action schemes, which can get out of control, but can also be steered into a new direction at turning points. Through these concepts it was possible to un-
derstand and reconstruct how past, present and future perspectives are interrelated while communicating one’s life, as well as to detect the turning points during which a change in viewing and recounting one’s life occurred. Thus, a biography cannot be considered a static representation of what happened similar to a tape-recorder. Instead, by detailed analysis we can see how the interrelation between past, present and future is performed in telling one’s life in a specific setting and in a specific way. The fact that we talk about our experiences from different points of view that have developed in different spheres and periods of life does not indicate that our accounts are unreliable (Fischer-Rosenthal 1989). Rather, it is a manifestation of the fact that the recollection of an event or of specific circumstances is always embedded in a specific context of meaning and social setting. An experience develops at the time an event takes place and is reworked in the light of the later consequences during its retrospective recollection and account.

Following these lines of thought and based on phenomenology and Gestalt theory, Gabriele Rosenthal further theorised the relation between the lived-through and the narrated life, as she explains in the interview concluding this issue. Her main idea is that we construct our biography from a present perspective in which our lived-through experiences come up as more or less important in certain thematic fields. Relevant aspects are separated from irrelevant ones, those that can be communicated in a certain context from those that cannot. However, we cannot completely invent a life story but have to relate it, by telling it, to our lived-through experiences. Thus, the life story is closely interrelated with the lived-through life history, and this interrelation has to be systematically reconstructed and understood along the available biographical data as well as the thematic structure of the account (Rosenthal 1993). In this regard, we can say that the perspective from which something is told is the result of a biography, in which social and personal contexts as well as experiences have created specific patterns of perception and attitudes of action that shape an individual’s life. Furthermore, these general perspectives are bound to change in the course of our lives.
3. Migration and transnational biographies

Although biographical research started its uneven path at the beginning of the XX century by focussing on migration processes, subsequent research in the field of migration has largely abandoned this method and privileged a quantitative approach. Migrants’ flows, push and pull factors, structural conflicts and changes in immigrant societies, as well as social stratification connected mainly to work migration, became the primary topics of interest.

It was then mostly in connection with the criticism on «methodological nationalism» (Wimmer, Glick-Schiller 2002) inherent in macro-sociological perspectives taken by former mainstream migration research that the experiences and action patterns of migrants became the topic of broader discussions amongst scholars. The innovative concepts contributed by biographical research to this shift in migration research have been pioneering (Apitzsch, Siouti 2007). For instance, a more adequate and differentiated understanding of gender roles, generational transmission, ethnic communities and religiosity evolved (Inowlocki 2006). Moreover, a new sensitivity has emerged in understanding the complex interplay between the knowledge developed in one society and that developed anew in another society and milieu from the position of foreigner or stranger (Schütz 1944; Breckner 2007).

In this regard, the general cliché-image of seeing migrants in a connection with deficits and even personal disorder is profoundly changing. Looking at migration experiences and how they are situated in biographies, one can see that personal crises and trajectories of suffering triggered by migration may, but do not necessarily have to, happen. Experiences of crisis and strangeness are not inherent in migration itself but are rather related to the embeddedness of migration in an «overall biographical structuring» (Schütze 2008), to the shape of the border which has been crossed in terms of possibilities to return, to the conditions of immigration, and not least to the historical relations between the societies of departure and those of arrival. The latter can strongly shape experiences of discrimination or recognition of migrants by either being structured by relationships built on cooperation or hierarchical subordination or domination – as in the case of post-colonial Europe – or even by hostility with a
broad range in between, including ambivalence on a collective level (Breckner 2014; Massari 2017).

Finally, the contributions made by studies in biographical research to the broad discussion of different concepts of transnationality (Vertovec 2009; Bauböck, Faist 2010; Boccagni 2012) are remarkable. Both the advantages as well as the challenges in transnational lives become apparent here, resulting in a development of sensitive concepts of transnationality (Apitzsch 2012; Siouti, Ruokonen-Engler 2013). In this regard, the article of Ursula Apitzsch, which opens this issue, shows very clearly how different policies implemented on a European, national and local level in the field of citizenship, education, language and labour, as reflected in the biographical narratives of different generations of families of European migrant workers from the 1960s onward, are destined to interfere with one another. The narrow national horizons of immigration societies are daily questioned and overcome by individuals, whose lives more and more often occur in transnational and transcultural spaces. Their commuting between different national contexts and systems becomes, as the author stresses, a crucial resource which allows different migrant generations to adopt strategies aimed at coping with exclusion and fostering integration. Family members involved in a migration process tend to experience it in a very different way, while developing a biographical knowledge which is strongly linked to their continuous crossing of borders and societies. Thus, biographies conceived as sites of transnational spaces cannot be considered merely a product of subjectivity, but a way of accessing both invisible and objective structures of transnational migration spaces.

4. Gender dynamics and generational experiences

Following up from the research on transnational migration, investigations of its impact on gendered experiences, biographies and the gender order in general are major contributions to the broad field of sociological research. Domestic work, a field which is barely visible publicly, has become a topic of increased investigation in the past few years. Here, the concrete ways in which global shifts in work distribution occur and how their consequences are experienced by those involved on both the side
of employers as well as jobholders in an unregulated job market become evident (Ehrenreich, Hochschild 2003; Lutz et al. 2011). Biographical research has been expanding theoretically as well as methodologically in connection with recent feminist discourses as well as critical sociological theory and contributing to the development of new concepts, such as that of intersectionality (Lutz et al. 2011; Davis 2014; Colombo, Rebughini 2016). From a biographical perspective, gender, age, class, race or ethnicity are not mere categories to be related in an abstract theoretical model, but rather appear as causing intertwined experiences and situations in which one dimension may become more relevant than another or even recede into the background, depending on the particular biographical context, period of time and social space. The ways in which social inequality develops amongst women on a global scale, how it is negotiated in tangible settings of interaction, such as in the performance of gender roles in everyday life practices as well as their generational transmission, and how the former touches and transforms the latter, are core issues that have to be addressed when aiming to understand how global changes go along with the transformation of locally bound social settings.

In this regard, this issue offers some interesting contributions, focussing on the ways in which gender, class, ethnicity and generational experiences embodied by women as well as men living in different geographical and cultural contexts interact and, consequently, affect and shape their biographical path and migration experience. The analysis of people’s lives and experiences may offer crucial insights in order to critically question dominant constructions of differences.

Two articles address the empowering potential as well as the rootedness and persistence of patriarchal norms, structures and roles, keeping in mind the close dynamics existing between structural conditions and agential powers. They are informed by the intersectionality approach and refer to case studies taken from Brazil and Bangladesh/Italy. The first one, by Priscila Susin and Hermílio Santos, concerns the biographies of two generations of women living in favelas in Rio de Janeiro, experiencing internal migration and intra-urban movement in peripheral areas. In these neighbourhoods, the presence of strongly rooted forms of structural violence and the consequent situation of marginalisation and social exclusion experienced by people living there is
closely interwoven with conflictive family and relational scenarios. Thus, gender, space and violence seem strongly linked to one another, while their changing intersection profoundly affects the life of the two women interviewed as mother and daughter, as well as their struggle and attempt to resist against a social and personal destiny that seems to be already written, as it appears that the recurrence of violence is the only possibility.

The second article by Francesco Della Puppa addresses gender dynamics and roles from the perspective of masculinity studies. It focuses on the life story of Hassan, a Bangladeshi man interviewed in Chandpur, Bangladesh, in the framework of a wider research on the social construction of masculinity during the experience of migration. The author shows how profoundly Hassan’s self-presentation is nurtured by hegemonic discourses, social taboos and personal experiences and considers the strong influence played by the situation in which the interview occurred. Even if unsolicited by the researcher who had accidentally met him in his family’s house, Hassan starts to tell his unexpected and dramatic story. There, the strong pressures exerted by his family overlap with the wider social and cultural expectations of the surrounding society, his gender role within the family, his age, his family’s class and overall status. Reading Hassan’s story, one is confronted with the challenge in addressing the complex relation between events, memories and narration, where objective as well as more invisible structures are inextricably linked. The embedded patterns of experience and presentation open up space for deep reflection and create a powerful emotional interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, which is, however, partly disguised and put in the background in the interview situation.

5. New challenges in the biographical field

Since its inception, biographical analysis has moved across disciplinary borders, exploring new research perspectives drawn from ethnography, history, and subsequently also discourse analysis and popular culture, just to mention few of them. More recently, new approaches are created by linking biographical research to developments in areas like visual sociology and the arts (Dussel, Gutiérrez 2006; Bell 2010; Breckner 2013) which provide new
impulses. The exploration of the visual dimension in interactions and the creation of (new) images of ourselves, families, generations as well as milieus has just started. Currently, the biographical significance of visual self-presentation intertwined with oral and written communication is becoming an issue of systematic investigation.

The article of Faime Alpagu, in this issue, expressly refers to the importance of embodiment in the construction of biographies, underlining the close link between narrative and non-narrative methodologies. Her analysis, which is part of a larger project on guest worker photographs and letters sent to family members in Turkey between 1960 and 1989, focuses on the case-study of Ali Demir, his visual presentation through photos and his narrated biography. The meaning of his migration, considered in the framework of a wider life story, has profoundly changed over the course of time and so has his self-perception. Alpagu’s research challenges the widespread homogeneity of images of migrants which are often depicted as a collective group from which individual stories and biographical processes hardly ever emerge. She shows how the adoption of innovative methods in the field of visual representations, such as Visual Segment Analysis, allow the reconstruction of latent meanings and more nuanced perspectives on the ways in which guest workers have been represented in the public debate.

The ways in which (ordinary) people deal with situations of societal and global crisis, ethicized social conflicts, war, trauma, violence and abuse, have been and still are one of the main issues of biographical research. The research field has contributed profound insights into how people’s lives are part of social contexts and thus shaped by societal and historical events, how the affected orient themselves based on their experiences and how the latter are formed and changed over a longer period of time, shaping different generations and their mutual relations. Especially in the last part of this issue, containing an intense dialogue between the co-editors and Gabriele Rosenthal, one of the most prominent representatives of biographical research at an international level, topics related to the darkest sides of both past and contemporary experiences and memories in people’s lives are addressed. Rosenthal’s research on the experiences of Holocaust survivors, Nazi perpetrators and subsequent generations, child soldiers in Northern Uganda and refugees bringing
increasingly traumatic memories of their crossings towards Europe offers a lucid demonstration of how biographical research can be part of and connected to societal processes in different areas around the world that have to deal with the aftermath of war, genocide and collective violence.

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