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LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The newsletter for 1997 is a special double-issue, twice the length of the preceding newsletters. This is due to several important activities in the past year, preparations for the upcoming World Congress in Montreal, and, last but not least, the ongoing debate on 'realism' and 'constructionism' which is still going strong since the 1995 newsletter.

The board of the research committee met in July of this year in Moscow at a two-day conference 'Biographical Research as Humanist Dimension in Sociology' which was also attended by many Russian sociologists engaged in biographical research. It was a an enormously inspiring conference and it not only strengthened the international research community, but provided an impetus to biographical research community in Russia as well. Special thanks are in order to Victoria Semenova and her colleagues, Elena Mescherkina and Marina Malysheva for putting together a conference which was not only intellectually stimulating, but well-organized and full of surprises like a boat trip along the Moskau and a dinner party in a luxurious hotel with a view over the rooftops of Moscow. Given the circumstances in Russia today, it was quite a feat.

In August 1997, the ISA Research Council Business Meeting was held in Montreal. We discussed the activities of the various research committees, made plans for the upcoming World Congress, and held a small conference. One of the main issues which was discussed at length at the business meeting was the performance of the research committees. An ad-hoc committee, initiated by the ISA executive board, made recommendations for evaluating RCs. It was agreed that each RC should meet the following minimum requirements: maintain at least 25 paid-up ISA members 10 countries in 2 continents or 7 countries in 3 continents, initiate activities (conferences, newsletters) between the world congresses, and maintain communication with the ISA secretariat.

Our own research committee meets all of the requirements but the first. While we have a long mailing list (nearly 500 individuals from 44 different countries), few of our members have actually joined the ISA or paid their dues. Both Helma Lutz and I have made a concentrated effort to remedy this situation. Although we still do not have 25 paid-up ISA members, we would like to thank those members of the board who responded to our call for help. In particular, we were heartened by Jan Coetzee and his sympathetic e-mails. He gets the Best Board Member

of the Year prize. We hope that those of you who are interested in the activities of the research committee will feel compelled to follow suit and make your commitment official. It would be a shame to lose our status as research committee in the ISA.

I hope that you will enjoy this newsletter. It contains an essay by me on the notion of community in biographical research as well as reactions to the ongoing debate on realism in biographical research by Thierry Kochuyt, Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal and Gabriele Rosenthal. There are several conference reports and announcements of future activities. The section on publications has been dropped as we had so few contributions, but we hope to take it up again as more members send us information. You will find a list of sessions for the 1998 World Congress with the names and e-mail addresses of the coordinators. Some of the sessions still have space for papers; sessions which are full have been marked with '***'. If you are interested in participating in one of the sessions, you should contact the appropriate session coordinator as soon as possible.

I look forward to hearing from you and, of course, to seeing you in Montreal next July.

All best wishes,

Kathy Davis

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VIEWPOINTS

'IMAGINED COMMUNITIES'?

SOME REFLECTIONS ON BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Kathy Davis, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

At a conference which was held in Amsterdam in 1996, oral historians, on the one hand, and sociologists and literary theorists, on the other, were invited to expound on their respective methods of doing biographical analysis. It was assumed that oral historians would take a realist approach and argue that life-histories are a source of factual information about the everyday circumstances of people's lives, while the sociologists and literary critics would treat life-stories as, first and foremost, a narrative, constructed according to cultural conventions and constraints. Our assumption turned out to be an erroneous one. What had been set up as a debate between historians and sociologists became a debate between 'realists' and 'constructionists' with historians and sociologists taking on both positions. In short, the realism/constructionism debate was clearly not a debate between different disciplines.

The debate between realism and social constructionism has also graced the pages of the newsletter of the research committee *Biography & Society*. The realist belief in life stories as a repository of the truth has been decried as theoretically naive and old-fashioned, an 'empiricist illusion' (Kochuyt, 1995). In this view, biographical researchers should be engaged in the collaborative enterprise of interpretation whereby their informants are 'sub-contractors' who provide the initial construction upon which the researcher continues to build. This narrativist belief in biographies as subjective stories, which themselves construct reality, has been attacked as a-historical, a-political, and trendy - a misguided and dangerous attempt to rob biography of its sociological relevance (Bertaux, 1996). In this view, biographical researchers are responsible for uncovering the workings of the social world whereby their research subjects are sources of otherwise unavailable information.

Such staunchly-held positions and passionate rejoinders suggest that the divide between realism and constructionism is fundamental to biographical research, that it is absolute and irreconcilable, and, last but not least, that the identity of our research community is at stake. In short, we as biographical researchers are being told that we must decide, once and for all, on which side of the epistemological divide we belong.

This piece is an attempt to reflect on the social dynamics of this debate. My concern with this

recent rendition of the realism-constructionism debate is motivated less by epistemological issues than by the consequences it has for our attempts to establish a 'community' of biographical researchers.

In other words, do we as biographical researchers need to take sides and what are the consequences of this decision for the development of biographical research as sociological tradition? Let me begin by exploring my own position(s) in the debate, before turning to the broader implications for biographical research.

An autobiographical sketch In the past two decades, I have done various forms of biographical research in medical settings in which I have examined the stories which patients tell to their psychotherapists, to their general practitioners, and to their surgeons. More recently, I have begun to look at the stories which the practitioners tell about their work, their aspirations, and how their individual career trajectories are linked to the development of their professions. My concern has always been to show how individuals make sense of their lives as well as to link these individual stories to an understanding of the interconnections between institutional discourses and practices in late modernity and social structures of inequality based on gender, class, and ethnicity.

When I began my scholarly career, Parsonian sociology was the dominant paradigm and the only respectable research was a survey conducted with a standardized inventory. Research subjects were expected to fill in questionnaires or answer yes- and no questions. Their stories about their lives were a source of contamination, to be avoided at all costs. As a critical, feminist sociologist, I disliked this attempt to erase people's everyday experience and I embraced biographical research as a way to explore how individual people make sense of themselves and their circumstances. The arguments I used in debates with my colleagues were constructionist. For example, I countered the determinism of Parsonian sociology with the argument that individuals are not 'cultural dopes' and that biographical research allows us to see how most ordinary people are agents who actively and knowledgeably give shape to their lives. Life-stories show just how complex, unpredictable, and creative social life can be and teach social scientists that they cannot make sense of the

social by only referring to social structures without looking first to how individuals construct their identities and give meaning to their circumstances and the world around them. Thus, when arguing for biographical research against the sociological mainstream as well as its critics (then: the Marxists), I would have described myself as a dyed-in-the-wool constructionist.

Now, twenty years later, poststructuralist theory has made its entrance into the social sciences and the notion that social life is constructed has suddenly become tame. It is now fashionable to argue that the social world is nothing but a text - to be 'read' by the sociologist-cum-literary critic. Identity has been decried as an enlightenment remnant, making people's stories little more than a 'site' for deconstructing their erroneous sense of self. Systematic patterns and generalizing statements about the social have been replaced by an endless search for fragments, ambivalences, and dilemmas.

In this context, as a biographical researcher, ironically, my arguments are not constructionist, but surprisingly realist. For example, I have found myself heatedly defending the notion of experience as the result of individuals' practical activities in the world. I have decried the notion that identities are simply a haphazard collection of fragments, focussing instead on the efforts which most ordinary individuals put into creating a coherent sense of self in a rapidly changing and often confusing world. And, finally, I have argued for an approach to biographical analysis which takes the concrete situation into account, including institutional realities and structured relations of domination and subordination.

Thus, when arguing for biographical research against the postmodern sociology of today, I would no longer describe myself as an unambiguous constructionist and in some discussions, I might, if pressed, admit that I have considerable affinity with the realist position.

What is to be made of this? One might conclude that I have simply been incoherent or have had trouble making up my mind in the debate between realism and constructionism.

However, this would assume that my primary concern was to take sides in this particular debate. In hindsight, however, my arguments seemed motivated more by my concern for finding an adequate way to describe and explain the phenomena I was studying than making a case for constructionism or realism. In other words, I used constructionist and realist arguments as part of my overall aim to defend

research which placed individual stories within the social context in which they were made, gave social structures and institutions a 'human face', and provided sociological accounts of social life which were both critical and self-reflexive. Seen in this light, my standpoint appears quite coherent, after all - I have simply been defending biographical research as a certain kind - and, I would argue, better kind - of sociological inquiry.

This brief autobiographical sketch makes me wonder whether we really need to decide which side we are on. A brief look at the history of the realism versus constructionism debate within the sociological tradition in which biographical research emerged provides even more evidence against the necessity and, indeed, the desirability of taking sides.

Sociological debates Realist and constructionist arguments have historically been used in the context of establishing qualitative sociology as a legitimate field of inquiry. In the first half of this century, sociologists of the Chicago School used realist arguments against the positivist mainstream in the U.S. to defend their ethnographic inquiries into the hitherto unknown life-worlds of impoverished, marginalized, or deviant social groups. Several decades later, the 'linguistic turn' transformed many ethnographers into social constructionists. Turning to phenomenology and ethnomethodology, they used constructionist arguments to defend qualitative research against the dominant Parsonian functionalism. Their aim was to show that how ordinary people make sense of their lives was essential to understanding the production and reproduction of social order.

In the wake of postmodernism, constructionist arguments are no longer directed at the sociological mainstream in defense of qualitative research. Instead the constructionist/realist debate seems to have been transposed. It is now being waged within the ranks of qualitative researchers. Some qualitative researchers have embraced postmodern theory as the logical extension of social constructionism, seeing it as a way to avoid false referentiality (the 'biographical illusion') or to explore the interplay of voices in individual's accounts. Others have taken a critical stance, reminding us that qualitative research cannot do without the concept of experience, the material body and a tangible social world, replete with socially sedimented institutions, organizations, and structures of power.

This brief look at sociological debates concerning realism and constructionism indicates that epistemology has not been the primary issue. The social context in which the debate took place has frequently determined whether qualitative

researchers used realist or constructionist arguments to defend their enterprise. Dichotomous epistemological positions were mobilized for the constitution of a research community and for defending it against a disbelieving or critical mainstream.

Recent debates on realism and constructionism are becoming counter-productive as they are turned inward and the positions take on an absolutist character. When the claim is put forth that there is but one correct, collective identity for biographical researchers - an identity which reflects 'our' shared history, 'our' theoretical and methodological perspective, or 'our' political mission, community is created through a rhetoric of exclusion and inclusion. Those who do not toe the line are, at best, deluded (Kochuyt) and, at worst, 'enemies' of biographical research (Bertaux). Our community becomes a community by virtue of unquestioning loyalty and the creation of false solidarity against the enemy. This strategy is problematic for several reasons. By suggesting that the resolution to the debate resides in adopting a particular epistemological position, the social and historical context of the debate in sociology is ignored. It is, however, precisely this context which shows why the positions are not simply epistemological and, therefore, why a resolution of the debate is not only highly unlikely, but also undesirable. More importantly, by proposing either realism or constructionism as THE paradigm for biographical research, a disruptive and damaging division is created in precisely the community in whose name one claims to speak. While this may serve the particular interests of individual scholars, it is detrimental to the creation of an intellectual community among biographical researchers.

Having looked at some of the more problematic features of the 'realist/constructionist' debate both within and outside biographical research, I shall now turn to what I think might be a more productive avenue of approach toward the constitution of community and the implications this might have for how its members might responsibly engage in epistemological debates, including but not limited to the debate about realism and constructionism.

Imagined communities In his path-breaking study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1983/1991), Benedict Anderson has argued that communities - and that would include scientific communities - can not be defined according to objective characteristics like language, territory, culture or history. Nations and national identities are 'imagined' by their members. This does not mean that they are false or that one merely needs to convince members that such communities do

not exist for nationalism to disappear. On the contrary, imagined communities are powerful, both for providing members with a sense of belonging which transcends differences of class and other social inequalities (p. 6), but also for mobilizing them in territorial disputes and even war.

It seems to me that a conception of biographical research as an 'imagined community' is helpful for understanding both the diversity of our positions as well as our sense of belonging to a collective intellectual enterprise. It can help us be critical of attempts to create false dichotomies which divide our members into 'we' and 'them'. But, most importantly, it opens the way to imagine a community which welcomes diversity, theoretical and methodological pluriformity, and reflexivity. In short, a community which can provide a sense of belonging to an international community of scholars, coming from different disciplines, with different topics and perspectives, to build upon previous biographical research, but also to elaborate upon it and take it in new directions.

If this were the way we thought of our community, what would this mean for how our members might responsibly engage in debates like the one between realism and constructionism? In order to answer that question, I think we might do well to take a look at one of the more programmatic statements about what sociology is and should be about.

A sociological program According to Anthony Giddens (1976), contemporary sociology has two primary tasks:

The first is 'the hermeneutic explication and mediation of divergent forms of life with descriptive metalanguages of social science' (p. 162). By that, he means that sociology is a pre-eminently interpretative enterprise. Social reality is not simply available to be 'discovered' independently of the person or person's who are interpreting it. This means that every good sociologist takes a constructionist stance when she or he explicates the way ordinary people make sense of their lives and the world around them as well as the interpretive schemes used by sociologists themselves in 'doing sociology'.

The second task for sociology is the 'explication of the production and reproduction of society as the accomplished outcome of human agency' (p. 162). By this, he means that society - the workings of social reality - are the bread and butter of the sociological enterprise. Human beings are not simply biological organisms, but actively engaged in making their social worlds. This means that any good sociologist will need to

accept the 'reality' of the social world as well as the importance of the concrete, situated, material practices of individuals for understanding society.

If these two tasks belong to the sociological enterprise in general, then the debate between 'realism' and 'constructionism' seems to be nothing more - but also nothing less - than what sociology is all about. Seen in this light, presenting the positions in the debate as a marker for who may or may not belong to the biographical 'community' represents a misunderstanding of the sociological enterprise.

Instead I would suggest that biographical research has all the ingredients of an empirically grounded and reflexively interpretative field of inquiry. As such, it may be the most sociological of the research traditions and schools which can presently be found within the contemporary sociological landscape. If this is only an 'imagined community', it is, nevertheless, one which can stimulate diversity and change as well

as provide many of us with a kind of intellectual 'home'.

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DANIEL BERTAUX'S COMPLAINTS OR AGAINST FALSE DICHOTOMIES IN BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal & Gabriele Rosenthal, Berlin, Germany

Overreaction The lion has roared at the meow of a kitten, but has he roared well - and why was he provoked to react so massively in the first place?

The soft voice - Thierry Kochuyt's short article "Biographical and Empiricist Illusions: A Reply to Recent Criticism" in the RC 38 Newsletter 1995 (yellow cover) - triggered a roaring reply which was three times as long and altogether out of proportion: Daniel Bertaux's 'Response' in the RC 38 Newsletter 1996 (blue cover). Obviously he felt that he had been reproached of a "naive realism which uses the life history as a documentary method to grasp external realities" (Kochuyt p. 6; Bertaux p. 2), although the first author had never blamed anybody in particular. Everybody has gripes once in awhile, but why the need to react so publicly and in article which is aggressive in style and badly informed in substance? Bertaux's article is a pamphlet which uses simple labels to make bad enemies and good allies. It is clearly tinted with national, not to mention, narcissistic undertones and tries to silence and disqualify serious research of the international community by making a crude misrepresentation of such work. For these reasons it deserves a reply - less directed at the author, than to the community which may rightfully take offence at this article. By dichotomizing and

nationalizing a complex international research field myths are built, which complicate or destroy international cooperation. We care a lot about this and we were filled with consternation when we realized that in recent conferences all over Europe 'the German idealistic approach' was contrasted with the 'realistic approach' of 'the French and the British'. To be put in the position as the 'German approach' is flattering, but it is rubbish because the differences in Germany themselves are as diverse as those in the international community of biographical research. Our paper is meant as a 'myth dissolver'.

The reader of these lines may want to look back at the trigger of the present debate in the RC 38 Newsletter of 1995. We did so and found Thierry Kochuyt's short piece neither aggressive nor to be blamed of anything more substantial than a lack of terminological definition (e.g. an oscillation between 'life history' and 'life story') and, more crucially, a lack of a concept for dealing with biographical continuity (e.g. 'structure'). Besides these weaknesses, Kochuyt's paper in our view represents in a nutshell some of the important methodological achievements in recent sociological discourse on how to use biographical accounts, what can be gotten from them and what cannot. We read it as a document about the

struggle to understand the difference between real life and talking about it, the difference between social reality and symbolic order, and also about how they are inextricably connected: There is no social reality, no society, no life without symbolic work and symbolic order - and vice versa. If one does not acknowledge this, one remains immersed in the well known dualism of the 'inner' and 'outer world' and misses how they, in fact, constitute each other. As a starter for present-day biographical research, this is quite an achievement: "All of us would question the naive realism which uses the life history as a documentary method to grasp external realities. Indeed...we have to acknowledge that the life history as a referent of the referred life is far from transparent. ... Social reality is always ambiguous, unclear, fragmented and discontinuous and no method can capture it as such. ...In other words, because life is not present itself, it has to be represented in order to become knowable." (Kochuyt, p.6) - and somewhat later, concerning the implications for the sociologists: "Sociology as empirical science cannot invoke some better way of knowing (or knowledge) without considering the way in which the subjects interpret themselves. Following this reasoning, narrators become subcontractors of the sociologist who uses their life stories not as raw empirical data but rather as a preliminary processing in interpretation of these data." (ibid.) We agree with this, if it means, that you have to find access to social reality through members of this society and their accounts. This has to be done to make your sociology. So far Kochuyt, but why does Bertaux not agree?

He has seen the fly of 'naive realism', swallowed it and like a huge salmon who has gotten hooked on the fishing line, is fighting for his life. When it comes to 'realism' versus 'idealism/nominalism', the fun of scientific discourse turns deadly earnest for Bertaux and one has to take sides. Obviously, he has the firm self-image that he is a 'realist' - at some points substantiated with a simple Marxist credo - and that his own work and the work of those who are inspired by him are also nothing other than 'realistic' studies. For him this is "a must" for anyone to belong to sociology at all, end of discussion. His ceterum censeo¹: 'idealism' has to be branded as the evil, because it blinds us to seeing the truth, "that the world has never before been so clearly and brutally structured by the logic of grand capital" (6). Whatever others may have been discussing in the field of theory of science, philosophy and even sociology for the past decades - for example, how to access 'reality', how it may be constructed

socially, and how difficult it is to come to operating concepts considering the part the observer has in constructing this very 'reality', he insists like a defiant child that "there is reality" as a clear, simple and sufficient fact, and thus opens the crusade by taking sides himself: "Lifestories can be used - and, in effect, have been used - as a documentary source to know about realities 'out there'. However the condition for a sociological use of life stories is the collection of multiple life stories from the same social category or milieu; an isolated life story may be the delight of psychologists, narrativists, or sociolinguists, but it has no sociological value whatsoever." (p. 2) Psychologists, sociolinguists and especially narrativists are obviously not realists according to this definition. Realism is just a numerical issue, starting with $n=1+x$. The individual - or the individual's voice and account - is of "no sociological value whatsoever". To be sure, having claimed 'realism' as his stance Bertaux attacks the other side for their idealism, and since they are apparently substantial in numbers and influence they must be fought bravely. "Every epoch has the idealism it deserves. ... today narrativism is in charge." (p. 4) He admits as 'true' that knowing about reality has to do with perceptions and theories and that symbolic systems may have relative autonomy in relation "to socio-historical realities (i.e. class relations, economic, or political formations). But to affirm that these symbolic phenomena would constitute the only 'reality' one can know and talk about is to turn to a neo-idealism" (ibid.), which is in sociology "nothing short of suicide." (ibid.) And he fears: "It means that a world subject to very powerful material interests can continue to function in all tranquillity, as the social scientists have given up describing, understanding and making public the real ways that the world works." (ibid.)

The Strawdog Referring to Bourdieu's critique („in bad faith") of biographical research, Bertaux indicates in his essay that Bourdieu had "set up a strawdog which could so easily be shot down" (5). We ask ourselves, why is Bertaux using the same pattern, and why is he - more explicitly than between the lines - opening up a national cleavage between French 'realists' and non-French 'idealists'. He writes: "Contrary to the hegemony of the life-story-as-narrative approach which I find strongly reflected in the last *Biography and Society Newsletter*, there has been an increase of researchers who work with life stories in a realist perspective in France" (5).² Labelling a certain paradigm of research with 'hegemony', a term used in power discourses, he tries to localize and

construct an enemy, thereby justifying defensive action. This is the only concrete hint where Bertaux locates his opponents, whom he proceeds to shatter vicariously by smashing Thierry Kochuyt's arguments. According to Bertaux's reaction the Belgian author obviously strongly represents such hegemony. Looking elsewhere for more evidence of what we could sense here, we find affirmation explicitly in Bertaux's and Paul Thompson's recent *Pathways to Social Class* (Clarendon Press Oxford 1997:13). The hegemonic eagles, the 'idealists', seem to have their eyrie in Germany. According to the authors, there are two sorts of biographical research: "The first approach, particularly strong in Germany, focuses primarily on the subjective meanings that a particular person gives to her/his past and present life; it is almost a form of social psychology." But to whom are they referring here? Which sociological biographical researchers in Germany reduce 'meaning' to simply 'subjective meaning' without respecting, both theoretically and practically, intersubjectivity and the social constitution of biography? We Germans - as well as biographical researchers of other countries - have been busy the last 20 years telling various readers of bad faith that biography is socially constituted in the interplay between individual and society. This has been congruent with classical sociological theorizing, be it Durkheim, Simmel, Weber and so on. If you look at the 'second orientation' in biographical research, which Bertaux and Thompson count as their own, one gets more puzzled. "The second ...takes interviewees as informants about the various contexts which shaped their life: thus they are used as sources to reveal what happened to the interviewee, how and why it happened, what he/she felt about it and how he/she reacted to it ... This orientation thus aims at gathering both factual and interpretative information ...by asking their informants not only to explain but also to describe it as factually as possible." (Bertaux/Thompson 1997: 13). Indeed, many international biographical researchers and also some German ones would not completely agree with the underlying notion of a dualistic division between communication (talking) and the separate factual world. It is too simple a concept assuming that the spoken (written) text just depicts a separated 'factual' world, and that sociology thus has direct access to a speciously language-free reality. Rather there has been a discussion about how to overcome this deeply Cartesian notion conceptually and in practical research by understanding and analyzing biographical work and patterns as integral part of social reality. According to this discourse, biographical work is social reality and not a sign, or picture, or image of another „real reality", which would be free of any perception and symbolic - i.e. communicative - smudge. But leaving this aside, Bertaux and Thompson insinuate that

biographical research of the social-psychological, i.e. German type, could not reconstruct the 'real' experiences of the biographer and would not take into account what really happened, but only refer to the subjective 'meaning' of the biographer's accounts. We feel that this is a clear misrepresentation of most German biographical research in all the different subtraditions we know quite well and have observed developing over years. It is definitely a misrepresentation of our own work. One only has to look at most of the 'guilty' literature to see that quite the opposite is true: careful scrutiny paid to analyzing the different levels of self-presentation and their relation to factual data and attempts to take this into account in formulating the results.

In short, it is about developing empirically grounded sociological knowledge about social reality and nothing else. So we want to know: who are these Non-French biographical researchers, who are blamed for having lost contact with reality? Bertaux should name them or give up this kind of argumentative misrepresentation. We - as well as those who have been witnesses of Bertaux's recent public appearances - know that he deals in simple, nationalistic and false labels. Our pain at being blamed for something we never did is less on behalf of being representatives of some fantasized 'German' paradigm, but rather on behalf of our identity as researchers and scholars.

Much bigger than Kochuyt's text, this straw dog has become a monster: "a fashionable, extremely powerful phenomenon, a kind of neo-idealism which denies all possibility of objective, or even approximately objective knowledge of reality, whereby the conclusion becomes the term 'reality' cannot be used at all. Everything becomes a matter of perception, of discourses and mirrors, of languages, texts and intertextuality. The heart of this neo-idealism resides in the ontological notion of reality as devoid of any reality, that is, any 'objective' or 'material' reality... All varieties of realism are, thus, thrown over board." (p.3f.) What a horrible, monstrous kind of social science. Clearly everybody who is not out of his mind would want to join Bertaux's crusade for reality! But, there is one problem, where is the problem - except as Bertaux himself has named it? We do not find such a crude negation of reality even in the most radical constructivist sociological writings. It is not reality itself which is discussed there, but how we construct and perceive it through observation, action and symbolic patterning. Moreover, where are the biographical researchers who would even identify themselves with a radical constructivist stance at all? Reading the research field of biographical research in terms of either realism (the good guys) or nominalism/idealism (the bad

¹ "Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam" - "besides this I think, Carthage must be destroyed" - the constantly repeated last sentence of Marcus Portius Cato's ("the Censor") public speeches to prepare the destruction of Carthage by the Romans in the 3rd Punic War 149-146 B.C.

² Cf. also in the same version of the B&S Newsletter 1995 (yellow cover) the article "The problem with identity: Biography as solution to some (post)modernist dilemmas" by Fischer-Rosenthal, which elaborates on biographical molding of the social order. See, also, the longer version of this article, Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995.

guys) does not correspond with what is going on in biographical research, in Germany or elsewhere. If Bertaux wants to change our opinion, he should give evidence instead of using anxiety talk and the rhetoric of power, polarizing scientific discourse into a discourse of 'we'(friends) and 'they'(opponents).

Truism It is not enough to repeat that his own research is realist and others' 'anti-realist' in characterizing his book *Les recits de vie dans la perspective ethnosociologique*, Paris 1997 in an e-mail circled advertisement (biog-methods@mail-base.ac.uk of 29th Sept. 97): "my own way of using them (life stories), could be characterized as 'realist'(by contrast with the 'anti-realist', i.e. textualist or psychological, approach usually focusing on a single case)." Or he uses the Chicago school to label and honour his 'realist' approach in contrast to the anti-realists (as Norman Denzin), who went astray and can obviously be identified as text crunchers. What is left out is that the Chicago school and those like Glaser and Strauss, whom he named, and others of their students and coworkers, whom he does not name but knows well enough (including a bunch of the blamed Germans, who are heavily influenced by the Chicago School tradition) do use texts, even analyze single cases but they never would even dream of themselves as being 'anti-realists' or 'neo-idealists' or 'nominalists' and so on. This is pure name-calling and if it is not narcissistic naivety, then it is doing politics and trying to gather an audience by branding other research and researchers as 'anti-my-way-which-is-the-real(istic)-one'.

To claim realism, does not mean much, if one does not explain, what one means by this! If it simply means a direct access to reality, without perception or the use of symbolic systems of bestowing meaning on phenomena, i.e. a direct channel to reality, something which does not have to be discussed, because it is merely stated, then this strategy is nothing else than the pre-modern idea that we know reality, because we believe that our ontological concept of reality is true. It is all right if the ordinary person does not doubt reality, because this is a practical attitude necessary for everyday life but it is not all right if sciences and, in particular, cultural sciences do not think methodologically about biases we use, or when we simply presuppose that everything is the same as what we assume in the 'natural attitude' of everyday life.

What happens then - and Bertaux gives an example for this - is that the argument backfires. Research is limited by the boundaries of it's

definition - a concept (sic!) of reality. The concept put forth by Bertaux ("sociology cannot do without an ontological concept of social-historical reality", p.5f.) formulates as precondition a concept of what reality would really be, before we are allowed to talk about it or study it. This approach of 'universalia sunt realia et ante rem'³ was from the 9th century on till the eve of modernity subject of complicated and heated disputes about God (and the universe) and man - as individual. Today we would call this notion 'idealism' (though these Platonically inspired people insisted - as fiercely as Bertaux - to be called „realists“). As back bone of medieval philosophy this selfunderstanding and theological theory prevented empirical research, and was Occam's antithesis 'universalia sunt nomina'⁴ at the turn to modern times, later followed by empiricists like Bacon, opening the doors of the authoritatively closed city of mind into the open, thus freed man from this dogmatic 'knowing in advance', what reality really is - and eventually produced modern mind. To put it historically: it was being open for the concept to ontologically not knowing beforehand what reality entailed, but making it topic of one's studies, which made empirical research and in general the world of modernity possible.

The real ways of life, of society, of how people deal with each other, will always be more controversial than we (scientists, sociologists - including Marxists or any other '-ists') want. Knowledge about the reality of a complex nature, of persons as individuals and social entities, of society, or rules and genetic structures will always lag behind 'what is really going on', however elaborated and enlightened and empirically grounded our research is. Nevertheless, such knowledge as well as the practical knowledge of the ordinary people enmeshed in their actions shapes what we call reality. So we have to live with two problems: first, there is no knowledge without taking into account the one who creates reality, his actions and his knowledge. There is no privileged position in the creation of knowledge. Second, there is no match between reality and knowledge in the sense of a true projection of reality within knowledge. Both amount to the painful insight that the old concept of objectivity has become obsolete in science and other scholarly research of natural and cultural phenomena. Only omnipotence can claim to bring knowledge and social structure together in a complete fit. In social reality, but also in the 'hard' sciences, the same phenomenon has a completely different meaning depending which standpoint you choose to look at it. This entails, there is no standpoint in the sense of the

old notion of 'objectivity', because there is no privileged point of observation. So, even to try to claim 'objective knowledge' which fits 'reality' by excluding differing concepts, perceptions and discourses others than ones own or by branding them as non-realistic, is nothing short of a violent power discourse, which tries to silence others.

Hermeneutical Case Reconstruction But to come back to the more down to earth research practice of biographical and sociological empirical studies. To put it briefly - and there is no need to limit it to the German sub-community of biographical research using narratives: No one here would contradict that it is of vital interest to maintain realism. On the contrary, one of the major arguments in some debates with quantitative methods in general was LACK of reality in positivist science: neglect of a socially structured society, of an account of experiences, of the symbolic means by which people structure their lives and societies. The very methods of phenomenological, or sociology of knowledge, or hermeneutic, or grounded theory styles attempt to not take it at face value what respondents have to offer, but to analyze and re-construct the structure and rules of their productions - be they texts (as in the interview) or events/experiences they really went through in their lives, which can be objectively shared and were observed by others. We „narrativists“ check what people tell us; we trust them, but we also know, that they tell us things in a way in order to make their life liveable and not just to give records for historians, who are interested in "how it was way back then" (and historians are not so simple-minded either). This is what we are trying to take into account, and we think it is in accordance to present day methodological concerns about how to do natural science, how to do sociology, how to be oriented at social reality. One can also discuss it on another level talking about cognitions, observation, the way how knowledge is created and made valid in action and not just by putting up criteria of "validity" which disguise the complete artificiality of production of knowledge in quantitative methods.

The authors of this paper concentrate on hermeneutical case reconstruction to both reconstruct the lived life history as well as the self presentation in the oral life story from the perspective of the present. Crucial is that the case level is the entity of analysis. This may be one biography or it may be stories of one family, the family making the unit to reconstruct the structure under analysis. Gabriele Rosenthal

(1997, 16ff.) has sketched her methods in her last book like this:

"The method used here to analyze narrated family and life stories is one of hermeneutical case reconstruction⁵ developed by the author over many years in combination with various other methods. In analyzing the interviews, particular attention is paid to the structural differences between what is experienced and what is narrated: between experienced life and narrated life, i.e. life history and life story⁶. On the one hand, we tried to reconstruct what the biographer actually experienced during this sequence of their life and, on the other hand, how they present their life in a present-day interview. In analyzing their biographical self-presentation, or life story, what we are aiming to achieve is an analysis of the biographer's present perspective. We interpret in what form, i.e. at what sequence of the text, they speak about certain parts of their lives and we reconstruct the mechanisms behind the themes they choose to talk about and the experiences they choose to tell. We assume that it is by no means coincidental and insignificant when biographers argue about one phase of their lives, but narrate another at great length and then only give a brief report of yet another part of their lives or describe the circumstances of their lives in detail. As the analysis proceeds, it becomes clear how the individual sequences of the main narration are thematically linked. In this context, we speak of thematic fields, referring to Aron Gurwitsch (1964). The underlying assumption is that the narrated life story does not consist of a haphazard series of disconnected events, but that the narrator's autonomous selection of stories is based on a context of meaning, namely, the biographer's overall interpretation. The narrated life story thus represents a sequence of mutually interrelated themes, which between them form a tight network of interconnected cross-references (Fischer 1982, p. 168). In Aron Gurwitsch's terminology, the individual themes are elements of a thematic field.

The construction of a genogram of the family under analysis is of considerable help in this process. This schematic diagram of the relationships within the family system based on the family tree is helpful for recognizing complicated family structures as well as historical developments and the complexes of problems linked to them within the family. Only now do we begin to formulate initial readings or questions about the family system that offer orientation in analyzing the life stories. It is at this point that we start to undertake historical research and archive inquiries. ...

³ Translation: 'universals (universal concepts) are real and before the thing' - over centuries a key sentence in medieval self-understanding, religious and metaphysical discussions called the 'dispute over universals', starting in the 9th century and ending, resp. gaining a new quality with Occam's writings.

⁴ Translation: 'universals are nouns'; i.e. terms given in communicative processes of signifying.

⁵ For details of the hermeneutical case reconstruction procedure, cf. Rosenthal, 1993, 1995a. Reconstruction and sequentiality are the key principles in this method. The texts are not subsumed under specific categories, but rather are analyzed for meaning in the context of the entire text (= interview). The sequential compilation of the text of the life story and the chronology of biographical experiences in the life history play an essential role.

⁶ By life story we mean narrated personal life as related to another in conversation or as written down in the present-day; by life history we mean the experiences that a person has lived through.

The general questions behind our analysis can be formulated as follows: how is the collective and family past integrated into the presentation of the individual's life story? What significance is assigned to this past in the biographical construction of the biographer? What form does the interplay between the individual life stories and the interactively generated family story take? What biographical repair strategies are used to heal the effects of a threatening past? As biography researchers, we are working on the assumption "that a deviation from the normal represents an active life achievement, which in itself entails the solution to a problem and which has a certain function in the life history in question" (Fischer-Rosenthal 1992, p. 20). Thus, we make a concerted effort not to subsume the development of symptoms into psychopathological concepts, but rather to reconstruct their function in the individual's biography and family system. In doing so, we refrain from evaluating them, for example, by dividing symptoms up into conscious coping mechanisms and unconscious defense mechanisms. Accordingly, we tend to initially develop our concepts in a descriptive manner, in the sense of the question: how is the past dealt with in the individual's biographical construction and in the family dialogue? Is this something one can call anti-realism or neo-idealism or nominalism?

Socio versus Psycho? At this point, we can only see in Bertaux's article a as lot of energy being expended in fighting windmills which are not even there. Perhaps we are mistaken, but then Bertaux should name the real „bad guys“ instead of creating a semi hostile mood against research using textual analysis. There is no question that there is good and bad research: here we have no argument with him, but we simply do not see the kind of research, which can be situated within nominalism/ idealism and definitely not in the German field. Bertaux should look again at the work of all the colleagues, who do active research in traditions of Martin Kohli, Fritz Schütze, Peter Alheit and our own as well as many others working with narrations as data. We challenge anyone to find a theoretical or practical denial of social reality in this research.

Bertaux indicates repeatedly in his response to Thierry (and elsewhere) that the individual life story does not allow sociological results, because sociological knowledge deals per definition with collective entities. By the same token, narrativists, who concentrate on the single life story, are to blame because they "distract their attention from collective phenomena and processes specific to social milieux or categories

and focus it instead on the subjective meaning contained in a particular life story".(p. 3) 'Subjective' meaning is identified with something purely individual and psychological, not of interest to sociologists. One could have learned from Max Weber or George Herbert Mead that subjective meaning is always socially constituted and part of the constitution of the social world. Bertaux presents instead a simple quantitative notion of 'social' and an idiosyncratic way out of the dead end street of subjectivity. As he reports, he "stopped working with single life-stories .. and instead began to collect family histories through interviews in order to study processes of social mobility" (p. 3). Isn't this notion of sociality a little bit too simple? One = psycho, many = socio. An old - may be Cartesian - dualism between individual and social is repeated, whereby he does not take into account that every life history and life story is socially constituted. The intersection between individual and social in the field of biography is precisely the theoretical contribution of biographical research to sociology in general, which has been developed and presented over the last two decades by Peter Alheit, Martin Kohli, Fritz Schütze, the authors of this paper and others. Identifying the single biography as non-sociological, as Bertaux does, throws the concept of biography as social practice and social pattern over board. Also the family history, which seems to be of evident „sociological value“ for Bertaux is as case just as individual and as collective or general as the single life history. The closeness to reality - let's say to what was experienced in the past - cannot be increased by comparing it with other interviews, because each interview represents it's own experiences. It can only be reached or found in a reconstruction of the same case. What others have experienced helps little to understand and explain the biographer's experiences, who looks back at them form the perspective of his or her present situation.

Beyond the personal annoyance one last point cannot be left without comment. It is Bertaux's polemical use of the genocide by Germans as argument against the narrative approach: "If witnesses' accounts did not have documentary value, how could we know about the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis ..." (p. 5). What other than a very serious and painstaking effort to reconstruct and write parts of the sofar unwritten historical realities of atrocities done by Germans and about the pain of their victims were the studies by Lena Inowlocki, Gabriele Rosenthal, Bettina Völter (cf. Rosenthal/Völter 1997), and other German researchers, who interviewed Nazi perpetrators and the victims of the Nazi regime in narrative interviews and accomplished narrative analysis? Anyone who uses the Shoah

for such an argument continues to instrumentalize the German genocide for his own political purpose and does not contribute to the sociological and historical elucidation of this past.

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COULD OBJECTIVE REALITIES TELL US A STORY?

REPLY TO BERTAUX

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Misunderstandings and malattributions are constitutive parts of each discussion. Defending one's own position adds to it. But responses ask for replies and it is my turn now trying to understand Bertaux while attributing to myself a divergent and with the risk of possible errors.

From past to present Bertaux's Response' switches between two story-lines: one that tells about the early days of the biographical turn and another which defends some kind of epistemological realism. Because the latter is a source of disagreement, let us start by saying that the former offers an interesting story. Explicating the inspirations of the life-history research and considering the theoretical and empirical stalemates of those days, it shows how the biographical alternative offered a way-out of these impasses. It would be pointless to question the historical relevance of these hindsight, especially since they come from a distinguished 'veteran'. Although my article had no historiographical ambitions, I note Bertaux' remarks in all modesty. So far the first story-line. But when this historical account confronts the present, it turns into a virulent lampoon against the narrativist malady. The neo-idealism of this malady "resides in the ontological notion of reality as devoid of any reality, that is, any 'objective' or 'material' reality. (...) we seem to be living in a postmodern world consisting of pure signs." (p. 4). It is quite uncomfortable to see how Bertaux' response (mis)understands the points advanced in the short article 'Biographical and empiricistic illusions' (Kochuyt, 1996). Restating what was written in the previous contribution could rectify this, but it is of no use to repeat oneself. I think, at least, a balanced attempt to clarify the constructive nature of life-histories as cognitive products and the difficulties one encounters in the practice of life-history research can provide testimony for the empirical relevance of these considerations (Aalten, 1995). When Bertaux's reaction stresses the collective dimension, I would agree, but the way he emphasises and tries to adduce realistic arguments in support of the collective nature of biographies is problematic and may turn out self-defeating. One does not need realism to uncover the social dimension of life-stories because people are not living in plain reality. Enough rhetorics, however, let's summarize Bertaux' realistic position and see where it leads.

Paraphrasing Bertaux Realism addresses persons as informants on the life they have in

⁷ By family story we mean the shared construction of a single family history in the family dialogue.

their specific socio-historical milieus and through their life-stories we can collect verifiable factual data - i.e. dates, places, situations, events, actions and interactions. Doing so, these external realities enable us to go to the collective phenomena and shared experiences of a specific social category, produced as they are not by the consciousness of the narrator but by the social relations in a specific historical time.

This sociological search for structure is far from easy because personal lives - even from a homogeneous milieu - are always characterized by a certain particularity and in order to distinguish the collective from the individual, one has to consult multiple cases. I agree with Bertaux that if life-history research deals with the social, it needs a basis which is broader than just some isolated life-stories. The financial limits forcing researchers to restricted cases, can probably be explained by the lower credibility of qualitative research. But being in an underdog-position, many qualitative researchers make unwarranted claims that are quite uncritical towards their own enterprises. Adhering plain realism is one of the problems.

Second pitfall in the sociological endeavor, according to Bertaux, is the inevitable sense-making connected with the life-story. Telling their biography, people constantly add, delete and read meanings into their factual life-courses. These meanings are misleading because one can not necessarily retrace them to the objective reality, and, therefore they trouble the transparency of the life-stories. So, these individual narrations obstruct the highway to sociological clarification that is looking for social structure. "Retrospective sense-making of an individual's account is an operation which differs depending on the individual as well as the historical period, thereby conflating the problematic with the individual speaker and making it much more difficult to generalize." (p. 3). Reading Bertaux' response gives the impression that he knows two categories: one is the social reality whose essence is structural and the other is discursive, i.e. that which people tell and are told. The potential of the latter category lies in its informative account on the social reality it documents but one has to be aware that these stories contain much more than just transparency. People can tell things which can not be found in reality or blur the insight and lead us into 'narrative' interpretations which are all too particularistic. Instead of being interested in the why and what of that sense-making, Bertaux warns us not to be misled because these narrations can turn us away from reality: the one and only we should deal with. Remember to stick to the facts! I'm not sure that this really is his position but reading the response, one at least gets the impression that it is. So, let us see what the facts show.

Sense-making as social activity By splitting apart the factual data - which are verifiable - and the sense-making - which is misleading and obstructive to the sociological endeavor - Bertaux loses surplus-value of life-stories because bare facts do not provide any meaning. They are what they are: dates, places, actions, etc. Such information is just like a detective's notebook without a clue. Verifying the facts will give us a meaningless tautology, and denying then will give us two claimed factualities without a indication why they contradict each other. So when one sticks to the verifiable facticity, one only has raw materials. The interesting part begins when people do something with these materials: the ways they make sense of the raw material life delivers and it is this shifting sense which presents the facts of life as relevant or disregards them as irrelevant information. In doing so, facts get enclosed in interpretations which constitute a conception of the world. Following Geertz and others, one can say: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it (...) an interpretive one in search of meaning." (Geertz, 1973 : 5). These cultural webs give experiences significance. They give people a framework through which they can orient themselves to the world, others and their own past, present and anticipated life. Through this sense-making new realities are inaugurated, i.e. existential spheres in which things are experienced as true and real. So transcending the factual situation one does not necessarily enter fiction but rather the subjective understandings of the situation. And if one starts telling the story of his/her life, those conceptions will raise their voice because facts as such do not speak for themselves. Objective realities can not tell a story.

How little bare facts say and how multiple they are in the discourses which define them, becomes manifest when one interviews persons having different positions and performing antagonistic roles within the same interactional context: e.g. teachers and parents of the same pupils/children, as in our research (Verhoeven & Kochuyt, 1995). Instead of verifying, one ends up complementing the first story with the other story. Multiple perspectives do not necessarily filter the sense-making, they can also multiply the signified reality in a kaleidoscopic way. Each of the viewpoints invokes its own raw material and when the same facts are mentioned, these often have shifting meanings. Manifold examples of interpretations which run constantly into similar contradictions can be found in *La Vida* of Oscar Lewis (1966), an author mentioned by Bertaux as an inspiring source for the life-history research. Indeed, *La Vida* documents the lives the poor lead but there is more to it than that because

throughout the pages of the book almost everybody is accusing everybody else of the misdeeds which they themselves never committed but are falsely accused of by the others. Claiming moral respectability people constantly disagree on what really happened, and a realist who collects these stories has to believe all of them or nobody at all.

Confronting these diverging definitions of a similar situation can be disorientating and it could lead to a disqualification of the sense-making as particularistic and therefore of no or only secondary relevance for sociology. Such a conclusion would be a capital error for three reasons.

First of all, the sense-making can be symptomatic for the social roles and positions the narrator takes. Attitudes, opinions, views, ideas and meanings are not sui generis, they are not made from air but rooted in the structural settings people live in. Their predispositions are related to the positions they take within society. Such correlations are documented by public-opinion surveys and elaborated for instance by the several theses on class-cultures but how they get connected and can alter throughout the course of life is rather an issue for biographical research. At least, if that research is interested in the signifying views people develop and does not discredit these as of secondary importance.

This sense-making may present itself as authentic and creative but it is not a purely individual product. Individuals do not construct their social world in terms of an entirely personal vision, neither do they construct their life-story from an unique point of view, but they draw heavily upon the organizing concepts which are part of the collective meaning-systems. By these larger meaning-systems the person draws upon, I refer to sub-or countercultural variations, specific ideologies, religions, larger socio-historical ideas and core paradigms about the nature of things and how they should be represented (one of these being the so called 'biographical illusion' articulated by Bourdieu (1986)). This mental sociability does not imply that people merely are deposits of the collective meaning-systems, 'cultural dopes' as Garfinkel would say. Such a view could only employ life-histories for illustrative purposes, while it is far more interesting to do research on the way people make use of these social meanings and - according to their positions and roles - negotiate and stretch the cultural standards set by the dominant meaning-systems. Only then one can witness signifying practices.

The third reason why sense-making is of a capital importance is its procreative capacity. It generates new realities because it gives

definitions to the situations in such a way that things will have consequences not only due to the intrinsic causality of the factual situation but also - and sometimes primarily - according to the 'extrinsic' definitions used by the sense-makers. Signifying definitions will be real in their consequences. In other words, sense-making is also constitutive for social reality and its structures.

Baking new bread My point can easily be illustrated by the study of bakery workers, also referred to by Bertaux (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame, 1981). The bakery workers interviewed in 1969 told about their apprenticeships and the way they experienced the physical and verbal violence of their masters. Call this inferior position and the masters behavior the factual data. Ten years later they were interviewed once more and depending on their actual position as bakery worker or bakery owners, they respectively told the same life-history or a different one which did not mention the humiliations experienced in the years of apprenticeship. So according to their actual position they make sense of their lives in a different way by confirming or censuring the same factual data of the past. Because the interviewer remembers that the latter category had a different definition of the situation before, she confronts them with the earlier version. Their reply does not deny but this. That is not necessarily a proof of realism, but an interesting interview-effect which shows that the same facts can gain different meanings through the variable sense-making of the subject. Apparently according to their actual position they redefine the facts and give them an alternative meaning: it was part of the apprenticeship which made them independent bakery owners. Because things evolved in a positive manner, there is no reason to mention the factual behavior of the master in the first place. This only has a peripheral significance and is of no importance in the narrative presentation of their life. The inverse is true for those who got stuck in the inferior position of bakery worker. Because their positions remained the same they restate their initial story which sees in the humiliations a confirmation of their inferior position and through this sense-making the negatively signified past will generate specific consequences, i.e. resentment towards their superiors, a 'them versus us'-perspective with the consequent patterns of (dis)affiliation, etc. Nothing of that sort will be found in the case of the bakery-owners because they redefined their professional career and now probably present themselves as 'self made men', thereby supporting the ideology of a society open to upward mobility by those who have the proper capacities. Doing so, their individual sense-making gets connected to the collective meaning-systems which are the dominant ideologies.

Idealism or realism, the dysfunctional use of polarized concepts Claiming that the discursive stands outside social reality and that it merely serves to give us a realistic picture of the structure we are looking for, is not very fruitful. What people tell and are told is a constitutive part of the different realities the social universe has. To the degree that these narrations even structure the social world, we should consider it as an object of attention in its own right. If such a position is called neo-idealism, there has been a severe inflation in the semantics used. "The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of wrath of God', depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence." (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 108).

Sense-making, signifying practices and attributed meanings are signified reflections of structural realities and the stories they tell are also intentionally directed towards that what they are talking about - i.e. the ongoing life. But if this inclination will lead us right away towards an objective mono-definable reality is another question. Arguments for this reluctance are already given but being reluctant to adhere plain realism is no reason to be labelled as a neo-idealist who only knows the vagueness of meanings. I think it is rather polemic to think in terms of realism either idealism: reality can shape ideas in such a way that some are sometimes inclined to think in deterministic terms. Other classes will indeed have different ideas and it is hard to ignore a reality such as material (in)sufficiency. But ideas also mould reality in such a way that one sometimes loses sight of what might be called real. Poor families may still adhere some kind of wishful thinking, hoping that things will turn out in a better way, if not for themselves then at least for their children (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Hochschild, 1995). Although this kind of self-delusion will not alter their material existence and its underlying economic logic, in the meantime they live in 'idealistic' anticipation and that is an existential reality which can not be denied. Such an attention for the subjective side does not deny the existence of other forces, like the logic of transnationalizing capital Bertaux is referring to at the end of his response. But capturing this

logic should not rely exclusively on life-history research in the first place. Even if one focuses on the itineraries of migrants, the narrow scope of individual life can be too limited to capture englobing mechanisms. No method can be comprehensive.

All this fuss and what it is all about?

Doing research I am not so much interested in the epistemological rightness of either perspective but primarily in their empirical potential and which perspective will be applied to what extent depends on the topic of the research and the optic aptitude of the researcher. So it is better to be pragmatic than to stick to a stubborn realism or a dogmatic neo-idealism. The irony is that the ultimate argument of Bertaux' plea for an ontological conception of the socio-historical reality, also has to rely on such pragmatic motivations. Comparing "a sociologist who is afraid to use the term reality" with "a pastor without faith" and "a soldier who has lost morale" (p. 6), does not look like an ontological proof to me. To the degree that such a 'realist' view closes the eyes to too many things, I remain unconvinced by Bertaux' response. But, then, seeing no reason to agree is probably the conclusion of each reply.

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CONFERENCE REPORTS

BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH AS HUMANIST DIMENSION IN

SOCIOLOGY Victoria V. Semenova, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

This international expert meeting was held from July 11-14, 1997 in Moscow. The main idea was to look at biographical research as specific way to think sociologically about society - as a society of human beings and for human beings, to speak with Berger and Luckmann. The Research Committee *Biography & Society* decided to organize this meeting in Russia, keeping in mind that Russian sociology is now in the process of transition from a positivist orientation toward a humanist tradition. The focus was on the following questions:

- Is biography a source for understanding reality or is it a subjective story which re/constructs reality?
- Is the interview dialogue primarily the site of self-reflection for the interviewer or can it be a site for self-reflection for the interviewee?
- What does it mean to understand the social and cultural context of an interview?

The first session began with Jan Coetzee's (South Africa) paper 'Broader Context in the Understanding of Private Experience: the Role of Redemption Narratives in the Life of Former Political Prisoners'. Based on the ideas of Simmel and his study of political prisoners in South Africa and the Czech Republic, he concluded that the difference in political context is what gives different meaning to otherwise similar individual accounts about past suffering. In biographical research, individual experience should, therefore, be seen against the background of the broader context - that is, the objective forces of social life. Further discussion showed that 'social context' is itself a complicated notion which needs more specification when comparing the past histories and present situations of different cultures. The notion of social context was elaborated by Elena Mescherkina (Russia) in 'Russian Post-Modernism: the Destruction of Typical Biographies'. What happens to biographical construction when the broader social context is destroyed? She argued that if the 'objective background of subjectivity' is ruined or loses its institutional control over biographical discourse, then the norms of the 'greater social world' are reduced to the 'small world' of direct interaction. In such a situation, individuals are able to simultaneously adopt different scenarios for their biographical projects in their various life-spheres and are provoked to 'outbursts' of idiosyncratic biographical creativity. In her presentation, 'Imagined Communities: Some Reflections on

Reflexivity in Biographical Research', Kathy Davis (Netherlands) returned to the mainstream of biographical debate, addressing the difference between constructivists and realists from point of view of establishing a research community (in this newsletter). The discussants showed their anxiety that false scientific disputes could lead to the separation of a community into an 'us' and 'them' according to nationality - the worst type of social (and not only scientific) inequality. To focus on national specificity and cultural context should not mean division according to national or geographical belonging.

The second session concerned some problems in the conceptualization of and reflection on human experience. Brian Roberts (United Kingdom) took on the issue of personal myths and how they are used by individuals to construct their lives. He concentrated on the problem of symbolic meaning and how myths reflect the norms and patterns of social behavior. The discussion focussed on methodological aspects of interpreting myths: the borders between myth and a story about past events, myths as narrated reality or as mental image, the material basis of myths, and how do myths emerged and how do they become group myths. In his paper, 'Life-Worlds, Socio-cultural Worlds and Research Dialogue', Valeri Golofast (Russia) focussed on the process of interpretation as a special research activity. Taking into account that one life-story can have many levels of meaning, depending on the cultural, theoretical and critical potential of the researcher, he proposes the researcher's mind as a kind of 'spiritual space' where a 'research dialogue' between biographical material and the final interpretation takes place. There is both a rational and an intuitive reflection about and selection of biographical material. The result of this inner dialogue is the final version of interpretation. Recognizing this version as scientific requires that the audience knows about the entire process of selection. First-hand interview material should be publicly available so that the researcher's ability to interpret can be checked. Further discussion demonstrated the danger of this approach in narrowing the space for interpretation to the researcher's 'inner dialogue'. The interaction between the Interviewee and the interviewer - i.e. their dialogue - are excluded. The result may be manipulation and the reduction of the interviewee to the role of passive informant (as is

the case in quantitative approaches). The self-reflection of the researcher about her/his scientific goals shouldn't overcome his/her attempts to understand the self-reflection of interviewees about their own lives.

The third session was devoted to some of the problems in understanding the cultural context of individual experience - an aspect of biographical research which becomes especially meaningful in a rapidly changing society like Russia. For this reason, this session was mainly concerned with the social and cultural specifics of Russia. Marina Malysheva (Russia) proposed the notion of a socially and culturally constructed reality in her paper 'Basic and Functional Identities in Biographical Gender Dimensions'. The paradox of Russian reality is that for decades it was mythological as actions of the masses were stimulated by subjective party will and utopian ideas. In this sense, the subjective reality of Soviet women was more 'realistic', while men's public activity was more 'subjective' and mythological. Nowadays the meaning of gender relations in Russian society has become particularly important. Based on her own research, she showed that a social context of extremity weakens all previous functional identities, while gender identity (as a kind of fundamental identity) became particularly strong and vivid. It appeared as a first-hand orientation in interviews toward gender-specific roles of breadwinner for men and keeper of the hearth for women. In the discussion, the role of national context was emphasized in analyzing gender. Some pointed to the socially-constructed

character of gender, while others claimed that there are also 'natural' gender differences (as in men's and women's language and ways of telling life-stories). In his paper 'Narrative and Reconstruction of Public-Private Sphere in Soviet Society', Victor Voronkov (Russia) reflected on 'private' and 'public' issues. For him, the public/private division in Russia was traditionally so strong that it is very complicated to speak about private issues in public space and visa versa. He argued his position drawing on his research concerning the dynamics of public/private relations since the 1950's: from strong separation and narrowing of the private sphere to the quasi-diffuse public-private space (partly private, partly public) to the domination of private space in biographical accounts and life experiences since the mid 1980's.

At the end of this three-day discussion, the participants shared the feeling that 'doing biography' is not the same as 'doing biographical research'. There are still many theoretical problems to solve and difficulties to be overcome in biographical research. However, thanks to the initiative of the RC Biography & Society, one significant result of this Moscow meeting is that a new collective orientation which could be called the Russian dimension could be put on the world map of biographical research. It is a dimension which is born of doing biographical research in the social context of a changing society and where the majority of the participants are oriented less to past life experience than to present and future biographical projects.

BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPEAN SOCIETIES

(EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE IN

COLCHESTER, ENGLAND) *Roswitha Breckner, University of Halle, Halle, Germany*

The Research Network 'Biographical Perspectives on European Societies' (Eurobio), founded in 1996 and chaired by J.P. Roos (Finland) has proven to be active and productive. After a conference in Budapest in 1995 and one in St. Petersburg in 1996, which was organized together with the Center for Independent Social Research of St. Petersburg¹, it was the third meeting initiated by the Network at the ESA-Conference. This conference was held in Colchester in August 1997. There was a full program over three days, starting with papers on conceptual debates, which were followed mainly by empirically grounded contributions about 'Political Aspects

in Life Stories', 'Comparative Perspectives on Russian Biographies', 'Migration and Organizational Change', 'Poverty and History' and 'Individualization & Age'. In nearly all sessions, papers focused on the biographical meaning of societal change and especially on the processes in the transformation of Eastern and Central European societies as a challenge for understanding from a biographical perspective. The emphasis on the Post-Socialist societies is not only based on a considerable and internationally increasingly visible body of biographical research which has developed especially in and about Russia, but also from or about Slovakia, the

Czech Republic and the GDR which have provided interesting contributions this time around.

All sessions were well attended with about 15 to 30 participants and there were animated discussions. Even if they were not always connected by a specific focus, they showed the

public interest in the issues presented. In addition, many good contacts were developed among the contributors of the different countries, which can develop productively in many areas and contexts. The biography sessions in Montreal will be the next occasion.

NARRATING SELVES AND OTHERS: FEMINIST THEORY

IN PRACTICE *Kathy Davis, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands*

An interdisciplinary conference on the impact of feminist thought on (auto)biographical writing and research was held in Antwerp, Belgium from November 28-29, 1997. It was organized jointly by the University of Antwerp and the Centre for Women's Studies in Nijmegen.

The conference brought together feminist scholars from Europe and the US from the humanities and social sciences. After a rousing opening by Rosi Braidotti (Utrecht University) on shifting notions of identity in feminist theory, four keynote speakers explored the possibilities of (auto)biography for feminist research from different disciplinary perspectives (psychology, oral history, sociology, humanities). Ann Phoenix (University of London) showed how young Londoners position themselves in relation to gender, 'race' and social class, arguing that we make ourselves and our identities through our autobiographical narratives. Mary Chamberlain (Oxford Brookes University) drew upon her oral histories of different generations of Caribbean migrant women to explore the impact of intergenerational transmission on the construction of female diasporic identity. Liz

Stanley (Manchester University) tackled the problem of referentiality in autobiographical writing, contrasting canonical versions of Olive Schreiner's life with some contrary facts. Nancy Miller (CUNY) provided an autobiographical account of growing up as an American girl in the fifties in order to show how the 'Zeitgeist' can shape individual destinies. In addition to these addresses, there were numerous sessions on topics like: biography and critical theory, the relationship between life and art, feminist discourse as fiction, writing bodies/writing selves, the woman writer, selection and construction in feminist biographical research, and narrative conventions in feminist (auto)biography.

While the conference left out some of the more 'realist' approaches to biographical research currently being done in the social sciences (the poststructuralist slant was ubiquitous), it showed how fruitful a dialogue between the humanities and the social sciences can be for feminists who are interested in (auto)biography and, more generally, issues of identity.

WORLD CONGRESS

The XIV World Congress of Sociology will be held in Montreal, Canada from July 26 to August 1, 1998.

Individuals who are interested in presenting a paper in a session of the Research Committee Biography & Society should contact the appropriate session coordinator as soon as possible. Sessions which are already full are marked with **. Abstract forms can be obtained from the session coordinator and should be returned before February 1, 1998. Each coordinator should send the completed abstract forms for her or his session to Kathy Davis no later than February 10, 1998.

Session Coordinators:

Biographies in a Reflexive Modernity?
Coordinator: Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal
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Autobiographies in/and Biographical Research ()**
Coordinator: Kathy Davis
Women's Studies Social Sciences
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P.O.Box 80.140
3508 TC Utrecht

¹ see: Victor Voronkov and Elena Zdravomyslova (Eds.) (1997) *Biographical Perspectives on Post-Socialist Societies*. St. Petersburg (in English and Russian).

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Doing Biographical Research ()**

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N.B. This session will involve the analysis of one transcript by the participants of the session. Those persons who would like to attend the session are welcome to write Gerhard for a copy of the transcript.

The 'Narrative Turn' in Biographical Research

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NEWS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, CALL FOR PAPERS

BRAZIL

The International Oral History Association in collaboration with the Brazilian Oral History Association is organizing the Xth International Oral History Conference in June 14-18, 1998 in Rio de Janeiro.
Contact: Marieta de Moraes Ferreira, CPDOC, Sector de Historia Oral, 22253 - 900 Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. fax: + 5521 5512649, e-mail: ohistory@fgvrj.br

FRANCE

The conference 'Précarisation: hommes et femmes face a la précarité. Quelles dynamiques biographiques? Quelles ressources, quels contre-pouvoir?' will be held on April 6, 1998 in Paris.

Contact: Béatrice Appay, IRESCO, 59 rue Pouchet, 75017 Paris.
A conference on The Legacy of the Chicago School will be held on April 2-4, 1998 at the Université de Versailles - Saint Quentin en Yvelines.
Contact: Pierre Tripier, Département de Sociologie, Université de Versailles - Saint Quentin en Yvelines, 47 bd. Vauban, 78047 Guyancourt CEDEX

GERMANY

The section Biographical Research of the German Society of Sociology (Sektion Biographieforschung in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie) is organizing its annual conference in Frankfurt a.M., March, 26-28 1998.
Contact: Dr. Lena Inowlocki, J.W. Goethe Universität, FB

Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Robert-Mayer-Str. 5, 60054 Frankfurt a.M., e-mail: Inowlocki@soz.uni-frankfurt.
The theme of the annual conference in 1999 is 'Biographies against the Background of the Separation of Europe'(Biographien im Horizont der Teilung Europas) and will be held in Berlin.

Contact: Dr. Roswitha Breckner, Gothaerstr.5, 10823 Berlin, e-mail: r_breckner@compuserve.com

The annual program 1998 of 'QuaText. Institut für qualitative Sozialforschung e.V.' is now available.

Contact: Dr. Simone Kreher, Ludwig Renn-Str. 31, 12679 Berlin, fax: + 49 30 2093 4340, e-mail: skreher@rz.hu-berlin.de

membership

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1053 DJ Amsterdam
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Date Signature

NETHERLANDS

The research group 'Biography and Identity' of the SISWO (Institute for Social Sciences, Amsterdam) is organizing a meeting on 'Fact and Fiction: Memory as a Resource for Biographical Research' on December, 19, 1997. In the Spring of 1998 meetings will be held on issues concerning the relevance and the analysis of biographical texts.

Contact: Dr. Bernard Kruithof, SISWO, Plantage Muidergracht 4, 1018 TV Amsterdam, fax + 31 20 6229430, e-mail: kruithof@siswo.uva.nl

The 2nd European Social Science History Conference (including sessions on Oral History etc.) will be held on March 5-7, 1998 in Amsterdam.

Contact: ESSHC conference, fax: + 31 20 6654181 or e-mail: esshc@iisg.nl
URL://www.iisg.nl/ESSHC

SLOVAKIA

The 2nd European Conference on the Social Sciences will be held on January, 22-25, 1998 in Bratislava.

Contact: Paul de Guchteneire, UNESCO MOST Clearing House, fax: + 33 1 4568 5724, e-mail: ssdpdg@unesco.org

UNITED STATES

The annual meeting of the Oral History Association will be held in New York, October, 15-18, 1998.

Contact: e-mail: bernhrdt@elmer1.bobst.nyu.edu or fax: + 1 212 9954 070 or e-mail: hiscmk@panther.gsu.edu

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