



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the first newsletter of the new millennium and it marks some new directions in which our research committee is moving. Biography and biographical research are coming into their own as a field to be reckoned with. Worldwide courses on biographical analysis, interdisciplinary conferences and a growing body of literature all attest to the vibrancy of the field.

Our research committee has reached a stable number of 64 members in good standing i.e. dues paying members of the ISA. While this is better than it was, this still leaves us eligible for only one half of the available sessions (8) at the next ISA World Congress in Brisbane. A Research Committee needs 100 members in good standing in order to get the full number of sessions. There has been considerable discussion on e-mail among the Presidents of the various Research Committees about this issue. Many of us have objections to the limitations which this restriction places on smaller RC's as well as to the undemocratic way in which the decision was communicated to us by the Executive Committee of the ISA. This issue will be the subject of discussion at the next Research Council to be held in Montreal in the summer of 2000. Robert Miller has kindly agreed to represent RC38 at the Research Council.

The Board of our Research Committee met in Amsterdam on August 19, 1999 in the context of the European Sociological Association conference, which was held at the Free University. Given the interest in our sessions at the last World Congress in Montreal, we all agreed that it would be a pity if we had to limit our activities to so few sessions. We discussed possible enticements for becoming paid members (T-shirts were mentioned!) as well as ways to activate non-paying members on our mailing list to pay there dues. While we would like to – once again – encourage all of you who haven't become members in good standing, to please do so, we also discussed how to make the best possible use of a smaller number of slots at the next World Congress in case we do not reach the 100-member mark. The following was decided:

- Papers on research go in poster sessions
- Paper sessions will be devoted to round table type discussions on broader methodological, theoretical, ethical or political issues of relevance to biographical research
- At least one session devoted to text analysis whereby all participants tackle the same text

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- Joints sessions with other RCs.
- More informal gatherings in-between sessions (like dinners, drinks)

This means that session organizers will have to do more preparatory work for the sessions, including writing a more substantial description of the aims of the sessions, questions to be addressed, and the form it will take. A stricter paper selection policy would also be necessary.

The present newsletter represents the decision to concentrate more on discussion pieces and less on announcements of ongoing activities. We have incorporated many of the suggestions, which have been made by board members. It begins with a 'state of the art' piece by Robert Miller, which is – he warns – very much in the preliminary stages. We have included it because we believe it will generate discussion among our members about the directions in which biographical research should go in the next millennium.

The 'heart' of this issue is devoted to books. Jan Coetzee (together with Suraya Naidoo) has compiled a reading list for advanced courses on biography – something many of us have been long awaiting. It is an abridged version of a much longer list. For those of you who are interested, contact Jan Coetzee (e-mail: scjc@warthog.ru.ac.za). We are currently applying for a publication grant from the ISA, which would enable us to distribute the list in book form to our members. This would be our first publication as Research Committee. In line with this project, we asked the Board Members to write short discussion pieces on their top favorite books, which inspired them in doing biographical research. Gabriele Rosenthal and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal responded with delightful reader's biographies.

In a slightly different vein, Robert Miller takes us along on his expedition to recover his own family history, ending with a book which resonates with his own findings.

We conclude the newsletter with a conference report and a call to participate in the next RC conference which will be organized in Kassel, Germany in 2001.

We would like to encourage you to respond to any of the pieces in this newsletter. Contributions should be sent to either Helma Lutz (hlutz@uni-muenster.de) or myself (kathy.davis@let.uu.nl) by April 20001.

All best wishes,
Kathy Davis
Utrecht, May 2000

VIEWPOINTS

DEVELOPING MESO-SOCIOLOGICAL STANDPOINTS: 'BIOGRAPHY & SOCIETY' AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

Robert Miller, The Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland

Introduction Many of the Research Committees of the International Sociological Association focus on a social institution or substantive area. In contrast, Research Committee 38, 'Biography & Society', centres upon a broad sociological viewpoint – the 'biographical perspective'. This complicates any attempt to assess the likely effects of social change upon the work of the Biography & Society Research Committee in coming decades.

The task is complex enough for RCs concerned with a social institution or substantive area: the institution or topic area may be (is likely to be) at different levels of development in different parts of the globe; the whole idea of evolution or of there being a series of stages of development is likely to be questionable; the parameters, structural, social and cultural, driving change or evolution will vary depending upon geography; the level of sociological knowledge and research in different locations may range from comprehensive to virtually absent; and the task of compiling what is known on a global basis can be formidable. Nevertheless, the rationale for a substantially based RC's existence does provide common bedrock of social practices or phenomena for study. Furthermore, the RC's institutional concern or topic area will be affected by social change, albeit perhaps in different ways and manners at different geographic locations.

The effect of social change upon the development of sociological practice for a RC like Biography & Society whose rationale is a methodological perspective, however, is more oblique. Admittedly, what this perspective actually is, whether there is a single biographical perspective, or what it should become are matters of considerable debate among its practitioners – a debate which is out of the scope of this paper and will be referred to here only indirectly (see the 1997 and 1998 issues of the 'Biography & Society Newsletter' for its flavour). The members of the RC do share a concern with the collection and analysis of life histories and, latterly, the narration of life stories. The substantive contexts in which these biographies are set and the topics of interest in an analysis, however, are variable. While the contexts may change, that people live lives, the stories of which can be collected, will remain constant. Arguably, we are living in a period in which individualism is waxing while traditional and modernist sources of community and class identity are waning, developments that should render the biographical perspective more salient. This shift should be seen in contemporary times,

however, more as one of degree than of kind. A core change in the nature of the Biography & Society RC's subject matter would be of an as epochal nature as the Renaissance/Enlightenment rise of individualism. With its work anchored in a methodological approach, the work of the Biography & Society RC will be affected less by social change than the majority of ISA RCs. Since the analysis of biographical material itself must incorporate parameters of historical change, this distancing from social change is ironic.

Developments While social change does not impinge directly upon the RC's subject matter, social change has had much to do with the methodological directions that the work of the Biography & Society RC has taken since its inception. Real historical events have shaped the evolution of the approaches to biographical work followed by the RC's members. It is this evolution that will form the substance of this paper.

The use of life histories and the biographical perspective in sociology can be traced back to Wladek Wisznienski and The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1958/1918-1920), the work of the Chicago School and pamietniki in northeastern Europe. RC38 had its origins in the revival of qualitative techniques in the late 1960s, coming most directly from the melding with oral history of work on social mobility promoted by Daniel Bertaux. The work of the RC during its first decades emphasized 'thick description', perhaps at the cost of conceptual grounding. The traditional concern of the RC with social mobility is continuing, focusing upon meso-theorization of the nexus between individual mobility and family influence and tradition (e.g., Bertaux and Thompson, 1997). The 90s have seen an accelerating trend towards theorization both in the development of methodological approaches to the collection and analysis of biographical information and in the grounding of 'rich' data in conceptual frameworks. These developments have been driven by social changes.

Narrative The rise of the narrative perspective in qualitative interview analysis has had a major impact upon biographical research. The prime method of data collection for biographical researchers is the in-depth interview, so the dynamics of the interplay between interviewer and interviewee becomes a central issue of interview validity. In addition, the nature of the subject matter of a biographical interview – the sheer volume of potentially relevant information in a single life and the

necessity for the interviewee to recollect and select events and states of mind from the often distant past – adds to the salience of methodological issues concerning narration. The information that the interview respondent recalls and the way they choose to understand and present the information at the time of an interview will be affected by their present situation and their anticipation of the future (Kohli, 1981).

One source of the impact of the narrative perspective upon biographical research has been the generalization of feminist methodology to qualitative research broadly. Feminist social science research methodology has been one of the main wellsprings of 'the narrative turn' in qualitative research. Given that the existence of feminist social science methodology owes its existence in turn to the movement of women into hitherto male-dominated academic career structures – the academic counterpart to the general struggle for women's rights – part of the growth of a concern with narration in biographical research has its grounding in overarching social change.

The main impetus for the development of a specifically 'biographical' variant of the narrative perspective, however, has its origins in a specific event – the Holocaust. German-speaking researchers attempting to carry out biographical research with participants and survivors of the Holocaust are forced to confront problems of recall – the selective recasting or repression of memory. This led to the development by Fritz Schütze and colleagues of methods of open interviewing and the 'microanalysis' of key text (see Schütze, 1992a & b; Chanfrault-Duchet, 1995) – partly as a response to problems of recall and interview dynamics. The application of biographical methods to the study of other societies that are recovering from historically traumatic events is a likely area of expansion in the coming decades.

Historic watersheds A linked development has been the use of biographical methods to study the effects of profound historic watersheds upon individual lives. The 'profound historic watershed' that provided the main impetus here was the collapse of socialism in eastern and central Europe in 1989. There had been a quasi-independent tradition of life history studies in Eastern Europe prior to 1989 and the falling barriers of 1989 facilitated contact between biographical researchers from east and west. In a situation of tight official censorship and control of information in the public media, private information, including orally communicated information, can be seen as more reliable. Arguably, this had the effect in the social sciences of biographical sources of information enjoying more general acceptance as legitimate sources of serious sociological data in Eastern

Europe than in the west. The most extensive application of biographical methods to study the transformation from socialism to 'postsocialism' has been in the former Soviet Union. Reunified Germany has also seen a high level of biographical work where the narrative impetus inspired by 'Holocaust studies' in former West Germany has coincided with the impetus produced by the reunification of two separately-evolved societies and sociologies.

The retrenchment of social support The retrenchment of traditional welfare state system of social support in Western Europe has led to a new development in biographical research – its application to social policy studies. The benchmark for this development would be the publication of *La misère du monde* by Pierre Bourdieu and others in 1993 (translated as *The Weight of the World* (1999)). A main feature has been the ability of the biographical perspective to communicate the human cost of welfare retrenchment and poverty. As well as impacting upon public consciousness through the 'richness' of its description, the use of biographical methods have proven capable of making effective linkages between 'thick data' and theorization. Quotation from another influential pan-European research project on 'social exclusion' and welfare policy that centred upon the use of the 'biographical interpretative method' is illustrative:

Another key significance of the research lies in its dynamic interrelating of social theory, policy and methodology . . . processes of social transformation necessitate the restructuring of biographical expectations and orientations. But social change is also embedded in biographies, propelled by changes in culture and in approaches to life. While theorising about such relationships between agency and structure has often been an abstract exercise, the SOSTRIS (Social Strategies in Risk Societies) project provides a living archive of material which substantiates and elaborates the theory, provides the means for thinking it through, and for bringing it into practical and active use. In many senses the research started from a frame which sought to explore the relationships between personal action and social structures, but it also returned to it through an emergent and grounded process of research, it shows the theoretical ideas being used in research practice and being exemplified in people's lives. The biographical perspective and methodology are integral to this exercise as a key tool for investigating relations between everyday life and institutional structures. (SOSTRIS, 1999: 92-3)

Future developments All of the above are recent developments in 'the biographical perspective' which may be extrapolated into the near future. What is more difficult is to anticipate the areas into which social change may drive future developments in biographical research. One may,

however, hazard some guesses. Biographical research always has had strong linkages with the study of the family. Biographical research into social mobility has tended to emphasize 'mesolinks' between individual social mobility and family influence and tradition and family strategies for upward mobility. Family structures in western societies in the latter part of the twentieth century have splintered from the dominant stable nuclear family model to an acceptance of complex multiple family structures that include single parent families that originate from either choice or circumstance, stable unmarried partnerships, serial monogamy, and homosexual partnerships. The complexity of the life course transitions that these structures imply are an invitation to the biographical perspective that has not as yet been taken up. One may anticipate that the study of new and evolving family structures will include the use of biographies.

The study of social mobility has concentrated upon western or European societies. Here, the original paradigm for research was the large-scale cross-sectional quantitative analysis of national datasets; a 'modernist' approach to social mobility research. The development of social mobility studies in the West in recent decades can be seen as having moved along 'post-modernist' lines to a fracturing into a variety of paradigms. The level of analysis now is as likely to be local or international/comparative as much as national and the method of analysis can be qualitative/holistic as well as quantitative. The application of biographical methods to social mobility studies was part of this evolution. The indigenous study of social mobility now has expanded to developing nations, particularly Asian societies. Here, the drive to understand rapid contemporary transformations in stratification, particularly the rise of the 'new Asian middle class', has driven mobility research. At present, Asian mobility research is still at the 'modernist' level of aggregate statistical model building. This is likely to change in coming decades with the focus of Asian stratification research shifting to

more fractured 'post-modern' models, including biographical methods.

Conclusion The tenor of the work of the 'Biography & Society' RC at the beginning of the new millennium can be subsumed under two related themes which will apply equally to a variety of substantive topic areas within biographical research. Firstly, the biographical perspective embodies a holistic viewpoint, which can cope with a complex multiplicity of social situations. This, coupled with the method's strong association with the relativism of 'the narrative turn', means that the point of view of biographical research is a post-modern point of view. Fractured views of 'reality' have become an axiomatic part of the biographical perspective. Secondly, the biographical perspective's focus of analysis is across the lengthy span of a whole life course and links with family structures of origin and destination. This will weld its evolution to the conceptual development of mesosociological standpoints.

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GREAT BOOKS

READING LIST FOR ADVANCED COURSES IN BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Compiled by Jan K. Coetzee (with the assistance of Ms. Suraya Naidoo)

This list constitutes a basis for advanced courses in biographical research and the narrative study of lives. It does not proclaim to be complete and only covers publications in the English language. The readings provide an introduction to general as well as more specialised themes. The list contains a range of references covering the logic and epistemological basis of the life history method

within the context of qualitative methodology. It deals with the qualitative research design in general as well as with the design of research based on in-depth interviews, life histories, focused interviews and other biographical methods. The readings refer to the experience of qualitative fieldwork. The meaning of biographical research (listening to, reading on, and writing up „other

lives") comes under scrutiny. The list provides references to how the qualitative social scientist should interpret narratives within the broader context of the life course.

More specialised focus areas such as gender/feminism, health/welfare and family/household are focused on – specifically with a view of illustrating – the implementation of biographical research.

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MY TOP 5 FAVORITE BOOKS Gabriele Rosenthal, University of Köln, Germany

Preliminary remarks As a biographical researcher I will give you the temporal sequences in which I read the books and the context of my reading. Although the following books are not directly connected with biographical research they are important for my theoretical and methodological thinking and influenced strongly my empirical work.

1. G.H. Mead (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University Press.

I read this book during my studies at the University of Constance in the context of a 2-semester seminar about G.H. Mead. I was extremely fascinated by Mead's theory. I assume here started my identification with sociology in general (before I was more identified with my studies in psychology) and it convinced me in doing qualitative research.

2. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday. I read this book shortly after I finished my studies and when I started to embark in the field of biographical research. At this time I was a participant of a reading circle of qualitative researchers in Berlin. We read over several years different theoretical books in the field of the interpretative paradigm. Berger and Luckmann was the first book we discussed. We met every other week and discussed one page, line by line. Today I am working again with this text in my teaching and I realize, how much I am influenced by this work but even more by the theoretical work behind it - that means by:

3. Alfred Schütz (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press. His first book I also read in the context of this reading circle. Looking at my underlining in these two books, I see that every time when the lifetime - the interrelationship between presence and past - is stressed, I marked it, made comments etc. But at this time I already was very much influenced by George Herbert Mead's theory of time (*The Philosophy of the Present*, 1932) and I was

convinced by the assumption that in order to understand a present phenomenon, I have to reconstruct its genesis.

4. Eric Leed (1979) *No Man's Land. Combat & Identity in World War I*. Cambridge: University Press. This was the first English academic book, which I read from the beginning to end and it is connected with the beginning of my still ongoing work about traumatization in historical collective situations. Reading Leed encouraged me to do interviews with veterans from World War I - which I conducted in 1988. I learned a lot through this research - not only about the traumatization of this generation of men, but also about the very differences to the experiences of WW II. I conducted interviews with men, who served in both wars and it was very interesting, how their biographical experiences of WWII was constituted by their perception and experiences of WWI. And, to put in on a general theoretical level, it showed how far the experiences of a historical event are constituted by the experiences in the past of the biographer.

5. Aron Gurwitsch (1964) *The Field of Consciousness*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. I read this book over the period of one year. I never lived so much in the world of one theoretical work. From chapter to chapter, I also read a great part of the literature Gurwitsch quoted especially the literature by the authors of Gestalt theory. This process was in the context of my habilitation, where I struggled with the question about the interrelationship between the subject and the object, respectively the interrelationship between experienced life and narrated life. Gurwitsch helped me to find an answer to this question, which puzzled me since my study time. With the help of this theoretical work (or with my conclusions from it), I am satisfied - not only on the theoretical level - but also on the level of the methods I am using for analyzing biographies. This means distinguishing between both levels - the experienced life and its presentation in the narrated life - and analyzing it in different steps of analysis.

MY TOP EIGHT Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal, University of Kassel, German

Heavy reading has been part of me since I was able to do it. How happy I felt at the age of seven with a bunch of books from the school library each Friday night after lending hour. I still do get excited about intelligent books, but it happens much less than then (and even lesser with sociology books). In my professional career, I have

been always something like a non-follower. Weber, Simmel, Habermas and Luhmann were and are highly influential in the way I neither opposed them nor became a disciple, so I leave them out. I learnt a lot from others, who did not write books (e.g. Ulrich Oevermann) by observing their work. So the following list is highly selective, longer

than it could have been, leaving out much and completely (too) short in view of all the hundreds of books I read between seven and seventeen which probably triggered my interest in biography. Not to mention life itself.

1. Garfinkel, Harold (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall. Was my favorite in a bunch of books in the then so called "sociology of everyday life". It was in the early 1970s when I had to report and explain this book to my non-sociologist colleagues in a research team on occupational careers. Sometimes I, as courier was beaten for the message. I never adopted the conversational analysis style of the later "movement", but have remained sensitive to the concept of creating order in interaction and communication.

2. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1945/1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. I read it first in 1980 in a Berkeley seminar with a small study group of four or five. The professor was a Father of the Franciscan order and the best student of a carpenter. I understood the English version better than my German one and learnt once and forever about the intimate relation of perception and being embodied (socially as in "flesh").

3. Husserl, Edmund (1966) *Zur Phaenomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1893-1917) in *Gesamtausgabe*. Den Haag: Nijhoff. Here I had followed the track Alfred Schütz had paved for me. I learnt about the importance of distinguishing different levels of temporality and tried to integrate it in my empirical work as biographical researcher since the late 70s.

4. Schapp, Wilhelm (1953) *In Geschichten verstrickt* ("Entangled in Stories"). Hamburg: Felix Meiner. First read in the mid 70s, I always found this

phenomenological book strange and old fashioned but I believed Schapp that stories make a big part of us and embarked in proving this empirically.

5. Plessner, Helmuth (1941) *Lachen und Weinen* ("Laughing and Weeping") in: *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp. I came over this work checking philosophical anthropology for a term paper and found concepts for a sociology of body, which I think has not yet been fully incorporated in our discipline. My later works on the sick and healthy body/biography has always been informed by Plessner's idea of the "eccentric positionality".

6. Strauss, Anselm (1959) *Mirrors and Masks. The Search for Identity*. New York: The Free Press. I read it in my 3rd year at the university and started to grasp and read everything I could get of this scholar. I owe him a good deal: thinking, style of research, and touching personal encounters, still one and a half decade later in the early 1980s.

7. Berger, Peter L. and Luckmann, Thomas (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. I read it by chance in 1969, when I tried to piece together my identity between the Scylla of protestant theology and the Charybdis of Marx' Capital. What a relief: now I could become a sociologist of knowledge. What would have happened to me, if I had missed this piece! The book also proved to have an in-built dethroning mechanism of it's authors by leading me immediately to Alfred Schütz' work, which has nourished me ever since.

8. Frisch, Max (1964) *Stiller*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. I read it around 1965 and it was one of the most influential books at the end of my high school time on the problem of constructing and denying identity. I was shocked and thrilled and the topic stayed with me up until now.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY Robert Miller, The Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland

Academic biographies tend to be rife with examples of how facets of the subject's personal life spill over into their intellectual life. My biography is no exception. The field of social mobility has been my longest standing academic interest. Two uncles had a seminal influence on both my personal mobility and on the intellectual route that my work on social mobility has taken. One uncle was an expatriate businessman and the other was a university professor. The expatriate worked for the notorious British American Tobacco Company in Latin America. His annual visits back to his sleepy

southeastern USA hometown gave his nephew a curiosity about living in a foreign land. The other uncle deliberately prodded his nephew's interest in science and, later on, was more 'hands on' when he helped us meet university tuition fees that were beyond the reach of my parents. The influence of these uncles came together when I leapt at the chance to take up my first real job - leaving the United States for Northern Ireland in order to work on a large-scale quantitative study of social mobility. After arriving in Ulster, the same background of oblique family influences led to a

predisposition to heretical thoughts about the primacy of the father-to-son paradigm that dominated social mobility research. Heretical thoughts that started me on a convoluted path to biographical methods.

Influences can go both ways, however. My research interest in life stories and family histories led me to teach a course in which students constructed a 'sociological' family history based upon in-depth interviews. The students used genealogical charts as a means of structuring their reports. Coincidentally, at the same time I received several genealogical charts covering the maternal and paternal sides of my family and used these in the class. Then, along came the Internet. The advent of the Internet has led to an explosion in private genealogical reconstruction. Huge amounts of raw information – censuses, emigrant ship passenger lists, and records of all sorts – have been put up on the Internet and can be searched remotely. A number of sites collate family trees together into genealogical databases – the most famous being that of the Mormons. A variety of 'bulletin boards' exist where one can post the names, dates and locations of ancestors and check to see whether others are tracing the same lines. I tried out a few of these sites and was amazed at the number of 'hits' (finding a source that would take a line further back). People who are seduced by the genealogical bug go through a distinct evolution. There is an initial fairly anal, 'male', phase where one concentrates on getting as far back as possible on as many lines of ancestry as possible. You log an ancestor's name and dates and immediately move on to try to find the names and dates of his or her parents. Aside from occasionally wondering, for example, whether they had nice weather on the 6th of May, 1856 when Luther Leonidas Miller married Mary Ann Taylor at Olive Branch Meeting House, North Carolina, you push on. Some people only trace their male lines (which is the easy option, the surnames of the men remain basically the same across the generations and there is always more information about the males – anyway). Eventually, this phase passes. The e-mail contacts with many-times-removed cousins who have information about a mutual line gradually dry up. 'Brick walls', shadowy people about whom no information as to origin exists, begin to multiply. The inevitable dwindling of records and literate ancestors to write them take their toll as you work backwards in time. At the same time, as the quality of information dwindles, sheer volume becomes a problem. Since the number of direct ancestors doubles with each generation, one does not have to go back too many generations before the theoretical number of ancestors exceeds the number of people who were living in whatever corner of the globe you originated in. If one happens to discover a remote connection with the aristocratic lines somewhere in your family tree,

you are likely to wander into an interconnected wilderness of medieval dynasties. My saturation point with this phase came when I received a file from a distant cousin that she claimed was 'definitive'. She established an aristocratic connection, which eventually led to Charlemagne, which seemed legitimate enough. This led on to a line of ancestry in early medieval northern Italy that led into Roman emperors and then, via Priam of Troy (!), to the Biblical patriarchs and finally Adam. (The most fascinating thing about this lineage was that each individual link appeared plausible, it was only the end result that was mad.)

Eventually, the genealogist moves on to a second phase. Instead of cataloguing evermore remote ancestors with whom the connection is meaningless, one's interest shifts to the more recent generations. What were these people like? How did they view the world? What did they look like? What had happened to them in their lives? This may lead to interviewing the surviving members of your family's oldest generation to capture something about those still in reach of living memory – oral history, but personal oral history. Written documents, particularly those that give some sort of insight into how an ancestor thought or behaved, become important. Distant cousins send you photocopies of letters or meticulously type out and e-mail the text of documents. For instance, I took great perverse pleasure in receiving an account of a memorable drunk of a distant Dutch colonial ancestor of mine:

... February 21, 1649 ... Jacob Toenys ... while in a state of drunkenness, struck Gerrit van Wencome, the nephew of V. van Slichtenhorst (the Director of the colony of Rensselaerswyck) 'without any cause'. Jacob Aertse Waegenenaer (my ancestor) then called Wencome an informer and tried to keep his guard off of Toenys. When the Director and his son showed up to arrest Toenys, Jacob Raedemaecker (wheelwright), Jacob Waegenenaer and Harmen Bastianesnesen grabbed hold of Toenys and refused to let the Director arrest him three times.

Eventually, Waegenenaer was 'ordered to appear in court and there acknowledge that he had done wrong and had fallen into error through ignorance and drunkenness'.

Wills are one of the main sources for early documents written by ancestors. One result of my 'data collection' phase had been to establish that all branches of my family had been very early immigrants into what became the southeastern United States, the last of them arriving in the 1740s. Many of them had prospered. While I understood what this implied, it still felt peculiar to come across excerpts such as the following: ... to my son-in-law Absolom Bostick the negro woman Amy whom I put in his possession many

years ago and her increase and all such increase. Also Little George, the son of Desse now in my possession, likewise the negro slaves Jeffery, Nann and the children of Nann and the increase ... to said Absolom Bostick my faithful old servant Pegg more as a charity to her than a benefit to him. ... – Will of David Dalton, 1st day of May 1815.

On a trip back to the United States, I visited an uncle who, knowing of my interest, lent me his copy of a memoir written over a period between 1913 and 1932 by 'Aunt Polly', a great-aunt who was the daughter of one of my great-great grandfathers. This short book had been published privately by two of her children in 1956 and was a set of my great-aunt's recollections about her early life and family stories from the decades before her birth. Absolute gold dust if you are interested in this sort of thing. I was reading the book on the flight back to Northern Ireland and came across the following passage:

This grandfather (Darius Masten, Polly's grandfather, my great-great-great grandfather) first married Phoebe Stanley whose father owned many slaves. When they were married Phoebe's father gave his daughter some slaves. I do not know how many, but that is not important here because this story is about one of them – Grace, who was then a young woman. His wife Phoebe died soon after her first baby was born and the child died soon thereafter. Under the law, if the child had died before the mother the slaves would have gone back to the mother's people. But since the mother died first her infant child became her heir and, upon the child's death, the father was heir to the child and thus the slaves all became his. It was in this way the young negro woman, Grace, became his. Grace had a number of children. Her oldest son was Jake who was born about the same time as my father who was the oldest child of my grandfather by his second marriage to Polly Fair (my grandmother for whom I am named). Besides Jake, Grace had other children and of them I well remember Mark, Lize, Sam, Asa, Lizzie, and Mitt. Grace died long before I was born but her children all remained with the family (as well as their children) until after the surrender in 1865.

A lengthy list of the names of the people Grace's children married some of their offspring and where they moved to follows.

Well, I found this interesting. The fact that Grace's story had figured prominently in a remembrance of the Masten family, coupled with the careful explanation of how 'Grace became his' shortly after the death of Darius' wife, the juxtaposition of the births of Grace's children with those of Darius and his second wife and the careful listing of the Grace's descendants all added up for me to a fairly obvious message from Aunt Polly to her descendants – Grace had been Darius' mistress and they had had seven children.

The reactions of my immediate family varied. I sent a photocopy of the book to my sister, drawing her attention to the account. Through her, I heard that my mother felt that I 'had got it all wrong.' But my mother has never come up with an alternative that is 'right' and has not discussed the book with me directly. My sister is sitting on the fence and the uncle who lent me the book agrees with me. Several other relatives became quite angry.

Viewed as a narrative, the text raises a lot of interesting issues. 'Aunt Polly' was born in 1858 and the book is compiled from remembrances that she wrote between 1913 and 1932. So, it was written a woman aged at least 55 who was the wife of an upper middle class architect and lived in the southern United States at the height of racial segregation. Darius' and Grace's relationship is not stated directly, but it takes an act of will not to 'read between the lines'. I believe that Aunt Polly was aware that unless something was set down by someone in her generation, all knowledge of the relationship would disappear with her death. For instance, a separate history of the family has the following note about Darius: Through the child of his first wife - Phoebe - inherited and became the owner of some slaves. It is said that is why he did not go to Indiana with the others. He could not sell them and could not free them or take them with him. He never bought or sold a slave, but kept them until they were freed by Lincoln's Proclamation.

Grace has become one of 'some slaves' and while a reader might wonder why Darius 'could not' do any of these things, he/she would not guess the reason. In contrast, Aunt Polly's account is a deliberate message to unborn generations, though she did not, perhaps could not, give an explicit account.

It is also worth noting that the book was published by two of Aunt Polly's children in 1956, twenty-two years after her death and in the same year as the landmark US Supreme Court decision on school desegregation. Her children edited her accounts, placing them in chronological order and adding explanatory notes. They could have left out the story of Grace, but chose not to do so.

I decided to take things a bit further. Having experience of tracing ancestors on the Internet, I attempted to trace the descendants of Grace down to the present day. I had a vague idea that if living descendants of Grace could be located there might also exist an account of the relationship from a black viewpoint. In the end, this was fruitless. Searching genealogical databases for the names of Grace's descendants produced no 'hits'. Searching the web pages of the Forsyth County Genealogical Society (the county in North

Carolina where Grace and Darius' descendants lived) produced a striking image – a panoramic photograph of the 1905 Masten family reunion with one black person, Harriett Masten, a 91-year-old ex-slave of the Mastens, in its centre. Harriett Masten had been the wife of Mark, one of Grace's sons. A query to a bulletin board run by the same Society produced a response from a historian of the Afro-American community. At the time of her writing, Aunt Polly had believed that only one of Grace's descendants had still been living and that that person was childless. The historian, who had a thorough grasp of the lineages of the original Afro-American families in the area, confirmed that the line appears to have died out.

So, where do I go from here? Last summer I told part of this story to Kathy Davis and she suggested that I have a look at the book *Slaves in the Family* by Edward Ball. Edward Ball is the descendant of a very prominent South Carolina slave-holding family that owned hundreds of people. Much of the Ball family records had survived either kept by

family members or in archives and he used these both to write a remarkable history of the slaves and to trace some of the descendants. Some of my own experience mirrored his reflections and the reactions of his relations. The quality of *Slaves in the Family* has an inhibiting effect. I cannot hope to equal Ball's achievement, so the academic impetus is gone, leaving only the personal. There is an outside chance that some primary research of records and papers could turn up more. When next visiting my uncle, I may build in a few days for searching for information, but finding anything more would be a very long shot. Besides, there are many other equally intriguing mysteries scattered across the generations. Most likely I just will log the material into my genealogical computer program's files and leave it for some niece or nephew to stumble across a couple of generations hence.

Reference Ball, Edward (1998) *Slaves in the Family*. New York: Ballantine Books.

CONFERENCE REPORTS

THE UNIVERSITY AS LIFE-WORLD AND METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ON BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH.

Martin-Luther University, Halle-Wittenberg, Germany, February 10-12, 2000

For the first time, the annual conferences of the study group in biographical research of the DGfE (German Society of Educational Sciences) and the DGS (German Sociological Society) section of biographical studies were organised as a joint venture. 130 scholars and students attended the conference, co-ordinated by Ursula Apitzsch (Frankfurt) and Heinz-Hermann Krüger (Halle). It offered representatives of the two disciplines an opportunity to come into contact and to exchange ideas on a broad range of topics.

Fritz Schütze (Magdeburg) gave the opening lecture on Thursday night „Bottle-necks or Studies in Creative Self-reflection“. It was followed by the lecture „Biographical strategies of 'non-traditional students'“ by Peter Alheit (Göttingen). The next two panels dealt with questions concerning the socialisation biographies of different students at the university and the theme of alienation and learning.

A round-table discussion about learning strategies linked the thematic and the methodical parts of the conference. Within the realm of the university, different methodical approaches and strategies have already become clear with the university landscape. Most of the work-shops are integrated in university teaching programs: Eberhard Nölke in Frankfurt, Marianne Pieper in Hamburg,

Thomas Rein and Peter Strauß in Magdeburg and Gerhard Riemann in Bamberg. There are also independent groups like „Quatext“ (Berlin), introduced by Gabriele Rosenthal, which offered courses for researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds. Numerous questions by young scholars indicated the great need for such workshops.

The second part of the conference consisted of sessions dealing with hermeneutics, narrative problems, and different disciplinary approaches. Many listeners attended the fact that the plenary lecture „Internet Research as a New Field of Qualitative Social Research“ by Winfried Marotzki, (Magdeburg) in the early morning showed the growing interest in the new medium. Probably, I was not the only one who chatted on-line the following day. The last lecture of this part of the conference was held by Theodor Schulze, (Bielefeld), who spoke about the analysis of biographical topics, followed by an interesting and controversial discussion.

The discussion about similarities and differences between the two disciplinary approaches of biographical research (education and sociology) began in a session in response to the presentation of Helma Lutz (Münster). It continued in the final round-table, to which well-known representatives

of the two fields had been invited, with impromptu presentations from the audience. During this discussion, it became evident that it is impossible to distinguish clearly between the two disciplines. An uncomplicated collaboration between them in regard to research practice and shared research topics has already been practised for some time. The differences within one discipline are often greater between quantitative and qualitative approaches than the differences

between the two disciplines. Nevertheless, a distinction seemed sensible in regard to pragmatic and academic strategies. The discussion raised a whole set of questions, which will hopefully be elaborated in further common conferences and collaborative efforts.

Ingrid Miethe, University for Applied Sciences at Greifswald, Germany
(translation: Jeanette Stiller, Münster, Germany)

CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal will be organizing the next RC38 conference in Kassel, Germany. The dates are May 24-26, 2001. Suggestions for papers or activities should be directed to:

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