CONDITIONS FOR SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN BIOGRAPHY*

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Abstract Sociological research in biography examines how, under continually changing social conditions, subjectivity is constituted in intersubjective processes. The reciprocity of the individual and society is not only stated as a matter of fact but is also made a guideline in sociological research. At all levels of this research area, society is the subject of discussion, ranging from a general view on social modernisation processes to issues like properties of specific milieus and family structures, and up to the socialised subject.

The Biographical Illusion

In his article ‘The Biographical Illusion’ first published in the French journal Actes de la recherche in 1986 and reprinted in BIOS (Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History) Bourdieu (1990) casts fundamental doubt on the approach of research in biography. His argument culminates in the following sentence:

To attempt to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient sequence of successive events without any other relationship than that to a subject ... is almost as absurd as to try to explain an underground route without taking into consideration the route network, that is, the matrix of objective relationships between the routes. (p. 80, trans.)

For Bourdieu, the existence of an ego is a valid question within the limits of sociology; however, it presents itself as the question of practical identity, the question of the habitual ego.

The following conclusion can be drawn from Bourdieu’s argument: research in biography, which, as is currently the case, concerns itself predominantly with individual biographical narrations, is deficient. It does not concern itself with practical life, but instead with the reflexive access to practical life, and it proceeds from the unquestioned basic premise that the life of acting individuals is to be interpreted as a coherent totality. The result of this ‘biographical false conclusion’ (Rahkonen 1991 : 244) is that the constitution of the subject in practical social interchange cannot be grasped. As a result, research in biography misses its genuine sociological object.

These criticisms have naturally not been accepted by researchers in biography without objection. In a rejoinder to Bourdieu, Niethammer (1990) writes:

In research on mass biography or oral history the objective of the historian is not to strengthen or make convincing the meaning construction of the source by means of retelling, but to dissect and reveal its constructive elements, its dependence on experience as well as a pluralism of relevant types, and by means of these alienations to destructunitheir naive transfer of meaning

* Translated from German by Madeleine Kinsella (Marburg) and Steven Vaitkus (Wuppertal).
in cultural communication ... Narratives can be compared to temporal levels of cultural interpretation patterns in the surrounding society. (p. 92, trans.)

This rejoinder misses the point of Bourdieu’s argument. Whereas Bourdieu places the constitution of subjectivity as the formation of practical subjectivity in a social context, whose totalising self-ascertainsments represent an epiphenomenon, Niethammer differentiates a priori between social space and individual. After completing this differentiation, he can then proceed to reflect on the relations between individual and society. The result of this, however, is already predetermined: it can only be about a ‘naive transfer of meaning’ between society and individual and a false consciousness in the case of the latter. Thus a social science that considers itself enlightening and informative creates its own object instead of first impartially approaching this object (in the sense of displaying a methodological openness towards the objective meanings of texts, actions and social structures). However, sociological enlightenment, which is anchored in the object, will always be much more effective than a scientific approach which must first create its object by means of theoretical pre-assumptions that are ultimately inappropriate.

Moreover, if one looks at the survey of research in biography in Europe done by Bertaux and Kohli (1984), the question of the constitution of subjectivity, in whatever form it is conceptually approached, is not found there. A remarkable exception is the work of Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1988). According to Bertaux and Kohli, the questions being dealt with are those of the subjective perspective of the narrators, the construction of meaning structures as well as the discovery of patterns of social relationships.

The purpose of the following discussion is firstly to go beyond the theoretical basis of Bourdieu’s approach and to develop on a wider basis his argument that the ‘detour via the construction of the social space’ is essential in order to secure subjectivity as a centre of social action. We then consider how, from the standpoint of a theory of the social constitution of subjectivity, problems of this type can be examined in practical terms as they appear from the perspective of the theory of biography. Finally, we develop a proposal of how research in biography can once again be brought closer to its sociological and social–philosophical roots. The difficulties of such an attempt are more a question of mentality than theory:

The necessity of this detour via the construction of space appears ... so evident ... that it would be difficult to understand why it is not immediately clear to all researchers if one did not know that the individual ... is also seemingly the most real of realities. (Bourdieu 1990 : 81, trans.)

A Cartesian conception of biography and the theoretical bias of non-Cartesian research in biography

In an extension of the theoretical focus beyond Bourdieu’s ideas, the problem presented here can be dealt with as one of a ‘Cartesian conception of biography’. We follow Grathoff (1989), who constructs his argument in relation to the problem of conceptualisation in the following manner. He
refers to Plessner (1975) in order to characterise and criticise the position of Cartesianism. ‘Cartesianism’ represents the separation between the physical (extended nature) and the psychical (inwardliness). Plessner’s criticism is that Cartesianism regards this difference as a basic one (and not, for example, as one of perspective), so that these spheres are placed in opposition to each other. Furthermore, Plessner criticises the fact that the only means of scientific discovery that Cartesianism will allow for investigating extended nature is that of mathematical mechanistic measurement, whereas the sphere of inwardliness is made accessible by consideration of the ego. This area, therefore, is limited to the ego. This dualism between the physical and the psychical, which is seen as fundamental, brings a translation problem in its wake: how does the ego render the outer world accessible to itself? According to the Cartesian principle of the isolatedness of an interior nature, the exterior world always appears under the cloak of appearance ‘so that each element of the exterior world … has elements of consciousness as its representative’ (Plessner 1975: 57).

Grathoff has recourse to Peirce in order to demonstrate Cartesianism’s inability to offer an adequate theory for understanding identity and sociality. Peirce lists four incapacities in Cartesianism. First, the unmediated perception of interiority. Instead, every perception of the self is a perception mediated through others. Second, we can have no insight into the immediate relationship of cognition to its object outside of consciousness. Cognition, rather, represents a process in which there is no clear-cut division between the perceived and the anticipated. Third, we cannot think without signs. ‘Thought is bound in signlike manner in this correspondence between experiencing consciousness and actual reality which is not manipulable or universally doubtable, and in which man himself is comprehended as a sign’ (Grathoff 1989: 83). Fourth, it is impossible to have a conceptual idea of something absolutely unrecognisable. This means that absolute reality is replaced by a virtual reality, a world of the possible which has a firm social basis.

Grathoff measures research in biography against Plessner’s and Peirce’s criticism of Cartesianism. In doing so he also concludes that the assessment of biographical experience is radically separated from original life:

Unnoticed assessments are responsible for deceptions, the reason for which is to be sought in unnoticed socially mediated non-authentic sensations. Sociality becomes ideologized and falls victim to the suspicion that it is the reason for every misconceived assessment even including false awareness. (1989: 88)

Social research, indebted to Cartesianism which seeks to banish the dangers of deception of this nature, places the individual first in order to examine the relationship between individual and society. ‘Here an almighty subject, there almighty structures, and in between a diverse tug of war which only alters the proportions but not the essences’ is Waldenfels’ assessment (1987: 131). Pragmatists and social phenomenologists counter with the primacy of practical intersubjectivity, meaning ‘a structure which forms itself within mutual action
into life objectives in which the somatic and exterior nature are effortlessly incorporated’ (Joas 1980: 9).

On the basis of this position, there is no alternative whether the individual creates order or acts within a preordained order. Even Sartre’s clear and fascinating formula from the Flaubert analyses, ‘what does man make out of that which circumstance has made of him?’, which seemed to present a more adequate, dialectic comprehension of the relationship between individual and society, still bears obvious traces of Cartesianism. In this formula a lively social interactive process disappears in a before-after-perspective.

A non-Cartesian conception of biography does not share the perspective of research in which, on the one hand, the unquestioning point of departure is the concept of authenticity or a coherent totality of the individual, and on the other hand, the relationship between individual and society is dissolved in the question whether more action (autonomy) or suffering (heteronomy) occurs in an individual biography. Such non-Cartesian research in biography, in which the central subject is the social construction of subjectivity in historical perspective, can endorse the theoretical drafts of Simmel (1983) and of pragmatists like Mead (1959), who considers personal identity as a process and as linked to a social perspective (Joas 1980), as well as the later concepts of Goffman (1971) and Strauss (1959) which are oriented to it. From this standpoint the historical and social contexts, within which the conception of autonomy, authenticity of the ego, etc. developed, could become an object of research from the diachronic and the synchronic perspectives. The diachronic perspective is primarily concerned with transformations in the relationship to self and the world in the train of the social modernisation process and its continuities and discontinuities. Important fields of analysis in the synchronic perspective are primarily concerned with, for example, the structural conditions of socialisatory interaction and the mental imprinting of the world of work, whereby diachronic and synchronic perspectives are always to be seen as interlapping.

_Draft of theory and method of non-Cartesian research in biography_

What is decisive for an approach, according to the theories of Bourdieu and Grathoff, is to examine the conditions giving rise to the development of personal autonomy under the specific circumstances of the modernisation process. The following perspective provides an orientation in this respect: which objective socio-structural and socio-economic life situations decide the framework of biographical development? Which socio-structural conditions are conducive to the development of a personal identity disposed to reflexive agenda-setting of the self, and where would these tend to be dysfunctional with regard to conditions specific to life situations? Above all: where do the lines of socio-structural conditions and emerging biographical development cross?

Matthiesen and Neuendorff (1989) propose the concept of interpretation pattern (Deutungsmuster) in order to solve these problems. For them, interpretation patterns constitute an independent structural level beyond the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity which, along with their representational problems, have
presented traditional research into working-class consciousness as well as the tra-
ditional theory of class and stratification with insuperable difficulties.
‘Sociocultural interpretation patterns’, according to Matthiesen and Neuendorff
(1989) ‘such as those concerning the connection between work and life form “pre-
conscious” and, in each individual interpretational act, preordained knowledge
structures. The classification of these, as a rule, is not made explicit by the indi-
viduals, although it asserts itself influentially in every interpretational act’ (p. 93).
In the particular case of an individual and his or her practical life situation, funda-
mental interpretation patterns from various areas of relevance are linked to each
other in a specific and formative manner.

We have already examined these questions by looking at a place of mediation
between the individual and society, namely the family milieu, which is a central
place according to the perspective of socialisation theory (Hildenbrand et al.
1992). We chose the example of peasant or agricultural lifestyles for the
following reason: the processes of biography have a particularly explosive
potential because of the objective situation in agriculture, where an unbroken
linear modernisation does not exist to the same degree as elsewhere. For a
family farm to have any chance of survival, the traditional idea that ‘the farm
comes first’ must be strictly adhered to. In concrete terms this means that the
work-oriented socialisation of the designated heir to the farm must take place
within the framework of the family and of an (in many respects) unquestioning
orientation towards the farm, if it is to succeed. Not only must the heir keep up
the old traditions of the farm, he must also simultaneously act as a modern,
innovative manager responding adequately to the demands of the market. This
contradiction between traditional and modern individualistic orientation, which
can also be formulated as the contradiction between the particularism of
orientation to the farm and the universalism of orientation to society and the
market, must be overcome in the biography of each individual farmer, i.e., it
must be transmitted into a simultaneously stable and flexible biographical
orientation. This obligation presents itself in exacerbated form with the
occurrence of the central event from the perspective of the farm and from that
of the young farmer: the handing over of the farm from one generation to the
next. In this situation often the women who have married into the farm and do
not come from that milieu are the ones who become the most important factor
in the modernisation process and thus secure the continuation of the farm.

The example of family farms in the modernisation process can be used to
demonstrate that in a non-Cartesian sociological approach four structurised
levels of social space, according to Bourdieu’s theories, must be classified.
These are:

1. The general difficult situation existing in agriculture. Within the rationalisa-
tion and universalisation processes of modernity, agriculture is unique (as are
all areas of production connected to nature) in that it is bound to conditions of
production that are not amenable to influence or manipulation, and in that it is
subject to particular patterns of social organisation (farm individualism and
the linking of family to the farm). The central problem here is whether and to
what extent the economic rationalisation process, which is proceeding along the level of society as a whole, is compatible with the general conditions of production in agriculture.

2. The concrete conditions of agricultural production and the particularity of rural social organisation. They create a second independent structurisation level of agricultural action. In particular, the specific geographical factors of nature and production and the local social constitution are the object of examination. Of particular interest on this level for the sociohistorical background is to know within which regional social constitution the history of family and farm took place.

3. The structure of the farm as an economic unit as well as the specific family history. They form a third independent structurisation element of action within a farming community. Taken on their own and related to the constitution of sociality and subjectivity, the question asked on this level is whether in the individual case an urban or a peasant family model exists, as well as the nature of the general structural conditions of socialisation. It should be remembered that gender and age in the family are most important factors, unlike in other social groups. In farming families sibling rank as well as gender has a comparatively great significance, as is evident from a glance at regional inheritance rights and customs.

4. The subjective action orientation against the background of the individual biographical and educational history. This complex represents a fourth independent structurisation level of action in a farming context and is the first logical level of reference for all research in biography.

This division of the object in the context of a dialectic of individual and society has consequences for a sociological analysis of interpretation patterns and world views, which is in the widest sense a sociology of knowledge. Such analyses attempt to explain the concrete social meaning of constitutive general interpretation patterns and world view elements which contribute to the rise of social action and identity, and structure them. We referred to interpretation patterns from different areas of relevance and range because we wished to point out those which correspond to the four levels in social space listed above. Nor is it mere coincidence that the concept of world view is extensively treated in relation to the first level. In contrast the interpretation pattern suggests a particular validity for smaller social units (strata, groups). Socio-phenomenological milieu analyses have their place here, as recommended by Grathoff (1989) in agreement with Aron Gurwitsch (1976). The self-image refers exclusively to the conception that one has of one’s personal being. The world view with its levels and elements finds an inner continuation in this self-image. Of course, research in biography will be less interested in the interiorisation of structures of an epistemic or general ideal-typical subject of action than in the acquisition and reproduction of a particular ‘family spirit’, such as that retained in the collective memory of the family and transmitted in the form of narratives (Hildenbrand 1990). As such, it is more interested in the acceptance of particular milieu norms and forms of integration into society.
The proportional relationship between these structural complexes determines the social identity of the individual. Subjective interpretation patterns interpret the world; however, they are subjective and therefore only partial. What is of interest, therefore, is the position of the individual in the alignment of models of knowledge and interpretation patterns, involving ideal-typically construed real existence on various action levels, with given objective problems of action. In short, subjective autonomy has important roots in a realistic understanding of social structures and problems of action.

This higher categorisation of action levels, with its corresponding knowledge and interpretation patterns, only makes sense if we assume as a base for every sociological analysis the meaningful and grounded/logical construction of the social world. The objective, not necessarily the subjective, meaningfulness of the world and human life expression is considered here to have always been there as a given. In this context, to postulate a subjective transcendental construction of a meaningful world would mean hopelessly overburdening the subject and, furthermore, would imply that the sociological line of inquiry (i.e., one with a structural and action logic) would have to be replaced by one of logical cognition. Research in biography is concerned with the subject: not with the epistemic transcendental subject, but rather with the real sociated one. When a socially meaningful logic (soziale Sinnlogik) remains identical through all aggregative levels of social space, there can be no logical difference between an objective societal world (which is supposed to be meaningless, although constituted in a functionalist or systematically logical fashion) and a subjective, meaningfully constituted life and milieu world of the individual. Something of just such a difference between social structures, which can be reconstructed along theoretical and logical (sinnlogisch) lines, is evident in the difference demonstrated by Max Weber (1964 : 135) between the ‘formal’ and ‘substantive’ rational organisation of social life. Formally rationalised areas of society adopt the character of life-distant systems. However, that does not change the fact that a theoretical reconstruction has a relative status and is not that of a fundamental constitutional logic. The problem of the relationship between substantive and formal rationality transverses horizontally the action levels we indicated above and is not simply a matter of aggregative levels.

These four levels, with their specific weights, are also relevant for the establishment of a preliminary typological classification of the subjective orientations of action and shaping of individuality in a farming community, to return to our example once again, in the modern societies of Europe and America. The construction of a high subjective autonomy of action and a highly developed individuality follows from an accentuation of the first and fourth levels. The first level of structurisation of agricultural action encompasses the general societal structurisation level of human action in modernity. It involves an orientation to universalist grounding patterns and standards of a rational manner of living. However, agricultural action also always stands in a state of tension in relation to it, due to the limited possibilities of rationalisation. In orienting towards these universalist patterns of action, the construction of individualist action orientations (fourth level) stands in a certain relationship of
affinity. More generally, this ‘configurative connection’ (Zusammenhang) between these different structural elements of action occurs through a realisation of subjective goals and wishes which are marked by methodical efforts to follow a course of living (Weber). Typically, it concerns an individualisation within the context of a ‘societalised’ (‘vergesellschafteten’) life form in contrast to a ‘communalised’ (‘vergemeinschafteten’) life form.

The construction of a traditional action orientation and a status-bound positional individuality can be expected wherever levels two and three dominate. These levels indeed essentially account for that social realm in which what was traditionally described as ‘communalisation’ (‘Vergemeinschaftung’) constituted itself. In the traditional milieu, that is in the particular social system, individuality (above all in the sense of particularisation) need not be constructed subjectively, but can be taken over qua status and position in the community. The precarious tension between these four levels is what currently amounts to the contradictory unity of tradition and modernity in the agricultural sector. When one is concerned with biographical/theoretical questions, levels three and four move into thematic focus, and it is then in relation to them that levels one and two are disclosed.

Conclusion

General conclusions for the development of concepts in theoretical and methodological biography research can be drawn from some reflections on the structurisation levels of action in social space within which the constitution of subjectivity takes place.

The core focus of a sociological theory of biography is the social constitution of the subject. This essential focus has an axiomatic validity. Biographical theory and research have the task and significance of finding and filling such forms of logical constitution through material studies involving the scholar’s ‘experiential scientific life’. All too often it is still believed that one can resolve this point of view by indexing the social constitution of the subject with a mere reference to the dialectic of the individual and society. Through a one-sided over-evaluation of the extreme levels of structurisation of social action, theoretical concepts arising thereafter stand in opposition to one another, involving formulas such as Habermas’ ‘colonisation of the life-world’ (which reduce all levels and their ‘own’ logical structure of formations and significances to a lower level of social aggregation) and hence fall victim to the general process of rationalisation. Such rather abstract societal conceptions are being opposed with conceptions from biography itself, i.e., with constructions that consider individualisation as purely an accomplishment of the subject for which society’s part is reduced to peripheral conditions or disturbance factors in subjective development.

With such theoretical conceptions, mediation in the dialectic between individual and society can be obtained only by deception, if not by outright transmogrification. The relationship between subjective forms of interpretation and ideal-typically reconstructed social structures is not immediately evident.
The socially structured situation of subjective action becomes problematic only when focusing on where the individual 'somewhere' necessarily stands; but it does not enter properly into theoretical view as merely formal instances of mediation. It needs to be enlightened by the structurisation levels of social action outlined above and detailed in our example of agricultural biographies.

Theoretical presentations of the social constitution of the subject require suitable methodology and methods. While collecting data for sociobiographical research, we replaced methods like the 'narrative interview' (Riemann 1987; Schütze 1983), which actually provoke a Cartesian view of the subject, with methods that either open up areas of practical intersubjectivity or—in more formal contexts—simulate these. In the analysis of data acquired by these means, research procedures that subsume socially constituted individual-meaning structures under formal rules (or laws) and hence cancel these data are hardly useful; nor can the view of the subject alone be the object of an adequate material sociological reconstruction.

The individual case certainly has to remain the focus in all biographical research (Hildenbrand 1991), but this individual case is better understood, as it is here, as a case of 'individual generality' (individuelles Allgemeines). The individual case is valid in its generality insofar as it reproduces general contexts of its own conditioning; it is valid in its particularity insofar as it individualises itself out of such general contexts of conditions. A sociological analysis of biography therefore must always determine the present objective framework of action (Weber 1988), and then investigate how the individual, family or group have established themselves within this framework; finally, it must examine how such specific decisions in an individual's life come to constitute an identity.

With the four structurisation levels of social action that we have determined and using the example of biographical research in agriculture, we have demonstrated how this task can be approached. Here the individual and his or her group is not abstractly confronted with 'society'. The action-theoretical approach involving the reconstruction of meaning structures, as outlined above, has ultimately the advantage of being able to embrace the abstract formula of the dialectic of determination and emergence. It can be realised in a manner which is adequate to the object of study and which grasps both the social determination of action and emergence as a result of solutions to action problems which are in principle open.

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