**Cross-national comparative research with biographical methods:
Problems and solutions**

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1. Introduction

In this presentation I discuss problems arising while doing comparative research with biographical methods, and solutions for meeting these problems. I refer to experiences and learning processes in relation to designing and implementing biographical methods in cross national comparative research in two EU projects:

 "Self-employment activities of women and minorities; their success or failure in relation to social citizenship policies" (TSER in 4th FP, 1997-2000)
and
"The second generation in families of ethnic entrepreneurs; intergenerational and gender aspects of quality of life processes" (RTD, 5th FP, 2002-2005) (see www.ethnogeneration.org).

These experiences and learning processes are shared by U. Apitzsch, coordinator of both projects and L. Inowlocki a colleague in the research.

The biographical method I refer to has been developed in Germany in the last decades mainly by F. Schütze (Schütze 1981; 1983; Schütze 1995), and further elaborated by other scholars. As U. Apitzsch and L. Inowlocki (2000) recently showed, the interpretative biographical method emerged from sociological traditions from North America like the Chicago School, the philosophical pragmatism the Symbolic Interactionism, ethnomethodology, the (early) conversation research, sociolinguistics and the Grounded Theory, and is related to transatlantic migrations of the 20th century.

This method utilizes the structure of biographical narration as an instrument for analysing the biographical process. The aim is to reconstruct the way people cope with social conditions, the way they develop strategies and influence their social environment, and the way social structures influence biographical processes and biographical plans, in other words, the relationship between structure and agency. The central assumption of the interpretative biographical method is that the narration reflects the "lived live", the experience which can be reconstructed through the analysis of the latent structure of the narrative. However, following the

Phenomenological Approach, the biographical interpretative method does not aspire to reconstructing the objective and factual experience, but considers the narration as the result of the interrelation between objective fact, and subjective experience. The suggested method takes into account the findings of the conversation and narration analysis and Schütze´s (1981) findings about the structure of biographical processes. These findings are utilized as heuristic tools for interpreting narration.

Organizing comparative research at the European level, we have set up our collaborative teams on the basis of the thematic interest in the research subject. Our partners are migration researchers. The common methodological basis for the research was a commitment to qualitative research methods and an interest in an emancipatory research process, looking on the social constraints migrants face and the coping strategies they develop and taking into account social power relations and being aware of gender issues. A problem of cross-national research aiming at implementing biographical methods was therefore to find a balance between the biographical method we pursued and the different biographical and other qualitative approaches that the other partners are working with. One way for harmonizing the methodological approaches would be to include in the research process steps in "teaching" the biographical method to the partners through tutorials, workshops, common interpretation, common reading. However, it was from the beginning apparent that in the framework of a time-limited research project there would be no harmonization of the methodological approaches at the level of the biographical method as we understand and practice it. Furthermore, the realization of such a goal would be hindered by the fact that the biographical interpretative method developed by Schütze is not well known outside the German speaking countries, and there are only few translations of the core texts in English. Therefore, we decided to utilize as a common ground the coding paradigm of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) rather than the coding paradigm of the biographical method.

In the first step of the following considerations, I discuss the similarities and differences of Grounded Theory and the Biographical Interpretative Method, and in the second problems in applying Grounded Theory to comparative research.

2. Grounded Theory and Biographical Method: Similarities and Differences

By taking the widely known Grounded Theory coding paradigm as the common ground for our biographical research, we tried to harmonize the methodological approach of the partners in the cross national comparative research project at the level of an accessible method. As it is well known, under the term Grounded Theory Barney Glaser und Anselm Strauss (1967) systematised the principles of qualitative empirical research as a research method that generates theory out of systematically obtained and analyzed data. Theory and hypotheses should emerge out of the analysis of the data and should not be built out of pure theoretical considerations. Theoretical knowledge on the other hand, should function as promoting the theoretical sensitivity of the researcher. The main principles of Grounded Theory are the processuality of social phenomena and the rejection of determination and strict non determination of human action. Social phenomena are thought of as continually

changing in response to the social conditions, and actors have the means to control their destinies, although they not always utilize these means (Corbin and Strauss 1990). The aim is to uncover relevant conditions and to analyse how actors under investigation respond to these conditions. A basic principle is expressed through the sampling concept. By comparing cases that in regard to the categories under investigation are expected to be minimally or maximally contrasting, other possible variations of the phenomenon can be investigated. Through the theoretical grounding of the sampling, the representativeness of the concepts is secured. This, on the other hand, implies the constant interrelation of data selection and analysis processes.

Coding is the basic analytic process in grounded theory. The basic unit of the coding process is the „incident". Coding consists of conceptually labelling the incident (event/action/interaction) with analytical categories which are in the terminology of Alfred Schütz, constructs of the 'second degree" (Schütz 1971, p.7; Endreß 2000).

As the biographical method emerged out of Grounded Theory, it is also non deterministic and non agnostic. The idea that through the interpretive steps one can reconstruct from the narration the experience and with this the social conditions that shape the experience derives from the assumption of the parallelism of mechanisms of experience and mechanisms of narration. These mechanisms have been conceptualized by Schütze as "cognitive figures" and "narrative constraints"(Schütze 1984).

Grounded Theory and biographical method share therefore the same epistemological assumptions. Their differences are:

- Grounded Theory makes no reference to data production while the biographical method elaborates the method of data production. The deployment of narrative relies, according to the biographical method, on the narrative competency of the interviewee that should not be destroyed by the interventions of the interviewer.
- Grounded Theory elaborates the method of sampling, but not so much the method of coding as the biographical method does.
- The coding unit is for Grounded Theory the "incident"; for the biographical method it is the flow of experience expressed in the biographical narration. Coding instruments and tools supporting the interpretation process and the generation of hypotheses are in Grounded Theory the comparison, the dimensionalizing and defining of properties, as well as the different steps of coding. The developed categories have to be refined in a process of comparing and contrasting. The analytical categories should be broken down into properties and their dimensions. The specification of properties and dimensions contributes to a specified and precise Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990, p. 423). Corbin and Strauss have broken down the coding procedure into open coding, axial and selective coding. In axial coding categories are related to their sub-categories and these relationships are tested against data. In the later phases of research, the selective coding takes place.

Here, all categories are unified around a central „core" category representing the central phenomenon of the study. Schütze (1984) suggests breaking down the interpretative process into two main steps, the structural description of the text and a summary of the hypotheses that emerged through the structural description in an analytical abstract. The *structural description* is the first step in the coding procedure of the biographical interpretative method. This is a detailed description of the structure of the narration: the thematic segments of the interview, their organization in supra segments and in sub segments. Structural description proceeds sequentially and utilises the structure of the text as an indicator for unravelling the layers of the experience. At the same time it pays attention to how the narrator in the course of the narration re-experiences the events in which he or she has been involved. In the structural description the biographical process structures and other social processes in which the narrator has been involved are described. The *analytical abstract* on the basis of the structural description aims at summarizing the hypotheses and findings of the structural description. It has to outline the dominant process structures of the biography, the interrelationship between biographical processes and other social processes (collective processes) the way the narrator interprets, evaluates the biography, and the way his/her identity gets shaped.

- Grounded Theory does not explicate sequentiality as heuristic devices for coding. For the biographical method, on the other hand, sequentiality is a central tool of interpretation. The assumption is that the sequentiality of experience is reflected in the sequentiality of the narration. It is thought, that the realization of processes of action takes place as a process of meaningful successive exclusion of unrealized action possibilities. These action possibilities are part of the original action horizon for the actor and part of the possible meaning horizon of the interpreter (Soeffner 1989, 145). This makes clear that sequencing means not only the temporal structure but also the succession of series of actions. Sequencing means much more than that. It means the specific interrelation of elements of action to a „ genuine pattern of succession". We could say that in the assumption of the successive exclusion of action possibilities is reflected in the theoretical assumption of the biographical analysis about the relative autonomy of the individual to act: action of an intentional nature based on constraining and enabling social conditions. This assumption is also compatible with the basic assumptions of grounded theory about human action, as outlined above.

- Grounded theory, however, implicitly takes into account the sequentiality of social order in setting up the action paradigm that serves as a heuristic background for coding. In the action paradigm, the key term is "causal conditions", defined as "the events, incidents, happenings that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon" (Strauss/Corbin 1990). Causal conditions lead to specific phenomena which exist in a specific context. This context is modified by intervening conditions which lead to action and interaction strategies. The final outcome is the consequences to be explained by the model.

3. Applying Grounded Theory in the comparative work. Problems and solutions

There are considerable difficulties in applying a theoretical sampling strategy when practicing European research on migrant populations and having to more or less exactly calculate the resources needed. The principle of theoretical sampling of Grounded Theory, trying to add cases that contrast minimally and maximally with the already analysed ones until the sample is theoretically saturated, turned out not to be feasible in research of populations to which it is difficult to gain access, as it is with the self-employed migrants and their family members. The difficulties in accessing the population necessitated using the snowball principle in selecting the cases. Moreover, the theoretical sampling design is not compatible with the principle of the calculation of costs on which the publicly financed research has to rely, as it does not allow fixing the number of cases that are needed in the planning phase, as the saturation of the sample cannot be predicted.

The transcription and coding of the interviews was done by the researcher who conducted them. The theoretical sampling has been discussed in the project workshops and teleconferences. Part of the selective coding work was done in the workshops. A unified transcription system HITM, taking into account non verbal communication - expressions of feelings of the narrator, changes in the voice – has been used by all teams.

The comparative operation takes place in the different stages of the analysis. The horizon of comparison can be localized within the analysis of the interview. Coding and interpreting the interview means taking a comparative perspective on the thematic passages of the narrative - asking what changes are revealed through the different passages about the identity processes of the narrator /actor. The next level of comparison is the one between two or several interviews that can be maximally and minimally compared, through which typical processes can be identified. This is the level of comparison we usually focus on when we make national research. European research yields a further level, the one of the comparison between the national contexts. This level of comparative work involves considerable problems that have to be solved.

a) Organizing the data base for aiding the comparative analysis

The aim of our first EU project was to bring together, analyse and compare biographical interviews of self-employed migrant men and women and non-migrant women from six European countries. The total number of interviews was large (252), so that the comparative analysis would rarely be managed in the traditional way of working with qualitative data without the assistance of software programs. We decided to try NUD.IST, a program that has been developed to match the standards and procedures of Grounded Theory. The program implements many of the processes specific to the Grounded Theory approach to qualitative analysis. The software includes a flexibly organised index system that contains references to data and memos about categories. It creates a document system to store and retrieve text as well as supplementary information about the text. It allows for searching words

and phrases and automatically indexes the result. On the basis of NUD.IST we developed a data base in which the empirical material and the analyses were stored. Data were processed at each site and transferred to the central database.

During the course of the project it became obvious that NUD.IST could not take into account two important principles of the biographical method - the principle of sequentiality and the principle of the Gestalt of the interview - since the interview was broken down into segments so that the analyst could find a segment of interest. However, in this process the whole analysis and the whole interview were no longer visible. Thus a NUDIST implementation of Grounded Theory made its use unsuitable for biographical analysis.

Therefore, in the second EU project, we decided to set up a common data base, so that everyone could have access to the data and the analyses of the other partners. In this way the state of the art of the research process was visible to all. However we did not use software for analysis on this occasion.

b) Making the data accessible to the other partners

For doing comparative analysis we had to ensure the accessibility of all data to all partners. A problem that arose was the different languages that were unequally accessible. It was not possible to translate all interviews into English, the working language. We decided to secure accessibility to the biographical material through the analysis written in English and through the inclusion in the analysis of the important passages translated into English. However, the translation of the narratives entailed a range of problems. In the translation some specificity was lost which could prove important to the interpretation. One specific problem we had was the translation of the broken language that some first generation migrants spoke. We decided that we could not reproduce language errors in the translation. We also regarded translation as an interpretative step, in the sense that every interpretation is translation of the text into concepts of a second order (Schütz 1971) and every translation has a new orientation to the interpretation of the text. In this sense, the translation of a passage might have to be reconsidered after the interpretation of the text had been completed.

c) Transcending the national level

When designing cross-national, policy-oriented European research, the aim is not to deliver results about single national cases but to deliver a comparison of the results of analysis of the national cases. We had to look for typical processes that emerged in different national contexts but also to ask about the reasons why one or more types emerged or dominated in one national setting and not in another. The aim is to understand the specific social conditions, policy frameworks and coping strategies addressing these conditions in order to formulate policy recommendations for influencing social conditions and support the coping strategies of the actors.

This means developing an awareness of the socio economic conditions in the national context. Moroever it was important to keep a perspective on national contexts since

its loss would lead to producing an analysis of a "European case". However, the aim is to localize the specificities of the national cases in relation to each other and to elaborate on the socio economic and political conditions for these specificities. These conditions were in our research the specific migration policy and migration history, the economic situation, the labour market, the educational system, the welfare system, the social security system etc.

Trying to avoid producing only parallel national reports, and to engage in comparative research, we reserved the last year of the project for comparative analysis, i.e. in this phase the empirical material that had been analysed by the national teams had to be compared. Each team conducted the comparison under a different perspective related to the own interests and expertise.

In the phase of comparative analysis and in writing up the report we had to switch from a micro level to a macro level of analysis. Moreover, each team had to develop a cross national perspective and understand the other national contexts. To help this process we developed a common data base. Moreover, we tried to remain in communication with each other (through mailing list, emailing, telephoning, tele conferences, etc) asking questions about the cases so that a better understanding of the cases of the other teams was possible. In this phase we started commenting on the comparative analyses of the other partners and especially the interpretation of the own cases made by the other partners. The process in this last phase of the research involved a discussion of concepts and theory, trying to find a common ground for theory building. In this phase we practiced what is also important in doing "mono national" interpretative research: the discussion of the interpretation of the cases analysed in the team. The interpretation is always more successful when the interpreter can control his/her blind spots through intersubjective communication about the interpretation. EXPLAIN??

Summary

In cross-national biographical research on migration issues we have had to tackle different national traditions in research and theorising. Multiple cultural levels interfere - the cultural understanding of the ethnic groups and the different scientific cultures of the different teams. Very important was the capacity to discuss the differences that arose out of different theoretical traditions and to avoid structuralistic positions that did not seriously take into account the agency of the actors, as well as to pay sufficient attention to the social conditions that influence the action of the actors.

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