

they clarify its difference from the ideal type, they assist in the understanding of its singularity and concrete manifestation.

Interpretative social science is, in this sense, the progressive reconstruction, the progressive interpretative understanding of social action which takes seriously the single case and thereby human beings, their norms and their history. Scientific 'constructs of the second degree', the historical-genetic ideal-types, are seeking precisely this historical understanding of the single case and, equally, the understanding of history.

NOTES

1 At a clear distance in time from the related research activities in the USA, an everyday ethnography, in the sense given here, has developed in the German-speaking world since the 1980s (see 3.8). Examples of this are to be found in studies of the agricultural milieu (Hildenbrand 1983), of the small life-world of the body-builder (Honer 1985) and the water-diviner (Knoblauch 1991a), of the labour situation (Knorr-Cetina 1981, 1989), of punk culture (Lau 1992), of police work (Reichertz 1991a) and of the making of donations (Voß 1992). See also the relevant contributions in Soeffner (1988).

2 As a 'famous' example we may refer here to the hospital studies of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in the context of which the so-called 'grounded theory' – the principle of abstracting a theory step by step on the basis of single-case studies – was developed (Glaser and Strauss 1965b, 1967, 1968; Strauss 1987; see 2.1, 5.13, 6.6).

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Part 3B

Qualitative Research Programmes

3.6 Qualitative Biographical Research

Winfried Marotzki

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1 BIOGRAPHY AND THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN A TIME OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The questions how human beings learn and what education means should also be considered with reference to the *intellectual situation of the time*. What is characteristic of contemporary social development is the rapid introduction of new information processing technologies. If one also considers the areas of genetic research and research into artificial intelligence together with the public discussions they have unleashed, then the question of the place of human beings within the whole structure of modern socio-technical systems becomes ever more urgent. We are obliged to rethink our understanding of mankind to be able to give information about the significance of learning and education in highly complex societies. To deal with this question it is helpful to make use of a research direction that has grown in popularity both in the social sciences and in education over the past 15–20 years: qualitative biographical research

(see also 3.7). Human development is approached, from the perspective of this research direction, as a lifelong process of learning and education, so the question 'What can we know about a human being today?' (Sartre 1981: 7) can in essence be handled through the study of patterns of learning and educational profiles in their biographical dimensions.

Although in the tradition of educational studies the theme of biography can also display a tradition as autobiography – for example, in Wilhelm Dilthey's pertinent reflections – the true motivation for the development of a research programme comes from the development of the so-called interpretative or qualitative paradigm (Hoffmann-Riem 1980) in the social sciences. With this, in addition to a predominantly quantitative approach to educational and biographical research (Leschinsky 1988), a type of biographical research has arisen that is oriented to the standards of qualitative social research (Marotzki 1995a; see 3.7).

Its bases consist of assumptions that have been elaborated in such differing disciplines as the

sociology of knowledge, symbolic interactionism (see 3.3), ethno-theory, ethnomethodology (see 3.2) and conversation analysis (see 5.17). One central methodological assumption consists of establishing social facts according to the meaning attribution of the actors. Here we apply the 'premise of the interactional conditionality of individual meaning attributions' (Hoffmann-Riem 1980: 342) that has been particularly developed in symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969). The interplay between the individual and society is seen as an interpretative process which is played out in the medium of significant symbols (such as language). The human being becomes acquainted with the world and him/herself primarily in interpretations that are mediated by, and bound to, interaction. Qualitative biographical research accepts that the biography of an individual can always be understood as a construct, but not only as that. The main focus of its observation lies in studying individual forms of the processing of social and milieu-specific experience. Individual forms can, of course, be those that are projected on to individuals during socialization and which they accept. But not every case can be treated as an acceptance. Individual variation or even the creation of new structures of experience processing, as an emerging and in part also a contingent process, cannot be derived from social models. Individuality and the problems of emergence and contingency are interrelated.

Emergence, in this context, means that human decisions are never completely programmable by environmental factors. Biographical decisions, which always contain an element of freedom, cannot be reconstructed as an ethical algorithm. *Contingence* means the existential experience of the finite and the coincidental, which cause humans to be thrown back on themselves. If it was said at the outset that the question of how humans learn must always be viewed within a temporal diagnostic framework, then we must also point out here that an increase in contingency is indeed a feature of the development of modern society. In this sense Peukert writes:

What is characteristic of the new age is a matter of debate. The least controversial claim is that it is based on a radicalized experience of the finiteness and coincidental nature of everything that happens: it is coincidental and finite, that is 'contingent', to the extent that it could also be different

or not happen at all. The contingency of facts is no longer captured by an intuitively comprehensible order of being. (Peukert 1984: 130)

Accordingly, it becomes increasingly difficult to describe or predict *normal biographies*. It becomes increasingly questionable to describe and expect any development as *normal*. Human forms of reaction and processing are diverse. The increased distinctions between worlds of social meaning are accompanied by an increasing diversity of individual lifestyles and values. Discovery movements and experimental forms of existence seem for many people not to be restricted merely to crisis situations in their lives but to be taking on the nature of a permanent way of living. In other words, the question about subjective meaning content implies that it means something different from merely what an individual is offered in the way of social models. In this perspective subjectivity is not understood just as the simple result of social intersubjectivity, but as its condition. Qualitative biographical research sees its opportunity in the fact that it confronts the complexity of the individual case. Two aspects of this, which are decisive for the constitution of biographies, will be developed below: processes of meaning-production, and processes of the creation of self-images and world-images.

2 PROCESSES OF SENSE-AND MEANING-MAKING

Wilhelm Dilthey (1852–1911), in his *Foundations of the Humanities* (1968b), opened a way of understanding the course of human life that has hitherto scarcely been used. He opposes mechanistic, technocratic and reductionist concepts of mankind and, on the basis of the now famous dictum 'we explain nature; we understand mankind', he developed a concept to make it possible to understand mankind through its manifestations. By human manifestations he means both artistic products and every kind of ordered activity and behaviour in social contexts. He sees the methodological starting-point for this kind of concept of understanding in that internal experience in which reality is presented to us. For him understanding is closely linked to the tradition of hermeneutics, which concerns itself with the interpretation of texts and communicative situations. From a methodological

point of view human objectivizations and manifestations are conceived in the broadest sense as *text* (see Blankertz 1982: 219), which has to be interpreted in the process of understanding.

For Dilthey the task of the humanities consists of understanding socially interrelated individual *life units*, that is 'to re-experience them and capture them in thought' (Dilthey 1968b: 340). These life units are first described as individual persons and as their forms of expression, their words and actions. These single individuals, however, are not understood as isolated atomized subjects but, as we would put it today, as mediated by socialization. This means that they are embedded in social units such as families, groups, society, humanity. On the one hand they are characterized by these in a particular historical situation; and on the other hand the individuals influence these units to a greater or lesser extent. No concept, in Dilthey's opinion, can capture all of the content of these individual units:

Rather the multiplicity of what is apparently contained in them can only be experienced, understood and described. And their enmeshing in the course of history is a singular event that is inexhaustible for human thought. (1968b: 341)

Conceptual thinking therefore, if we pursue Dilthey's idea, is only conditionally capable of understanding humans in their individual incarnations. It is an *essential* element of the process of understanding, but not a *sufficient* one.

Sense-making as the production of coherences

Sense is produced, in Dilthey's opinion, with the aid of the mechanisms of coherence-creation. The category of coherence, for him, is a *central category of life*.

The course of a life consists of parts, consists of experiences that are related together in some internal coherence. Every individual experience relates to a self of which it is a part; it is bound in coherence through its structure with other parts. Everything intellectual contains coherence; therefore coherence is a category that arises from life. We understand coherence by virtue of the unity of consciousness. (1968c: 195)

The creation of coherence, in Dilthey's work, is therefore seen as an achievement of consciousness

which constantly produces links between parts and the totality and then checks or modifies them in new biographical situations. In this way life-history shows itself to be a construct produced by the subject and which, as a unit, organizes the wealth of experiences and events in the course of a life into some coherence. The creation of this kind of coherence of experiences is achieved through an act of meaning attribution. From the present meaning is given to past events. The memories that a person can call up of his or her life are those that seem globally meaningful and through which that person structures his or her life. It is only when these meaning-coherences set up by the subject are available that development is possible (cf. Dilthey 1968a: 218).

In summary, therefore, it must be said that the concept of *biographization* characterizes that form of meaning-ordering, sense-creating behaviour of the subject in conscious awareness of his or her own past life. A meaning-giving biographization is only possible when the subject is in a position to produce retrospective coherences that allow him or her to organize events and experiences within them and to create relationships between them and also to a totality. In this way we are constantly working at making our life consistent, at drawing lines in the *material of our past*, which will order it and create coherence. Lines separate, make prominent, show contours and give directions. They represent indications of relationship and orientation. If we fail to enter lines into our biography then we say, in colloquial terms: 'I can't work it out'. If this kind of line-drawing and coherence-creation fails, we may legitimately speak of a crisis, an existential crisis of sense. Human plans bear the mark of the individual and are only generalizable under certain conditions:

Every life has its own meaning. It is to be found in a meaning context in which every memorable present has a counter-value, but at the same time, in the context of memory, it has a relation to a meaning of the whole. This meaning of the individual being is completely singular, inseparable from recognition, and yet, in its way, it represents – like Leibniz's monad – the historical universe. (Dilthey 1968c: 199)

The *perspective of individual sense and meaning-making* leads directly to the approach of modern biographical research. An approach to understanding that sees itself as concerned exclusively with the realm of social interaction does not

meet the target. The problems of subjectivity cannot be replaced by the problems of intersubjectivity. In no way does this mean that intersubjectivity should be excluded; it means, rather, that intersubjectivity is an essential but not a sufficient condition of understanding. In this it is not only the question of the intersubjective conditions of subjectivity that are of interest, but also that of the subjective conditions of intersubjectivity. The consistent perspective of the individual leads to the category of biography.

This position of modern biographical research may be further illuminated by certain thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre. In his critique of Marxism, he required that the attention of hermeneutics be directed to the individual. Contemporary Marxism, he claimed, has driven the exile of man from human knowledge. Sartre opposed this with his famous definition: 'The object of existentialism – because of the failure of the Marxists – is the individual in the social field' (1983: 106). Sartre demands that individuals be understood by studying the forms they use to process reality. Against any kind of finiteness of knowledge, against unambiguity in the understanding of meaning, he sets up multiplicity and multi-dimensionality: 'It is necessary to insist on the ambiguity of past facts' (1983: 100). Marxism displays a degree of anaemia; it has driven the exile of man from knowledge. The rediscovery of a knowledge of the individual is Sartre's goal. For this reason, *biography* is consistently a central category for him. With hermeneutic intention he follows the traces of the individual. In a number of existential and hermeneutically designed extensive interpretations of particular cases (for instance on Flaubert, Genet, Baudelaire) he showed – from a philosophical perspective – the way of modern biographical research, which sees itself as the qualitative interpretation of individual cases.

The reflections on Dilthey in this section have essentially brought forth the idea that the making of sense and meaning are characteristic of human existence. The processes of biographization are an immediate expression of these dimensions. In this way the thesis of the interpretative paradigm that we reviewed at the outset, with mankind as an interpreting, world-designing and reality-creating creature, has been clarified from a particular point of view. The production of sense and meaning represent the creative centre of human existence.

An understanding of learning and education cannot ignore this, but becomes possible only when one comes to understand processes of learning and education as specific ways of interpreting oneself and the world. This viewpoint will be developed in the next step in the argument.

3 PROCESSES OF SELF-CREATION AND WORLD-MAKING

Here it is appropriate to refer back to Alfred Schütz's position on the sociology of knowledge, which is in the tradition of phenomenologically oriented theory-building. His name is associated with the endeavour to base the social sciences essentially on the ideas of Edmund Husserl through explaining the processes of meaning-constitution in the life-world (see 3.1, 3.8). In Schütz's work questions are dealt with which seek to clarify how the social world is meaningfully constituted and how a scientific analysis of these processes of meaning-creation is possible. Schütz developed his field of enquiry in the course of his debate with Georg Simmel and, in particular, Max Weber. In this the question of how one can understand the subjective meaning of the behaviour of others came to be a central theme of his thinking. He assumes that humans can construct different internal attitudes to themselves and to the world. He provides a polymorphy of such approaches. These are not reducible to one another. A human being cannot be understood from a single form (cf. Srubar 1988: 49, for discussion), but only from an ensemble of varied forms of the approach to himself and the world. This is the central nucleus of Schütz's position.

From 1928 onwards Schütz began the preparatory work on *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, which appeared in 1932. In this work he establishes an essential link between meaning constitution and social action and its sociality. After his emigration to the United States he worked, from 1939, on a synthesis of action theory and life-world theory, which he described as *pragmatic life-world theory*. To characterize it he used the term *cosmion*, which refers to the symbolic self-interpretation of a society. When a human being interprets the world meaningfully he or she makes it into his or her life-world, or cosmion. In this cosmion there are different realms of reality. The assumption of the multiplicity of levels of reality was

developed by Schütz in his *Theory of Multiple Realities* (1962), in which he attempts to justify the inter- and intra-cultural multiplicity of human reality. The recognition of the life-world basis of human action leads him to the conception of a plurality of finite areas of meaning, and this marks the broad boundary of his so-called life-world. The pluralization of areas of meaning corresponds to a pluralization of areas of rationality, since every area of meaning is characterized by a particular attitude towards the world and oneself.

It was William James who, in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), drew attention to the fact that such worlds are in principle created subjectively. Schütz develops this idea, for example in his work *Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality*:

The whole distinction between real and unreal, the whole psychology of belief, disbelief, and doubt, is, always according to William James, grounded on two mental facts: first that we are liable to think differently of the same object; and secondly, that when we have done so, we can choose which way of thinking to adhere to and which to disregard. The origin and fountainhead of all reality, whether from the absolute or the practical point of view is thus subjective, is ourselves. Consequently, there exist several, probably an infinite number of various orders of reality, each with its own special and separate style of existence, called by James 'subuniverses'. (Schütz 1964: 135)

The spectrum of possible worlds extends from the everyday world and the world of science, to the world of dreams and fantasy, the insane world of psychosis, and the world of intoxication with hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD; finally, we must also include today the world of virtual reality in which many computer freaks operate. Each of these worlds has its own limits and is real in its own way (see 3.8). In every area of reality there are meaning patterns that do not need to be mutually compatible with each other. But we have the ability to switch between them. It is perhaps constitutive for humans that they are *world-migrants*, that they can reside in a variety of worlds and then return to their own everyday world. This last-named ability is both an essential and a sensitive criterion of the ability to live communally: the everyday world is the indispensable referential framework for such migrations. Migrating into other worlds is a diversion from daily life, in confidence that it will be possible to return there. These other worlds call

into question what is taken for granted in the everyday world, threaten it directly or indirectly, and therefore frequently create anxiety. Communities, therefore, develop forms (traditions, conventions) to allow for other worlds, and for calling-into-question the everyday world. Any calling-into-question or exceeding the boundaries of the everyday world may often bring about a crisis which leads, as a rule, to specific processes of biographization:

If his life [the life of a human being] (or what he considers to be the meaning of his life) seems threatened, he must then ask himself whether what just seemed so urgent and important is still so urgent and important. The relevancies that had previously operated so matter-of-factly are then subjected to an explicit interpretation in the light that the present crisis casts on his previous life and on his future life (which has been put into question). What results from his interpretation is another matter: the relevances can, as the case may be, turn out to be void or still remain valid. The person can hold on to the results of his reflections as a *memento mori* for his further course in life, or else forget them as quickly as possible (especially after the crisis has faded away). (Schütz and Luckmann 1989: 128)

Humans then begin to ask questions of themselves and the world. This can result in a restructuring of subjective relevances and thereby in a transformation of the behaviour of oneself and the world. Humans then see both themselves and their world differently. It is just these processes that are of interest in biographical research: can we understand such migrations from a single case? Can we make statements about conditions and consequences? Therefore, although the everyday world takes on a pragmatic character, the other worlds are not rejected: they represent an internal enrichment. The individual is deprived if, as a world-migrant, he or she settles in only a single world. For crossing borders means that everyday life loses the focus of its reality in favour of another. On the other hand human beings see themselves exposed to the danger of dissociation if the everyday world, as the Archimedean point of the existence as organization, is put out of action. From this viewpoint human life is a constant process of creation and maintenance of worlds. We are world-migrants, frontier-crossers, aliens and home-comers. A fragility of identity is the hallmark of our existence.

From the Schützian position further links to modern biographical research can be set up: it is a matter of becoming acquainted with a large number of the forms of human beings' approach to themselves and to the external social reality. Knowledge of a broad phenomenology of such approaches ought to be a fundamental component of social-scientific thinking. It might be said that a typical feature of modern biographical research is that it has moved from the question of *what* and *why* to consider *how*. The question of *how* is concerned with forms and performances; it could be called a morphological question. The analysis of the biography-making processes documented in the form of a narrative interview serves the purpose of clarifying the forms of these attitudes to self and the world. The results of such analyses are often micro-logically exact descriptions of the formation process, which represent a morphology, and – to a certain extent – a genealogy of the empirical educational profiles. Biographical research in this sense is concerned with determining figures of education. It carries out what W. Benjamin and T. W. Adorno have called micro-logical analysis (Marotzki 1997a). The interest in possible forms of attitudes to self and the world works on the premise that these are produced by individual people in interactive contexts, but that they cannot be derived from these. The making of sense and meaning means, above all, that a person's behaviour to self and the world is being developed. Worlds are not pre-determined, but have to be created and maintained by action, communication and biography-making. We are constantly developing ourselves and the world in processes of biography-making from the viewpoint of a particular way of being that is unique to ourselves. It is legitimate to use the term 'education' to approach this behaviour to self and the world. Modern qualitative biographical research (with educational intent) is therefore interested in concrete educational profiles, their origin and their transformations (Marotzki 1997b).

4 FINAL REMARKS

In this chapter the phenomenological aspect has been stressed because the everyday life-world is understood here as a fundamental dimension. Here it is not – as, for example, in the tradition of Habermas – a matter of an opposition between

life-world and system. Nor is it therefore a matter of finding systemic bridging designs of the life-world to protect them from ~~one~~ another. Biographical research in the phenomenological tradition (see 3.1) should not, therefore, be equated with a lyric of affliction or a new subjectivism. This must be emphasized because it is only in this way that the accusation of turning the processes of learning and education into a therapy can be avoided. Qualitative biographical research, which concentrates on the interpretation of single cases, can be associated with the tradition of micro-logical analysis (Benjamin, Adorno) and in this sense does not see itself as necessarily being in opposition to social theory approaches, of which it has often been accused.

At the beginning of this chapter we enquired about the place of mankind within the scenario of socio-technical systems. Technical systems, particularly new technologies, relieve us of routine activities. As a rule these are carried out more rapidly and reliably with the help of technical systems. Mankind can now devote more attention to its creative, innovative and expressive ways of problem-solving. Because of problematic social situations these are more in demand than ever. To release this potential, to develop and promote it, requires suitable scenarios for learning and education. The decisive insight consists of not only understanding the problem-solving potential as a cognitive capacity. There are, in particular, biographical resources that represent, in a comprehensive way, a potential for order. One of the main tasks of qualitative biographical research is to explore these. It is therefore concerned with exchanging new-style perspectives and meaning contexts, with learning how human beings perceive and process unambiguous *facts* differently, and what meaning they attribute to them. In this there are no right and wrong ways of looking at things. It is rather a matter of systematically considering and recording the concrete experiential world of humans as an independent sense and meaning-context for processes of creativity and problem-solving. The flexibility needed for this cannot be achieved through a similar flexibility in definition of self and the world.

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