



**Biographical Analysis  
as an Interdisciplinary  
Research Perspective  
in the Field of Migration Studies**

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## Introduction

The use of biographical analysis as a method derived from and developed through different disciplines. It has proven to be an excellent way of making theoretical sense of social phenomena. Especially in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, the biographical approach is well suited to empirical investigations of migration processes because it offers us a way of empirically capturing the diversity, complexity, and transformational character of migration phenomena and of reconstructing them through biographical analysis.

In this chapter we present our understanding of the biographical approach as an approach to research in the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, treating it as a perspective revolving around a reconstructive research logic. We explain biography as a theoretical concept, as a historical-empirical object, and as a complex methodological strategy.

We start with a brief history of the biographical research perspective and how it became established in the social sciences, especially in the context of migration and gender studies. Secondly, we set out the basic principles of reconstructive case analysis as an interdisciplinary field of methods, focusing especially on the methodical use of narratives in transnational migration research. Finally, we discuss the biographical migration research perspective in combination with the transnationalism approach, considering the paradigmatic shift and methodological challenge that these concepts entail for the field of migration studies.

## 1. The history and establishment of the biographical research approach in the social sciences

### 1.1 The origin of biographical methods in the Chicago School of Sociology

The biographical approach originated in the tradition of the interpretative paradigm developed by the Chicago School of Sociology. William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, two sociologists belonging to the Chicago School, were the pioneers of biographical research in the discipline of sociology. In their well-known study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the research for which was conducted during World War One and which was published in the USA in 1918, biographical research was developed as an innovative method in the social sciences in order to explain complex migration-specific social phenomena as qualitatively new in terms of the originating and the receiving society (Apitzsch 2006a).

Thomas and Znaniecki's methodology, distinguished by the fact that biographical material was used as sociological data to gain insight into the principles constructing the lives of migrants, inspired the empirical research tradition of the Chicago School from the 1920s onwards. It was here that the use of biographical material for sociological investigations, particularly in deviance research, was continued and systematised as a biographical method during the 1930s. This was achieved in particular by means of Clifford R. Shaw's *The Jack Roller* (1930), which was the second significant study in the development of biographical research. Shaw used

biographical material not only for the purpose of illustration, but also - together with other sources - for case studies (Fuchs 2000: 91).

While quantitative research subsequently replaced the biographical method in American sociology and caused an interruption in its development, the method was readopted by European, and particularly German, sociologists during the 1970s.

## **1.2 The development of biographical research in the social sciences in West Germany**

In Germany the field of biographical research developed in connection with the adoption of symbolic interactionism, pragmatism and hermeneutics in the context of controversial paradigm discussions around scientific theory and methodology.

However, the label 'biographical research' in the German social sciences today involves complex methodological and theoretical approaches and is not just a single research method.<sup>1</sup>

Although biographical research is particularly common in the German-speaking social sciences, it should be stressed that it was initially developed in an international context and has been influenced by various European and transatlantic traditions (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000: 54). It is important to note that biographical research in Germany is not derived from a subjective hermeneutic approach in the tradition of idealist philosophy, but on the contrary from an awareness of wider theoretical and methodological sources such as the Chicago School, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, sociolinguistics and not least the French tradition of phenomenology, especially Paul Ricoeur's (1983-1985) and Daniel Bertaux's (1986 and 1997) concept of '*récits de vie*'.

In the initial development of biographical research, the practical use of biographical material was the main point of interest. The methodological development of biographical research in Germany was initially driven by the sociologist Fritz Schütze, who belonged to the Bielefeld Sociologists' Working Group (1973) (*Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen*). In the 1970s, Schütze developed a model for an open narrative form of interviewing and a procedure for analysing narrative texts within the area of sociolinguistic theory (Schütze 1977). By the 1990s, Schütze's model had been developed into the central interpretative research approach in biographical analysis. Furthermore, empirically founded concepts of biography theory have been developed in biographical research in the German-speaking world. In these concepts biography is becoming a focus as a theoretical and social construct in social-scientific research.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.3 The theoretical concept of 'biography'**

The development of the theoretical debate primarily entailed the recognition that biography, as an instrument of social regulation (Kohli 1985) and as a design template for subjective self-representation and self-authentication, is bound up with the

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<sup>1</sup> An overview of the diverse approaches in the field of biographical research is provided in Bettina Völter, Bettina Dausien, Helma Lutz and Gabriele Rosental, *Biographieforschung im Diskurs* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of different theoretical schools of thought in the theoretical debate in biographical research. For an overview of the social-constructive, structural, and system-theoretical positions, see Alheit and Dausien 2000.

development of modern society and has been transformed in this process (Alheit 1994). Since the 1990s biographical research has been based on the acceptance that biography is a social construct (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997, Alheit and Dausien 2000).

In this way biography is conceived as a ‘social creation/construction’, which ‘constitutes both social reality and the subjects’ worlds of knowledge and experience, and which is constantly affirmed and transformed within the dialectical relationship between life history knowledge and experiences and patterns presented by society’ (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997: 138).

The main questions of interest to biography-theoretical research are how people ‘produce’ a biography in different cultural contexts and social situations, and which conditions, rules, and patterns of construction can be observed in this process. The concepts of ‘biographical work’ and of ‘biographicity’ (*Biographizität*) are significant in relation to these questions (Alheit 2000).<sup>3</sup>

For theoretical and empirical reasons, in the context of biographical research the concept of ‘biography’ or ‘biographical construction’ is often used instead of the term ‘identity’ (Fischer-Rosenthal 1999). The aspect of ‘identity’ is conceptualised in biographical research/ biography theory as the accomplishment of building and maintaining continuity and coherence through changing situations. Developing an identity in the context of biographical analytical studies is understood as biographical work. Biographical research is interested in the process-related and constructive nature of life histories, and it distances itself from identity models which regard identity as something static and rigid.

The concept of biographicity was introduced into the sociological debate by Martin Kohli. Kohli defines it as a ‘code of personal development and emergence’ (*Code von personaler Entwicklung und Emergenz*). Peter Alheit continued the theoretical conceptualisation of the concept in social science research, and especially in the educational sciences, in a detailed analysis of Bourdieu’s critique of biographical research (Alheit 1995). At the centre of the theoretical concept of ‘biographicity’ is the synthesis of structure and individuality. According to Alheit, ‘biographicity’ is the intuitively available genetic structure of a biography. It is the ability of the individual to shape that which is social ‘self-referentially’, and to place oneself in relation to society. Biographicity means that individuals can continually reinterpret their life in the contexts in which they experience it, and that they themselves experience these contexts as ‘mouldable’ and ‘shapeable’ (Alheit ebd.).

#### **1.4 The institutionalisation of biographical research as an interdisciplinary field**

Although biographical research was cross-disciplinary from the beginning, it has been established more strongly as an interdisciplinary field in recent years as a result of

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<sup>3</sup> The concepts briefly outlined here are the basic assumptions on which biographical research in general and biographical migration research in particular are based. We cannot deal here with all the theoretical positions relating to the concept of biography which have been developed during the course of biographical research. It is, however, important to note briefly that alongside the empirically based concepts there is an abstract theoretical discussion which regards biography as a construction of a self-referential consciousness and which is based on systems theory (Nassehi and Weber 1990, Schimank 1988) and cognitive theory (Maturana and Varela 1987).

increased interdisciplinary and international networking. This is essentially a consequence of the subject of biographical research, namely the concept of biography. Biography is an object of theoretical thought which is not construed according to the logic of scientific disciplines, but is modelled on a complex social and cultural phenomenon (Dausien 2002b: 118). The power of the biographical approach to extend across disciplines can be explained by social individualisation and its accompanying biographisation. Moreover, the principles of the methods and methodology of biographical research are extremely well suited to a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields of research. Nevertheless, the institutionalisation of biographical research as an interdisciplinary field of research was essentially promoted by the founding of research groups, institutions, and interdisciplinary and international networks. Many of these scholars have an interdisciplinary educational background themselves, and many of them have established research groups and even research institutes in their main areas of research.

In recent years there has been an identifiable trend towards building interdisciplinary working groups and networks. Among others, the *Interuniversity Network for Biographical and Life World Research (INBL)* has been established, involving the *Institute for Applied Biography and Life History Research (IBL)* in Bremen, the research group *Biography and Cultural Analysis (Fobika)* at the University of Bielefeld, and the *Focus Research Area on Biography and Life History Research (ABL)* at the University of Göttingen. In addition, the *Transdisciplinary Research Group for Migration and Biography Research* at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt is active in the specific field of migration research.

However, biographical research has expanded beyond the disciplinary boundaries of sociology (Apitzsch 1990, 2003a) and educational science (Krüger and Marotzki 1999) into other social and human science disciplines. It has also extended into psychology (Straub 1993, Jüttemann and Thomae 1987) and history, especially oral history (e.g. Passerini 1992). Important debates on narration and biography have also taken place in literary studies.<sup>4</sup> Biographical approaches are also used in the medical and health sciences, theology, social work, gender studies (Kraul 1999, Dausien 1996), and migration research. In the context of gender research, the theme of migration also represents an increasingly significant field in which biographical approaches are used (see for example Apitzsch and Jansen 2003, Dausien, Calloni, and Friese 2000, Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1999, Lutz 2000a, 2004; Lutz and Davis 2006). In connection with transnational migration research, ‘transnational social spaces’ have primarily been investigated through ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Clifford 1992) approaches. The multi-sited ethnography approach calls for research in the receiving and originating countries of migrants, in order to connect social changes in both countries and to decode transnational networks (Apitzsch 2006). In order to understand and reconstruct transnational migration phenomena today, biographical narrative interviews can be considered as a main research component in researching ‘transnationalism from below’.

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Lukic and Jakab 2007.

## 2. The methodological use of narratives: The biographical narrative interview

The biographical narrative interview is nowadays a central concept in interpretative social research and especially in biographical migration research. It is particularly suited to the analysis of social phenomena as identifiable processes, and is therefore also appropriate for use in transnational biographical migration research. This is because it is a 'process-analytical procedure' which provides an idea of the genesis of the course of social events and records social reality from the perspective of acting and suffering subjects (Schütze 1983).

The methodological terms of reference of the narrative interview are characterised above all by theoretical traditions of interpretative sociology. It incorporates elements from sociolinguistic theory, the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz, and the sociology of the Chicago School, especially symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (Schütze 1977, Bohnsack 1991). In addition, biographical methodology has included essential elements of Grounded Theory, the concepts of theoretical sampling, contrastive comparison and theoretical saturation, in the methodological framework for empirical biographical studies (see Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In the 1970s and 80s, Fritz Schütze developed a systematic method for the hermeneutic textual interpretation of biographical interviews, which aims to reveal structures of personal and social processes of action and suffering as well as possible resources for coping and change.

Schütze's methodological terms of reference are shaped in particular by phenomenological sociology (Alfred Schütz) and by the sociology of the Chicago School, especially symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology .

The focus of biographical analysis is not only the reconstruction of intentionality, which is represented as an individual's life course, but the embeddedness of the biographical account in social macro structures. For the biographical analysis of narrative interviews through the key concepts of cognitive figures and process structures, Schütze (1983) made the suggestion of a sequential single case analysis, which consists of a combination of three steps. The first step is the formal textual analysis, where the transcribed interview has to be segmented into its thematic segments as well as its narrative, argumentative and descriptive parts. The second step is the structural description of these segments. The purpose of the structural description consists of explicating the substantive biographical structural processes: trajectories of suffering, biographical action schemes, and other social processes which are represented in the narrative. The structural description proceeds sequentially and regards the textual structures as indicators of the narrator's sedimentation of experiences. It takes into account how the narrator is taken over and influenced by them (see Riemann 2003).

The aim of the structural description is to describe and analyse the interview in its structure and to reconstruct in a detailed line by line analysis the manifest and latent meaning of the text. It is important to stay at the level of the text and start off from the narrator's own categories, making use of the whole array of formal features of the text. In the next step of the analysis, the analytical abstraction, the entire form/*Gestalt* of the interview has to be revealed in order to arrive at more abstract theoretical

categories. Finally, the single case analyses are compared and contrasted with each other, to generate a theoretical model (see Schütze 1983).

In the methodological development of biographical analysis there have been modifications and additions to Schütze's position, for example the method of 'hermeneutic case reconstruction' (Gabriele Rosenthal 1987, 1990; Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997).<sup>5</sup> Gabriele Rosenthal has developed a method of narration analysis, which is partly based on Schütze's procedure but also utilises the analytical resources of objective hermeneutics<sup>6</sup> and focuses on the structural difference between lived and narrated life history (*erlebter und erzählter Lebensgeschichte*).

Her methodological suggestion can be seen as a response to the critique of Schütze's model of narration analysis, which was formulated by Heinz Bude (1985) as what he called a 'homology critique/assumption of homology'. In her model of 'hermeneutic case reconstruction', Rosenthal distinguishes explicitly two levels for the analysis of narrated life stories, the analysis of the 'lived life' through the experienced life history (genetical analysis) and the analysis of the narrated life story (Rosenthal 1993). 'The purpose of the genetical analysis is the reconstruction of the biographical meaning of experiences at the time they happened and the reconstruction of the chronological sequence of experiences in which they occurred. The purpose of the analysis of the narrated life story is the reconstruction of the present meanings of experiences and the reconstruction of the temporal order of the life story in the present time of narrating or writing.' (Rosenthal 1993: 61) For the analysis of biographical narrative interviews, she suggests five steps: (a) analysis of biographical data, (b) thematic field analysis (reconstruction of the life story), (c) reconstruction of the life history, (d) microanalysis of individual text segments, and (e) contrastive comparison of the life history and life story (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997: 152).

Both methods can be combined for biographical analysis applied to transnational migration research. However, we would argue that, especially in gender and migration studies, it is important to follow an open methodological perspective, which is guided primarily by key principles and allows combinations of different methodological perspectives. As Bettina Dausien (2002b) argues in her reflexive-reconstructive model of interpretation, three main contexts (*Kontexte*) should be reflected in the interpretation process: the biography, the interaction process in which a biographical narration comes into being, and the cultural patterns and social rules which guide the biographical narrations.

## **2.1 The biographical narrative interview as a central method of data production**

As a 'procedure for a social science survey, prompting the informant to give a comprehensive and detailed impromptu narrative of personal involvement in events and corresponding experiences in the given theme field' (Schütze 1986: 49), the objective of the biographical narrative interview is to allow the individual to relate

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<sup>5</sup> See Fischer-Rosenthal 1997 and Rosenthal 1990, 1993, 1995. An detailed presentation of the method can be found in Gabriele Rosenthal's habilitation thesis (1993), which was published in 1995 under the title *Erzählte und Erlebte Lebensgeschichte*.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenthal adapted the steps of micro analysis and analysis of the biographical data from the method of objective hermeneutics suggested by Ulrich Oevermann.



how he or she has experienced certain life history processes and his or her own life history.

Thus, the main idea of the biographical-narrative interview is to generate a spontaneous autobiographical narration which is not structured by questions posed by the interviewer but by the narrator's structures of relevance.<sup>7</sup> During an interview the person concerned, the so-called biographer, is firstly requested to tell his or her own life history. While the life history is being narrated to the interviewer (who plays the role of the interested and empathetic listener), the latter does not interrupt the main narrative but encourages the biographer by means of non-verbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention. The interviewer waits until the narrator breaks off the story of his or her own accord, and only then asks questions in the second part of the interview. The interviewer first asks narrative questions on topics and biographical themes already mentioned. In addition, in the last part of the interview or in a second interview the interviewer asks about issues that have not been addressed by the biographer (Rosenthal 1993: 60).

A very important aspect, which has to be taken into account not only as a context but also as part of the method, is the working alliance between researcher and interviewee. The social relationship between them, their specific interests and perspectives, and the social setting within which they meet and which they themselves produce during the interview, have to be reflected and are always part of the analysis of biographical narrative interviews (Riemann 2003). However, theoretically the interview technique<sup>8</sup> is based on the assumption that biographical self-presentations are most convincingly rendered using narrative as a text form to communicate events experienced by the self (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997: 136). Schütze's thesis means that the narrative acts as a trigger in the interview situation, which is an interaction situation, but that it is not primarily controlled by the situation. It is controlled by the content and experience structure of the person who has experienced the events. Seen linguistically, the necessary elements are triggered by means of the narrative flow. Schütze differentiates three necessary elements of the narrative: the law of closing, the law of relevance and condensation, and the law of detail (Schütze 1982: 572, Alheit 1993).<sup>9</sup> In guiding and organising the description during the impromptu narrative, four principles of narration are at work. Schütze calls these principles cognitive figures. The cognitive figures are not artificial constructs, but elementary schemata which are used quite naturally during the narration of personal experiences and cannot be circumvented (Dausien 1996: 113). Schütze distinguishes four cognitive figures: (1) biography and event holders, (2) frames of events and experiences, (3) social structures: situations, life milieus and social worlds, and (4) the entire shape of the life history (Schütze 1984). Besides the cognitive figures, four kinds of process structures were identified by Schütze (1984) in his studies of biographical accounts. These empirically based concepts are: (a) the process structures of action schemes, in which planning, initiative and action are dominant,

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<sup>7</sup> Fisher-Rosenthal and Rosenthal suggest as a very open formulated question to prompt an autobiographical narration, the question: 'I'd like to ask you to tell me your life story, all experiences and events you remember. You can take as much time as you want to. I will not interrupt you, I will ask my questions at the end ...' (Fisher-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997: 4). In the first phase of a narrative interview, the interviewer should avoid any kind of 'why' questions, because they hinder or destroy a narrative scheme and generate explanation, argumentation and a legitimation position. For an introduction to the interview technique, see Rosenthal 1997 and Riemann 2003.

<sup>8</sup> On the narrative interview technique, see Schütze 1977, Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussions of the necessary elements of the narrative, see especially Schütze 1984 and Alheit 1993.

(b) the process structures in which institutional expectations are in the foreground, (c) the process structures of trajectory, which indicate a potential loss of control over the life because of extraneous conditions, and (d) process structures which suggest an unexpected or unaccountable turn towards a creative transformation in the biography. The process structures correspond to experiences and are represented in distinctive ways in the course of biographical accounts.

The idea of reconstruction of factual courses from biographical narratives is a main critical point in discussions of Schütze's theoretical model. The arguments against the biographical research perspective still insist on the main methodological premises: on the one hand, the specific focus on narrative material, and on the other hand the research logic of generalising from the biographical analysis of a single case. Among others, in the German context Heinz Bude's 'homology critique' criticises the acceptance of the homology of experience and narration which he sees in Schütze's model. According to Bude, Schütze's model includes the premise that the autobiographical unprepared extempore narrative is seen as a truly reproductive recapitulation of past experience (Bude 1985: 331). Gabriele Rosenthal repudiates Bude's critique, pointing out that Schütze in no way, as Bude implies, bases his approach on a homology, but rather on the structure of biographical narration as 'the structure of remembered life history experience building' (Rosenthal 1993: 132).

## 2.2. Key principles of biographical analysis

In biographical research, there is not only one single method bound to a particular theoretical position but different ways of doing biographical analysis. Most of the empirical studies in biographical migration research are rooted in the tradition of phenomenological narration analysis and objective hermeneutics<sup>10</sup> (e.g. Apitzsch 1990, Gültekin 2003, Ricker 2000, Dabagzi 2004, Lanfranchi 1993, Schröter 1997). In recent years the method of 'hermeneutic/biographical case reconstruction' (following Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997) has also been used in the field of Migration Studies (e.g. Breckner 2005, Juhasz and Mey 2003). This is partly based on the methods of narration analysis and objective hermeneutics, combined with Aaron Gurwitsch's theory of 'Gestalt' (*Gestalttheorie*). Despite the theoretical differences, phenomenological narration analysis, objective hermeneutics, and the method of hermeneutic case reconstruction have in common the fact that they are case reconstructive procedures which make it possible to analyse the interconnections between individual and institutional aspects of social reality in the context of biography and action (see Wohlrab-Sahr 2000).

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<sup>10</sup> The method of objective hermeneutics, as such, is in its self-understanding not exclusively an analytical procedure for biographical-narrative interviews but a strictly analytical, objective method of the unbroken development and reconstruction of objective sense and meaning structures (Oevermann et al. 1979). The methodology of objective hermeneutics is based on different theoretical concepts. In addition to French structuralism, especially that of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ulrich Oevermann has integrated the pragmatist-naturalist approach of George Herbert Meads, Jean Piaget's interactive constructivism, Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Karl Popper's falsification theory, Noam Chomsky's theory of grammar, and John R. Searle's and John Austin's speech act theory into the concept. At the same time central concepts from Adorno's methodological position of 'dialectic-hermeneutic social research' are contained within objective hermeneutics. We cannot here address the complex theoretical framework of objective hermeneutics. However, it seems to us to be important to stress that Oevermann integrates central concepts from Adorno's thought into the sequence analysis procedure (on this point, see especially Wagner 2001).

Biographical analyses are based on case reconstructive procedures. These procedures follow specific basic assumptions. In general, these are the key principles of (1) reconstruction, (2) abduction, and (3) sequentiality (Corbin and Hildenbrand 2000: 159, Kraimer 2000) and (4) reflexivity. Furthermore, they concentrate on the detailed analysis of a single case and refer to it as a basis for generalising.

In contrast to the logic of subsumtion (*Subsumtionslogik*), the logic of reconstruction follows Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of abduction. Abduction is a specific form of syllogism for starting an argument, different from deductive and inductive reasoning. Abductive reasoning means that the researcher puts forward a methodologically controlled hypothesis. Unlike deductive reasoning, abductive reasoning belongs to 'the logic of discovery'. According to Peirce, the necessary logical circle within abductive reasoning is not a *circulus vitiosus*, but a *circulus fructuosus* (Apitzsch 2004: 53n). Thus, Peirce methodologically rectifies what in hermeneutics is called a circle of synthesis of understanding. Case reconstructive methods always follow an abductive logic and proceed in a methodological way that avoids confronting the empirical material with predefined systems and variables and classifications. In practice, this means that in biographical research first of all the abductive and innovative aspect is unfolded during the research process by following the research strategies of Grounded Theory as a methodological framework concept, in order to anchor a theory (in Robert Merton's sense, as a middle range theory) in the empirical material. In detail, biographical researchers adapt the methodological steps of the integration of the processes of collecting and analysing data through the development of contrastive comparisons and the concept of theoretical saturation (see Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990).

A difference to classical studies in the tradition of Grounded Theory is the use of the sequential single case analysis, in contrast to open coding, for the analysis of the biographical narrative interviews following the key principle of sequentiality. 'The principle of sequentiality makes allowance for the process aspect of social activity. It starts from the assumption that every action represents a choice between the alternatives potentially available in a certain situation. Action sequences that are manifested in texts as reported activities are thus processes of selection that, independently of the narrator's perspective, result in certain subsequent actions while at the same time eliminating certain other possibilities' (Rosenthal 1993: 66).

### **3. The biographical research perspective in the field of migration studies**

The biographical dimension of migration processes became a specific subject of research in German-language migration studies only at the beginning of the 1990s, with the inclusion of biographical approaches (Apitzsch 1990, Lutz 1991). Previously, the discourse of German-language migration research had been dominated by quantitative approaches and policy reports (Breckner 2005: 22). In the 1970s these approaches were established as 'research into guest-workers (*Gastarbeiter*) and foreign children'. The focus was primarily on the social conditions and problems experienced by migrants during their integration into the receiving society, and the theoretical discourse was determined by approaches to acculturation, assimilation, and enculturation, as well as concepts of integration. The gender aspect was mostly ignored and the migration of women only received attention in the field of Women's Studies (see Morokvasić 1984).

At the level of migration theory, the dominant way of looking at migration phenomena in Germany was to subsume the whole process under the concepts of migration and 're'-migration, since classical theories of migration treated it as a one-directional move from the region of origin to the region of settlement (Pries 2001). Thus, German-language migration research concentrated mainly on the process of becoming settled and on the problems encountered by the immigrants in the receiving society. The dominant theoretical conceptual approaches were Hoffmann-Novotny's 'structural migration model' (1970, 1973), Esser's action theoretical model (1980, 1990), and the ethnic community approach of Friedrich Heckmann (1981). The first biographical investigations were predominantly concerned with aspects of work migration, for example difficulties experienced in school by children of Italian migrant workers (Apitzsch 1990, Lanfranchi 1993) and the migration and remigration of women from former recruiting countries (Steinhilber 1997, Philipper 1999).

The first case-based reconstruction using biographical material in a rigorous way for the analysis of life processes among the second generation of migrants in Germany, and thus initiating a biographically-oriented perspective in empirical migration research, was the study 'Migration and Biography' (Apitzsch 1990). This study was based on the interpretation of biographical-narrative interviews with young Italian migrants (Breckner 2005: 55). In contrast to the mainstream enculturation theory, which argued that migrant youth were inwardly torn between several cultures and thus striving more or less 'naturally' for deviant careers, the study was able to show empirically that these young people generally develop an intercultural disposition that may lead to upward mobility in the receiving country and thus a contrast with their class position (see Apitzsch 1990). In this context migration is regarded as an ecological transition beyond the borders of the macrosystem (Apitzsch 1990: 115). Therefore, this study explicitly and systematically takes up the problem of the marginality and creativity of migrant culture presented by Thomas and Znaniecki in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Apitzsch 1990: 60, 72). A theoretical term of reference which consolidates the sociological concept of transformation in terms of biographical theory is the concept of trajectory.

The concept of 'trajectory'<sup>11</sup> is a central concept in biography theory. It was developed by Fritz Schütze with reference to Anselm Strauss in an analysis of the 'temporally ordered reciprocal permeation of social and subjective processes' (Schütze 1981: 94; see also above, section 2). The concept of 'trajectory' is a concept of social reality which refers both to situations which are objectively threatening and to the interactive production and reproduction of threat, marginalisation, and exclusion (Apitzsch and Inowlocki 2000: 59). The process of turning intentional actions upside down in a phase of intense suffering and apparent passivity, overpowered by external forces, pushed by destiny and becoming alienated oneself, is of particular relevance and interest for migration studies. On the one hand, migration seems to be social action 'par excellence'. A person or rather a couple or a whole family who want to emigrate have to plan and organise and to make decisions with

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<sup>11</sup> Schütze uses the German word *Verlaufskurve*. He takes this concept from the English term trajectory, which comes from Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser. They used the term to define phases of the course of an illness, in which subjects can no longer act intentionally but are processed and dealt with in overpowering institutional courses of events, so to speak as 'being lived' or 'being processed' (Apitzsch 2000: 103).

lasting consequences. Thus, migration seems to be bound to the principle of a biographical action scheme. On the other hand, the reasons for migration mostly refer to collective fate: poverty, unemployment, political instability or even persecution of parts of a population. As a collective fate, migration seems to be quite the opposite of social action and rational choice; paradoxically, its sequences are structured more like the laws of nature than according to social planning.<sup>12</sup>

Evidently, most migration processes are structured by both principles: by action schemes and at the same time by phenomena which Anselm Strauss called 'collective trajectories'. Also, if the single departure of an isolated person seems to be the consequence of a very individual decision, the migration process will typically show up later on as characterised by phases of loss of control and collective exposure to social disorder and profound suffering. Intentional action with the aim of integration in the country of destiny, which at the beginning seemed to be strong enough to generate plans for the next generation as well, will be halted or altered by new experiences, false expectations, the hostility of neighbours and the discovery that strangeness may increase instead of disappearing as time goes by. 'Biographical work' in migration processes means the special connection between both of these experiences within the logic of life construction and life constitution (Apitzsch 1999).

The biographical research perspective in migration studies uses biographical analysis to provide a methodological way of looking at problems and conflicts, but also of examining the subjective action competencies available to the subjects as ways of coping with crises in migration situations (Apitzsch 1990: 90). In this context, the concept of biographical resources (Hoerning 1989) is at the centre of the analysis. It integrates biographical experiences and the knowledge constructed from these into experience, sense, and action resources. A further characteristic and advantage of the biographical research perspective in migration studies is that the biographical approach helps to avoid reductionist concepts of social types, the latter using essentialist cultural mechanisms of investigation. Biographical reconstructive research proceeds from the characterisation of biographies as 'radical documents of the sociality of the individual' (Apitzsch 1990). In this way, processes of change and the mingling of individual and societal positionings and identity constructions can be investigated. Thus, biographical research perspectives offer a potential methodological tool within the framework of women's and gender studies (see Diezinger et al. 1994). In Women's Studies, scholars have discovered that the perspective of mainstream disciplinary migration research was based on the model of the 'normal' biography as well as the 'male bread winner model'. In recent years in feminist biographical research, the concept of biography has been understood as an aspect of the reconstruction of gender (Dausien 1994, 1996, 2002). Especially interesting in the context of historical development and establishment of the

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<sup>12</sup> In their article on 'Trajectory as a Basic Theoretical Concept', Riemann and Schütze argue that 'trajectory might be seen as the conceptually generalized natural history of disorder and suffering in social processes'. They refer to Robert Park's observation concerning 'conditional relevance as a basic relationship between the progressively deteriorating stages of natural history processes of social disorder' (see Gerhard Riemann and Fritz Schütze 1991, p. 352f.). Riemann and Schütze, however, have remarked that the term 'conditional relevance' itself 'is not Park's, but was coined by the late Harvey Sacks during the study of the sequential organization of conversation (cf. Sacks 1967/1972). It might appear strange to use it in this context, but it is exactly Park's and Sack's interest in sequential organization that provides for an interesting similarity – their totally different substantive interests and methodological procedures notwithstanding'. (Riemann and Schütze *ibid.*, p.355, n.5)

biographical research perspective in German migration studies is the fact that many biographical researchers in the field of migration are female social scientists. Their positioning mirrors the double 'not normal' biography in terms of being women and mostly also being migrants themselves.

Even though the biographical research perspective is not the dominant or mainstream approach in German migration studies, it is obvious that the biographical research perspective has developed further since the 1990s alongside historically-oriented migration research and research focused on migration processes in global contexts. The range of biographically-orientated research on migration phenomena has expanded steadily since the end of the 1990s<sup>13</sup> (see Apitzsch and Kontos 2003, Breckner 2005, Guitierrez Rodriguez 1999, Gültekin 2003, Hummrich 2002, Inowlocki 1995, 2002, Juhasz and Mey 2003, Ofner 2003, Ricker 2000, and Jimenez Laux 2001, 2002). However, biographical research methods have expanded not only in Germany, but also across Europe in different interdisciplinary fields of research.<sup>14</sup> Especially, Daniel Bertaux's and Paul Thompsons edited book *'Between generations. Family models, myths and memories'* became very important for the research about the transmission of family memory in contexts of radical social change such as displacement, slavery and migration (1993). Lena Inowlocki's contribution about *'Grandmothers, mothers, and daughters: intergenerational transmission in displaced families in three Jewish communities'* introduced the term of 'generational work' into the debate on biographical methods. Moreover, her theoretical reflection showed how important the gender aspect becomes when traditionality is involved in 'biographical work' (Inowlocki 1993). Catherine Delcroix in her book *'Ombres et lumières de la famille Nour'* (2001) showed in a rigorous analysis of the internal communication processes of one immigrant family from the Maghreb how gender relations work in a very unexpected way in order to make achievements possible by accumulating 'capital d'expérience biographique'.

Biographical studies in the field of migration cover different types of migration, from intra-European to transatlantic and circular migration phenomena. Gender has recently become an important aspect of research in this context of new migration processes. Since the 1990s, we have been able to observe a development of new migratory patterns and behaviour which we call transnational circulation. Mostly, women exercise agency as they draw on a range of biographical resources, e.g. care

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<sup>13</sup> A broad range of biographical analytical investigations are summarised in, among others, the following publications: Ursula Apitzsch (ed.), *Migration und Traditionsbildung* (1999); Bettina Dausien, Marina Calloni, and Marianne Friese, *Migrationsgeschichten von Frauen. Beiträge und Perspektiven aus der Biographieforschung* (2000); Wolf Dietrich Bukow, Markus Ottersbach, Elisabeth Tuider, and Erol Yildiz (eds), *Biographische Konstruktionen im multikulturellen Bildungsprozess. Individuelle Standortsicherung im globalisierten Alltag* (2006).

<sup>14</sup> An indication of this expansion are a number of international research projects which have been funded by the European Commission during recent years and have used biographical research methods. Among them are the projects: 'Self-employment and activities concerning women and minorities' (1997-2000) coordinated by Ursula Apitzsch; 'Social strategies in risk society' (1996-1999) coordinated by Michael Rustin and Prue Chamberlyne; 'Between integration and exclusion: A comparative study on local dynamics of precarity and resistance to exclusion in urban contextes' (1998-2000) coordinated by Daniel Bertaux in cooperation with Thomas Boje and Susan MyIntosh; 'The chances of the second generation in families of ethnic entrepreneurs: intergenerational and gender aspects of quality of life processes' (2002-2005) coordinated by Ursula Apitzsch; and the ongoing project 'Integration of Female Immigrants in Labour Market and Society. Policy Assessment and Policy Recommendations' coordinated by Maria Kontos.

giving. Here, community-building follows paths different from the community-building of gender balanced migrations (Harzig 2003). The monadising structure of domestic work and the permanent mobility that is implied in commuting by new female migrants decouples them from wider ethnic communities and binds them instead within transnational networks (Morokvasic-Müller 2003). There emerges a ‘chain of marginality’ in these networks, with less marginalised members of the group helping more marginalised ones (*ibid.*). At the same time, there emerge local and national networks of collective self-help of migrant women in which approaches to improving policy and laws for female migrants may develop (Anderson 2001, Apitzsch 2006). Networking with other female migrants from their own national or linguistic group becomes a major strategy for regaining the ability for action in the social arena (Lenz and Schwenken 2002). These networks are the main resource of migrant women, as this form of social capital enables social agency (Campani 1993, 2000, Jiménez Laux 2001, Kontos 2003). Only by using biographical research it is possible to investigate these informal networks.

#### **4. The transnational turn in migration studies and its impact on biographical migration research**

Since end of the 1990s, the transnationalism approach has also been receiving attention in German migration research.<sup>15</sup> In migration studies, the ideas of transnationalism and transmigration - developed in American social anthropological research (see Glick Schiller et al. 1992) - were introduced with some delay at the end of the 1990s (see Pries 1996, 1997, Faist 2000a) and entailed a paradigm shift.

While classical migration research analysis in Germany traditionally concentrated on examining integration and assimilation within the paradigm of the nation state, the focus of transnationalist perspectives has underlined the intersections of the local and the global by looking at forms of interconnectedness that transcend nation state borders. The transnational approach does not question the existence and fundamental impact of the nation state perspective, but it underlines its character as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson), as a political construction that is based both on inclusion and on exclusion and which is concretised in territorial borders (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2006). The transnationalism approach is strongly connected with the globalisation debate. While globalisation focuses primarily on economic developments, the concept of transnationalism focuses on the level of the social and the actors who are actively engaged in migration processes (see Ong 1997). The transnationalism approach opens up new and challenging ways of understanding more profoundly the dynamics of migration processes without subsuming migrants immediately in the assimilative logics of the nation state paradigm (*cf.* Lutz 2004: 210). It involves a different set of questions and factors than those traditionally taken into account by classical migration research (see Apitzsch and Siouti 2007).

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<sup>15</sup> We are focusing in this section primarily on the debate in German migration research. Among the numerous publications on the transnationalism approach, see Cohen 1997, Gerber 2000, Levitt 2001, Ong 1997, Portes, Guarnizo et al. 1999, Vertovec and Cohen 1999, Vertovec 2001, Smith and Guarnizo 1998.

## 4.1 Transmigration as a new type of migration

Unlike classical approaches, which focused on ‘traditional’ forms of international emigration and immigration (see Pries 2001: 8), the transnational migration approach treats transmigration as a form of migration which lies at a tangent to both the region of origin and the region of settlement, and constitutes a form of existence in its own right (Pries 2001a: 14). The sociologist Ludger Pries was among those who introduced the discussion on transmigration into the German context,<sup>16</sup> basing his work on the analytical framework of the anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Christina Blanc-Szanton. Glick Schiller et al. (1992) defined transnationalism as the process in which immigrants create social fields linking their country of origin with the country where they have settled (Glick Schiller, Basch et al 1997: 81).

This process, rooted in the everyday life activities and the social relations of migrants, is indissolubly linked with the development of global capitalism and leads to the coming into being of social fields located between the everyday practices of the migrants and hegemonic contexts. Glick Schiller et al. call these ‘new’ social fields transnational social spaces, which cross the borders of nation-states and create new specific forms of consciousness (Glick Schiller, Basch et al, 1997: 85ff).

Transmigration phenomena are not completely new, as they could also be observed in earlier waves of migration. However, new technologies in communication and transportation constitute the intensity and depth of links in transnational life-models in the era of globalisation (Faist 2000, Lutz 2006).

## 4.2 The combination of the transnationalism approach and biographical research perspectives in empirical studies

In recent biographical migration research, scholars have started to pay attention to the theoretical discourses of transnationalism.<sup>17</sup> It is argued that empirical migration research needs to conceptualise more clearly different types of transmigration phenomena subsumed under the heading of transnational social spaces and transmigration, and especially pay attention to the gender-specific aspects (Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2006). Feminist scholars have studied the phenomenon of domestic work in different disciplinary fields, using the transnationalism approach as their theoretical background (see Hess and Lenz 2001, Lutz 2004, Shinozaki 2004) and examined how gender, class, ethnicity and ‘race’ intersect with one another.

In her study *Negotiating Citizenship in Transnational Migration: The Case of Filipina and Filipino Migrant Domestic Workers in Germany* (2004), Kyoko Shinozaki examines the identity formation and subjectivity of Filipina and Filipino irregular domestic workers. Her empirical study is based on biographical interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. The theoretical background lies in the transnationalism

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<sup>16</sup> The empirical basis of Pries’s theoretical conception of transmigration was Mexican migration to the United States; see Pries 1996, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Apart from the biographical-analytical studies linked with transnationalism approach which are mentioned in this section, there are also a number of empirical studies which are based on the transnationalism approach but do not use biographical research explicitly. See, for example, for Italian migration to Germany Martini (2001) and for Turkish migration Can (2006).



and citizenship approaches. Shinozaki looks into the negotiation strategies of care workers with family members left behind via the gendered norms inscribed into Filipino citizenship. She also investigates patterns of the migrants' everyday negotiation strategies in relation to working conditions negotiated with their employers. The analysis reveals migrant domestics' agency, severely constrained by Filipino citizenship norms as well as their irregular immigration status in the racially and ethnically segmented German labour market. This delicate and yet dynamic negotiation shapes their citizenship in the process of transnational migration (see Shinozaki 2004).

Minna-Kristiina Ruokonen-Engler combines a transnational perspective with biographical analysis in her empirical study of migration processes and subject constructions of Finnish migrant women in Germany (2007). By reconstructing biographical processes and subject positions, she indicates how agency gets constructed along transnational belonging as a result of individual biographical resources and structural constraints at the interplay of a range of locations and dislocations in relation to gender, ethnicity, class and racialisation.

The integration of the transnational perspective into the analysis of second generation immigrants in Germany has recently started (see Fürstenau 2004, Siouti 2003, 2007). In the German-language migration research literature, the transmigration approach and the transmigrant as a prototype of migration have been dealt with predominantly in the context of working migration and the first generation (see Martini 2001). In connection with the second generation, transmigration was treated at the beginning of the debate – at least at a theoretical level - as something cosmopolitan, an elite phenomenon, and was ruled out as a possible form of life for children of the classical working migrants, the so-called ‘guest workers’ (*Gastarbeiter*) (Kürşat- Ahlers/ Waldhoff 2001: 58).

Biographical research on migration processes among second generation immigrants has shown, though, that cross-border movements are shaping biographical reconstructions, being perceived as positive opportunities. This makes it necessary to discuss transmigration as a specific form of migration among the second generation in Europe (Fürstenau 2004, Siouti 2003, 2007). One important finding of empirical research among the second generation of Greek immigrants (Siouti 2003, 2007) is that the hypothesis which dominates the literature, to the effect that the ‘commuting phenomenon’ leads to poor school results and failed educational careers in the second generation (Damanakis 1982, Diehl 2002, Auernheimer 2006), cannot be confirmed. Biographical experiences in two societies and cultures, along with the experience of ‘commuter migration’ during childhood and schooldays, do not necessarily lead to failure at school. Having the opportunity to cross borders and to attend school in two different systems may also be conceptualised as a biographical resource for the second generation which can be mobilised in order to achieve success at school and in other social environments. The ‘transnational commuting migration’ schemes (Siouti 2007), defined as a sort of transmigration phenomena, can be interpreted as unintended consequences of strategies that are structurally determined by migration policies. The transnational treaties between Germany and Greece, the setting up of the Greeks’ own binational education system in Germany, and the possibility of moving freely within the EU make it possible for Greek migrants to establish a biographical action scheme that is based on geographical mobility. However, not only structural

factors influence the development of transmigration phenomena; it is more the interplay between the structural factors and biographical (work) processes that leads to the development of transnational biographies (Siouti *ibid.*).

### **4.3 The category of the transnational social space**

The theoretical core of the transmigration approach is the assumption that geographical and social space have become decoupled from each other. Now, the discovery of the decoupling of social from geographical space is not altogether new, since this is the main concern of the whole field of diaspora research. However, the diaspora approach focuses on the mechanisms which serve to maintain the difference between country of origin and country of settlement, and assumes that the diaspora is socially, or at least culturally, closed in relation to the society of settlement. The transnational space approach, on the other hand, proceeds on the basis of the assumption that in transnational social spaces, new sociocultural models and forms of society-formation come into being which 'include elements of both the society of settlement and the society of origin, and which simultaneously give both of these, by mingling the elements together and mixing them up, a qualitatively different hybrid content' (Pries 2000: 418). A consequence is the constitution of hybrid and multiple identity formations (see Mecheril 2003).

Cross-border interactions and movements in transmigration processes do not just function as links between two national societies, but are genuinely transformed into a kind of 'new cross-border social texture' (Pries 2003).

At a theoretical level, the concept of 'transnational social space' has been introduced as a central category in migration research.<sup>18</sup> The questions that arise out of this phenomenon, about the relationship between social spaces as life contexts of the everyday world and geographical-physical spaces, are discussed in the social sciences with reference to various concepts of space, especially Simmel's 'sociology of space' (see Pries 1997, 2000) and Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social spaces (see Faist 2000a, Fürstenau 2004).

Transnational social spaces are defined from a political science perspective by Thomas Faist (2000a) as combinations of social and symbiotic ties, positions in networks and organisations that can be found in at least two geographically and internationally distinct places (Faist 2000a: 10) Faist distinguishes three types of transnational social spaces: kinship groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities (Faist 2000a: 20-22). In his theoretical model, space refers not only to physical features, but also to larger opportunity structures, the social life and the subjective images, values, and meanings that the specific and limited place represents to migrants. According to Faist, 'space is thus different from place in that it encompasses or spans various territorial locations. It includes two or more places. Space has a social meaning that extends beyond simple territoriality; only with concrete social or symbolic ties does it gain meaning for potential migrants' (Faist 2000b). Ludger Pries (1997) follows Norbert Elias and defines the transnational social spaces as 'contexts of social integration.....relatively permanent, dense configurations of everyday social practices, and systems of symbols, which are distributed across

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<sup>18</sup> Other terms such as transnational social fields or transnational social formations are often used synonymously in the social sciences (see Siouti 2003).

several locations or spread between a number of spaces, and which are neither delocalized nor deterritorialized' (Pries 2001: 53). They emerge within the setting of transnational migration systems.

Empirical studies which combine the biographical research perspective with the paradigm of transnationalism are based on these theoretical definitions of transnational social spaces. However, they are trying to extend them through a biographical perspective by focusing on the question of how transnational social spaces are constituted through migration processes (Apitzsch 2006, Lutz 2004) and how transnational biographies can be theoretically defined.

It is argued that the transnational social space is 'overformatted' by hegemonic relations and is simultaneously produced by the migration subjects' biographical work and concretised in the structure of the migration biography (Apitzsch 2003, 2006). A 'transnational biography' is seen in this conceptualisations as a 'site' for the biographical accumulation of experience and knowledge (Apitzsch 2006) as well as an articulation of 'narrative negotiations of biographical experiences' (Lutz 2004,<sup>19</sup> Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2006: 10).

From a phenomenological perspective, it has been argued that the metaphor of transnational social space is equated with the phenomenon of biographical knowledge (*Biographisches Wissen*) (Alheit and Hoerning 1989) of subjects, which is accumulated and symbolised in life courses of individuals and groups (Apitzsch 2003, 2006). A transnational biography is thus not only a product of subjectivity (Lutz 2004) (*Produkt von Subjektivität*) but also a methodological way of accessing invisible objective structures of transnational migration spaces.

## Conclusion

About ten years ago the famous Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences (1996) predicted that, if social scientists could not find a revised intellectual perception of a useful interdisciplinary collaboration between them, taking into account the perspectives of gender, race, class, and linguistic culture, it would be no doubt be done for them by administrators of the institutions of knowledge.

Biographical research is a good example of what the Gulbenkian Commission observed as a new and promising development which has crossed traditional disciplinary boundaries. Biographical research offers ways of engaging interdisciplinary fields of research and biography theory in a theoretical framework for investigating processes of change and the mingling of individual and societal positionings and identity constructions in migration processes. The embeddedness of gender and migration as well as generational relations become visible through the biographical perspective.

The biographical research perspective offers a promising way of responding to the methodological challenge that the notion of transnationalism brings into the field of

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<sup>19</sup>Helma Lutz (2004, 2006) argues from a discourse theoretical position. Referring to Stanley (1992: 7), she understands articulation as 'narrative negotiations of biographical experiences' (*erzählte Verhandlungen biographischer Erfahrungen*; Lutz 2004: 212).

qualitative empirical migration research. Through the methodological use of narratives and case reconstructive procedures, it is providing methodological tools to overcome the nation state perspective as 'natural unit of the analysis' and the 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2003) of migration research.

However, it remains a challenge for the methodological debate in biographical research to reflect upon the intercultural aspect of the way in which methods are proceeded. We need to develop a whole set of concepts that respond to the fact that not only forms of migration but also the contexts of research have changed.

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