

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH IN GERMANY

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ABSTRACT

The contribution gives a brief historical insight in the beginning and the drastic change of biographical thinking particularly in the educational sphere. Biography is a theme addressed by German educational sciences ever since its historical beginnings in the late 18th century. The discovery of the autonomous, educated, middle-class subject is rooted in that interest in biography, which also shaped the process of “biographisation” of the lower social strata a century later. Even post-modern and post-structural criticism of the ‘subject’ towards the end of the 20th century has a lasting influence on educational science. Understanding the historical background and the consequences of this threefold change of ideas in the concept of “biography” in the German tradition is the aim of this article.

Keywords: Biography. Subject. Biographisation. Life history. Qualitative methods. Biographicity. Subjectivisation.

RESUMO

UMA BREVE HISTÓRIA DA PESQUISA BIOGRÁFICA NA ALEMANHA

A contribuição apresenta breve visão histórica do início e mudança drástica do pensamento biográfico, particularmente na esfera educacional. A biografia é um tema abordado pelas ciências educacionais alemãs desde seus primórdios históricos no final do século XVIII. A descoberta do sujeito autônomo, educado e de classe média está enraizada nesse interesse pela biografia, que também moldou o processo de “biografização” dos estratos sociais mais baixos, um século depois. Mesmo a crítica pós-moderna e pós-estrutural do “sujeito” no final do século XX tem uma influência duradoura na ciência educacional. Entender o contexto histórico e as consequências dessa tripla mudança de ideias no conceito de “biografia”, na tradição alemã, é o objetivo deste artigo.

Palavras chave: Biografia. Sujeito. Biografização. História de vida. Métodos qualitativos. Biograficidade. Subjetivação.

RESUMEN **UNA BREVE HISTORIA DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN BIOGRÁFICA EN ALEMANIA**

La contribución proporciona una breve perspectiva histórica al principio y el cambio drástico del pensamiento biográfico, particularmente en la esfera educativa. La biografía es un tema abordado por las ciencias educativas alemanas desde sus inicios históricos a finales del siglo XVIII. El descubrimiento del sujeto autónomo, educado y de clase media está arraigado en ese interés por la biografía, que también dio forma al proceso de “biografización” de los estratos sociales inferiores un siglo después. Incluso la crítica posmoderna y postestructural del “sujeto” hacia fines del siglo XX tiene una influencia duradera en la ciencia de la educación. El objetivo de este artículo es comprender los antecedentes históricos y las consecuencias de este triple cambio de ideas en el concepto de “biografía” en la tradición alemana.

Palabras clave: Biografía. Sujeto. Biografización. Historia de vida. Métodos cualitativos. Biograficidad. Subjetivación.

Introduction: biography as a point of reference for educational thought and research

Scientific interest in biographies has roots in many academic disciplines, in each case with different directions and accentuations. Biographical research is primarily an *interdisciplinary* field, therefore. The following article is an attempt to identify traditional lines of, and current approaches to biographical research in educational science in Germany and other German-speaking countries.

Interest in life histories is closely interwoven with the history of educational science or ‘pedagogy’ as a discipline, and with its specific sub-fields, especially the traditions based on the *humanities and hermeneutics*. However, contemporary educational science in German-speaking countries is based not only on that particular tradition, but also on biographical research approaches in the *social sciences*, which focus on the social constitution and construction of biographies and which have developed methodologies for empirical research into biographies.

The interlinking and integration of these two traditions is where the specific potential of biographical research in educational science is found to lie (cf. MAROTZKI, 1996, 1999; DAUSIEN, 2016) – potential not only for the internal development of each discipline, but also for dialogue between the disciplines.

Referring to both traditions, one can express the general premiss that both intentional and intended learning processes (‘education’) as well as ‘concomitant’, non-intended learning, the primary focus of socialisation theories (cf. DAUSIEN, 2016), are ‘framed’ by life history. The observation ‘that pedagogical reflection and theorising, since its beginnings in modernity, has used the medium of construction and reconstruction of life courses as a way of verifying its specific forms of thought and the plausibility of its argumentational methods’ (cf. HERRMANN, 1987, p. 305) should therefore come as no surprise. We begin by sketching the

outlines of those traditional lines of thought and research (Chapter 2). The article ends with an outlook and some reflections on the critical function of biographical research (Chapter 3).

Traditions in biographical research: an historical outline

If we accept Herrmann's reference to pedagogical thinking having its 'beginnings in modernity' (see above), then we are dealing with an historical and social context in which biography becomes relevant not merely as a scientific category, but firstly as an everyday construction for the thoughts and actions of the majority of individuals – with the beginnings of modernisation and the formation of the bourgeois society, with which the relationship between the individual and society is fundamentally restructured, and as a consequence of which problems of individualisation and integration came to the fore.

This inter-relationship between biographical research and the development of society will be briefly elucidated below. In a first approach to that relationship, which has been analysed in different ways (e.g. HAHN, 2000; HAHN and KAPP, 1987), the establishment of biographical research as a field of research in educational and social science can be interpreted as a reaction to social modernisation processes which are characterised in particular by the disintegration of social certainties, increasing experience of the contingency with which individual lives are led, accompanied simultaneously by an increasing requirement for individuals to deal with those contingencies on their own. The aim is to show, with 'momentary sketches', some examples of historical and social 'locations' and typical problem situations that generate research interest from the biographical theory perspective.

Educational biographies as a theme in the nascent field of education

The first sketch looks at the 'original context' of scientific interest in biography, which can be dated, like the origins of pedagogy as a scientific discipline in German-speaking countries, to the second half of the 18th century – a period characterised by increasing interest in (auto)biographies, also in literature and other scientific disciplines.¹ Autobiographical documents and literary forms of biography, above all the German *Bildungsroman*, can be read as documents of a new assertiveness of bourgeois individuals, who no longer spend their lives as subjects within the collective straightjacket of a class-based and religious order, but who experience the opportunity and the compulsion to take their lives 'into their own hands' in an independent and self-reflecting manner. This process, referred to by Ulrich Beck (1986) and others as *individualisation*, is accompanied by the *biographisation* of individual patterns of action and interpretation. It initially involves only select groups in society, above all male members of the bourgeoisie, or middle class.

This process of the biographical becoming an object of reflection in everyday life is the point of departure for what Alfred Schütz calls 'constructs of the second degree' (SCHÜTZ, 1962, p. 6), i.e. for concepts relating to the meaning and functioning of biographical processes, e.g. due to a pedagogical interest in controlling and supporting educational processes. This is not confined to scientific approaches in the narrower sense, but also includes literary forms of construction and reflection which, in their role as second-order observations, assimilate the changing everyday experience of middle-class individuals (cf. ALHEIT and BRANDT, 2004).

¹ Biography and autobiography, as a literary genre, are a separate field of research which cannot be dealt with here (cf. FETZ, 2009).

The reconstruction of that context from the scientific and educationalist perspective is primarily focused on the 'coming-of-age novels' and autobiographies of the late 18th century. Classical examples, read and interpreted as reference texts to this day, include Karl Philipp Moritz' autobiographical novel 'Anton Reiser' (1785-90), Rousseau's fictitious biography of 'Emile' (first published in 1762), which was written as a treatise and which also exerted a strong influence on German educationalists, Goethe's 'Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship' (first published in 1795/96) and his autobiography 'Dichtung und Wahrheit' (POETRY and TRUTH, p. 1811-1833).

Yet it was not only literary works which become subject-matter of scientific and pedagogical reflection, but also specifically acquired or collected documents in smaller formats and by less important contemporaries. One prominent example of this scientific interest in 'inner' educational processes is the '*Magazin für Erfahrungsseelenkunde*', or 'Magazine for Experiential Psychology', which was published over a period of ten years by Karl Philipp Moritz, the author of 'Anton Reiser', and which can be considered one of the first major scientific project aimed at investigating biographical education processes.²

These examples are clear indications of the greater attention being paid to *individual* life experience and life histories in literature and science. The construction of the bourgeois subject is described not only as an external *individualisation* process relating to the conduct of life, but is accompanied by a new, subjective *sense for individuality* and specialness. Individual experience is also assigned considerable importance in the field of education. Ulrich Herrmann (1991) finds convincing evidence

² The '*Magazin*', which appeared from 1783 to 1793, is available as a reprint (1986; cf. Paul, 1979, Vol. 2, p. 43ff.). Herder's collection of autobiographies (cf. PAUL, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 14ff.) reflects a similar interest.

in Johann Christoph Greiling's '*Endzweck der Erziehung*' (1793; cf. HERRMANN, 1991, p. 42), in the Enlightenment writings of Christian Gotthilf Salzmann and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ibid., p. 43) or the educational theories of Ernst Christian Trapp (1780; cf. ibid., p. 46) and August Hermann Niemeyer (1796; cf. ibid., p. 45).

In the two-way movement from general concepts to the analysis of a specific case, and vice versa from the specifics of everyday experience to general categories (cf. ibid, p. 42), the relationship between (general) theory and (concrete) empiricism is modelled in a way that is also found in similar form in current debates over empirically grounded theorising (see Chapter 2.3). Herrmann highlights a clearly *empirical* orientation even in the early pedagogy of the 18th century. The study of life histories, self-observation and observation of others, the description of specific educational situations in everyday life, and the introspection and self-observation of the educator, combination with recollection of one's own childhood and youth, are methods not only of self-reflection on the part of educators in their educational practice, but rather are conceived of explicitly as instruments of scientific discovery, and create the empirical foundations of modern scientific thought in education (cf. ibid., p. 45).

The point to be made, regarding this snapshot at the end of the 18th century, is that life histories and biographical documents were thought to provide key access to the '*views from the inside*' (HERRMANN, 1991) of education:

- Biography is thus construed in the difference between 'outer' and 'inner' life course and life history – a difference which is also given prominence in contemporary biographical research (cf. SCHULZE, 1996, 2006).
- Education is conceived of primarily as a subject's 'inner history'. This is pred-

icated by the discovery of the subject as an independent self-awareness that shapes itself *in opposition* to an extraneous social reality (VEITH, 2001).

- That discovery is accompanied by empirical research strategies such as case studies, introspection, observation of others, and precise study of individual life histories which today, in more sophisticated variants, are among the most important methods of qualitative social research.
- Literary (auto)biographies and autobiographical documents are generally thought of as documents of self-reflecting, self-shaping awareness; for that reason, *texts* are the preferred materials for advancing knowledge.
- The study of life histories is not motivated by purely theoretical concerns, but is also geared to *pedagogical action*, the aim of which, also in the context of the biographical perspective, is to create a space where the wayward processes of subject construction can unfold and be systematically supported. This basic concept in Rousseau's 'Emile' (cf. HERRMANN, 1987) is also found in the current educational debate.

In the historical context outlined here, however, there is one aspect which the construction of the 'biographical subject that is forming itself' fails to address and reflect upon, namely the *social conditions* of its construction. The ideal-typical model of the subject turns out, from a critical perspective, to be 'autonomous', 'male', 'middle-class' and 'educated', thus narrowing the perspective for biographical learning processes. Any experience which is not subsumed under the classical notion of education is ignored.

Secondary influences on biographical research in education: the discovery of 'life history' in the social sciences

A second tradition in scientific interest in biographies can be identified in a situation that arose historically a good century later, and which is commonly thought of as the founding context of *social scientific* biographical research. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, individualisation and biographisation processes in European and north American metropolises had acquired such characteristics and become so generalised in society that a systematic, scientific interest in biography took root.³

The driving force is less an interest in educational issues, or primarily an internal scientific debate over theories and methods, but the explicit focus on *social changes*, on new *social problems*, and on perspectives for policymakers and professionals in addressing the latter. At that time, the process of individualisation was dramatised and became vivid and 'palpable' in its contradictoriness, in a way that had little to do with the contradictions experienced by individual members of the middle class in the course of their emancipation. The paradigmatic aspect for this individualisation and biographisation is no longer the (male) middle-class subject freeing himself from feudal and religious shackles, but the forced release and uprooting of broad sections of the population in the course of *industrialisation*.

The breakup of previously valid social orders and the loss and changes in social contexts experienced as a result of migration – from the countryside into the city, and over and beyond national and cultural boundar-

³ A comprehensive overview of the development of biographical methods in the fields of ethnology, sociology and psychology is still provided by the work of Sigrid Paul (1979); on the history of biographical research in sociology, see also Fuchs, 1984; on the Chicago School, cf. Fischer-Rosenthal, 1991a; Bulmer, 1984.

ies – generate social suffering, but they also open up emancipatory opportunities, which could be discussed in greater detail with specific reference to women’s participation in the workforce, for example, or the biographies of migrants. This form of individualisation gradually extends to all sections of the population; it becomes *something general*.

In the transition to industrial society, especially, in the phase of extensive and untrammelled capitalism, the biographical problems this produced (unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, destruction of families, prostitution, poor housing conditions and homelessness, etc.) became visible as mass phenomena, as long as no new social structures had been formed which could mitigate the impacts of individualisation and create new ways of integrating. Those problems need to be coped with not only at the individual, biographical level, but also demand social and political responses.

In the context of the ‘social question’ in Germany at the end of the 19th century, an interest developed in bringing the perspectives of those affected into the public debate – be it through the medium of literature, or in scientific research. It was in that context that the literary genre of the ‘*worker autobiography*’, for example, came into being at the instigation of social democratic and Christian/reformist intellectuals and socialist activists, both male and female.⁴ Social reportages and research methods such as interviews and participatory observation were likewise deployed with the aim of getting to know the working and living conditions of the lower classes ‘at first hand’

4 Cf. the worker biographies published by Pastor Paul Göhre (cf. PAUL, 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 302ff) or the autobiographies of female socialist authors like Adelheid Popp (1909) or August Bebel (1910-14), which were written with educational and propagandistic interests at heart. On the history of the ‘worker autobiography’, see, for example, Emmerich, 1974; Bollenbeck, 1976; Klucsarits and Kürbis, 1975.

and making them accessible to a broader public.⁵ In that context, biographies are less a discrete object of empirical research and theoretical reflection, but are used above all as instruments for making social problems perceptible for the representatives of the political and (educated) middle classes who formed the professional and political élites. Biography is used here, in a sense, as a medium for didactic mediation, political education and denouncement, social contact and cultural encounter with ‘other lifeworlds’.⁶

This interest leads to early forms of an ethnographic research focus, in which social activities are studied ‘in the field’ using qualitative and empirical methods, thus laying a foundation as well for specific perspectives for social action and for reformist projects. It also inspires a biographical research focus in which social action and problem-handling processes on the part of subjects are studied from the perspective of their life history, and which was of sustained importance above all for the phase during the 1970s in which the biographical paradigm in sociology and education was rediscovered.

5 Cf. the study by Susanne Hirschberg (cf. Paul 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 318ff), in which the authoress herself worked in the factory for a while so that she could study the situation of the women factory workers.

6 In the USA, especially, industrialisation and migration (within the country itself, and from virtually every part of Europe), the explosive growth of large cities, and all the concomitant problems of disintegration and survival strategies are challenges requiring social policies in response. Such responses were forged in the pragmatist tradition of philosophical thought that developed in Chicago, which sought, by emphasising interaction and social practice, an alternative to the dualisms of European philosophy of consciousness (‘inner’/‘outer’, mind/material, being/awareness, etc.). Two men who taught and researched in the Department of Philosophy at the newly founded University of Chicago were John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, whose influence on the emerging *Chicago School of Sociology* was noteworthy (cf. FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, 1991a, p. 115; BULMER, 1984; PAUL 1979, Vol. 1, p. 211-226). That was also the context in which a sociological variant of biographical research developed, and which also exerted a strong influence on educational science in the 1970s, following its reception in the social sciences in German-speaking countries.

This strand within the German social science tradition, namely the developing interest in biographical aspects in education, is not the only innovation characterising the turn of the 20th century. An even greater impact appears to have been made by a hermeneutical discourse in the humanities to which academic pedagogy was directly exposed. A key role in that discourse is played by the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, the philosopher. His core question, ‘how the structure of the mental world in the subject makes a knowledge of mental reality possible’ (DILTHEY, 1984, p. 235), leads to an extended concept of understanding (*Verstehen*), namely one based on *cultural studies*, in which (self-)biography plays a central role (cf. MAROTZKI, 1999, p. 327). Because understanding, according to Dilthey, is ‘a rediscovery of the ‘I’ in the ‘You’ (1984, p. 235), ‘the spirit’ (*Geist*) also discovers itself in this process: ‘in the I, in the You, in every subject of a community, in every system of culture, and ultimately in the totality of spirit and of universal history’ (ibid.). Unlike many of his epigones in educational science, however, Dilthey considers biography to be of only limited use as a tool of scientific discovery, due to its concentration on the individual. It lacks, so to speak, an understanding of the ‘general movements’ (ibid.). One could express this in more modern terms as follows: it (still) lacks the sociological or interdisciplinary perspective (cf. FETZ, 2009, p. 9). At about the same time, the latter is explicitly elaborated by members of the Chicago School of Sociology. In ‘*The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*’ by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), a key study for biographical research, biographies or ‘life-records’ are used as a methodological tool for accessing the social world and analysing its contradictory dynamics.

A new conceptualisation of the relationship of the particular individual to the cultural generality is already laid down in Dilthey’s ap-

proach (cf. DILTHEY, 1968, p. 199). When biography is conceived of as ‘work on the individuality of others’, which ‘can only be construed within the framework of the constructional logics provided by discourses in history, psychology, biology or sociology’ (von ZIMMERMANN, 2006, p. 31), then as an instrument of understanding in cultural studies, it can leave behind its concentration on the individual, and hence also the dualism between the humanities and the social sciences that was still typical of early 20th-century Germany.

The following summary spotlights the parallels and differences between these traditions in biographical research, compared to the educationalist view presented in the first example:

- The turn of the 20th century marks a rediscovery, in a sense, of the importance of biography – it represents *not just the subjective* or the inner, but also gives expression to the culturally general and the social, to social relations.
- Biography is conceptualised as a methodological bridge: to the dialectical *link between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’*, between consciousness, action and structure, between individual and society.
- Within that link, the ‘outer’ is understood not just as the ‘world’ in the abstract philosophical sense, but as the historically changing *social space* and the *cultural context* that is interactively shaped and modified by active agents.
- Whereas the methodological importance of the *individual case* and a research methodology based on *case studies* bears some similarity, a systematic, methodological clarification of the relationship between theory and empiricism is now pursued with greater clarity, however, than in educationalist perspective outlined in the foregoing. This is where the foundations are laid

for the model of reconstructive, empirically grounded theorising – above all in American sociology.

Biography as a category of (scientific) self-reflection

A similar linkage between theory, empirical methods and sensitivity to changes in existing social relations can also be found in the recent history of biographical research, which forms the background and the antecedents for the third and last snapshot of a debate within biographical theory. The rediscovery of biographical research in the social and educational sciences in the 1970s⁷ is related in many respects to the critical counter-movements against dominant positions in science and society at that time. These research efforts involved contradictions and different accentuations, and lively development of biographical approaches.

The late 1970s see the emergence of an educationalist approach to biographical research that aims to ‘tap autobiographical and literary sources for the advancement of pedagogical knowledge’ (BAACKE and SCHULZE, 1979, p. 7). It takes a critical stance against the empirical and social scientific turn within the discipline and emphasises – with explicit reference to the humanities tradition – the importance of subjectivity: ‘It cannot be switched off, if one wants to act in a pedagogically meaningful way; it must be accepted’ (ibid, p. 9) and understood with appropriate methods. On the one hand, however, the aim was not to revive the humanities, but rather the ‘attempt to open up new methods for pedagogy, and to conquer new terrain’ (ibid.) and on the other hand to

apply concepts from qualitative research and biographical research that were emerging simultaneously in the social sciences.

Biographical documents and methods gained importance in the field of Marxist industrial sociology, in critical historical analysis, understood as ‘history from below’, in the emergent literature and research on the situation of migrants, or in women’s studies and gender research – wherever research had an underlying *political bias*. In the women’s movement and in women’s studies, for example, such concepts were seen as a way of making ‘visible’ the experiences of women that are otherwise ignored, concealed and suppressed within the patriarchal system.

However, the politically motivated objectives of biographical research as a form of ‘counter-science’ soon became an object of (self-)criticism: the main argument was that the concept of biography is often used unreflectedly in its everyday meaning, and falls short of the insight that biographies are ‘social facts’ or social constructions, and not some unquestionably existing, semi-natural categories for addressing experience. Reflection on the assumptions associated, mostly tacitly, with biography – that people ‘have’ a biography, that the latter runs according to certain patterns inherent in *normal biographies*, and can be measured against *normative* notions of a ‘successful’ (e.g. ‘emancipated’) life or of an ‘educational biography’ – has been systematically pursued since the 1980s in conjunction with a critical discussion of methods and mounting experience with empirical biographical research – a phase in which the approach taken by interpretive sociology in (West)Germany has also been revisited on a broad scale.⁸

⁷ Biographical research was rediscovered not only in the social sciences in German-speaking countries, but also in most European countries (cf. NIETHAMMER, 1980). However, it should be pointed out that this tradition has existed for a long time already in some countries, for example in Poland since the 1920s, mainly through the influence of Florian Znaniecki. We confine ourselves here to the discourse in German-speaking countries.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas provided the impulse for that reception as early as the 1960s, with his work ‘On the Logic of the Social Sciences’ (1967). The two-volume translation of key works of interpretive sociology, published by the ‘Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen’ (1973) also played an important role.

In contrast to the 'older' social constructivism of the Chicago School, and related concepts in the 1960s, the recent debate places greater emphasis on the social *rootedness* and *constructivity* of social scientific research itself. This self-critical reflection, conducted since the late 1980s in the field of gender research especially, is bound up with a methodological discussion in the social and educational sciences. In biographical research, the change of perspective can be seen from the fact that 'biography' is no longer used unquestioningly as a *method of surveying* given structures of experience, but itself is made the *object* of theoretical and empirical reflection. Its subject-matter shifts, so to speak: the question is no longer *what* biographies 'are' or what 'course' they take in different groups and contexts, but *how* people in different cultural contexts and social situations '*produce*' a biography, and which conditions, rules and patterns of construction can be observed in that process (cf. FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, 1991b, 1999a) and, going even further, how biographies are generated through discourse (cf. ROTHE, 2015).

Biography is then conceived of as a social construction, as an individual and collective 'achievement', as 'biographical work', which responds to specific social problems, uses specific cultural patterns and which can have different respective meanings for specific actors or groups of actors. The objective in empirical studies – especially with newly developed interview techniques and analytical methods – is to examine socially specific patterns of biographical construction and to identify differentiated logics in the recapitulation of experience. This means that an ahistorical, universalistic concept of biography is simultaneously *deconstructed*.

Individual biographical work is emphasised, also by contemporary metaphors which stress the freedom and creativity of the construct-

ing subject, like the image of everyone being their own 'producer' and writing (or rewriting) the 'script' of their lives themselves, but which also refer to the fragility and brittleness of that achievement – like the image of the 'do-it-yourself biography' or 'patchwork biography' (HITZLER and HONER, 1993). The social background to this heightened sensitivity towards the (risk-laden) biographical work performed by the individual is still the historical process of individualisation, but the latter has acquired a different quality (cf. Alheit, 1995, 1996, 1997) in 'modernised modernity' (Beck, 1986) or 'reflexive modernization' (BECK, GIDDENS and LASH, 1994).

The end of the 20th century saw a growing awareness that 'normal biographies' have normative significance, but do not describe any (statistical) normality and are models which in practice are almost impossible to live any longer. For people in modern societies, changes, especially in the core area of gainful employment, are important. Such changes are making continuity in educational and occupational biographies increasingly unlikely. A pluralisation of life plans is diagnosed instead (cf. Beck, 1986), which grants individual members of society a much greater range of choice and the opportunity to engage in 'lifelong learning', but also demands 'lifelong' willingness to continually reorient and adapt oneself (SENNETT, 1998).

In this social situation, issues in education theory and education policy also gain in importance. In view of these diagnosed changes, the experience- and knowledge-based resources of previous generations become just as questionable as teaching media and educational concepts that have worked hitherto. What is involved is not just the market-related question as to which competencies and skill profiles are needed to successfully handle one's future (career), but the much more fundamental issue

of which life plans and educational pathways can still be viable, or need to be redeveloped, and which role is to be played by pedagogical support and counselling. How knowledge is passed on between the generations, how it is processed retrospectively and organised with a view to the future, how educational processes are designed in view of globalisation and migration and, last but not least, the question as to how new media and digitalisation affect the construction of biographies – all these are topics of debate in educational science at the beginning of the 21st century.

The concept of biography plays an important, but ambivalent role on the whole – the perspective taken of biography and the ‘biographicity of the social’ (ALHEIT and DAUSIEN, 2000) is influenced by different theoretical currents and has led to various variants of ‘biographical constructivism’ that can be roughly classified into two directions: on the one hand, there is still a strong tradition of *social constructivism* in biographical research, which at present is particularly concerned with methodological issues such as the interconnection between *interaction and biography*, and between ethnographic and biographical research (cf. DAUSIEN and KELLE, 2002). The interactionist perspective is supplemented by a (socio-) *phenomenological* analytical perspective which conceptualises not only construction and action, but also experience and experiences as biographical processes.

Another variant of social constructivist approaches, in the broadest sense, is focused less on the phenomenological perspective and (inter-)action of subjects, but places greater accentuation on the ‘external’, social structuring and constitution of biographical processes, and social practice as a collective phenomenon. Research work in this direction, often with a sociohistorical focus as well, is based on theories of the *social space*, with borrowings

from Mannheim and Bourdieu, and explicitly emphasise the *supra-individual logic of biographies*.⁹

Whereas the aforementioned approaches pursue the constructivist concept, by linking social action, the subjective construction of meaning, and historical and social structures, along the lines of ‘classical social constructivism’ locate *the construction of biography in the social dimension*, others have detached themselves from this ‘down-to-earth’ approach: the influence of theories which can be labelled ‘post-modern’ – and especially the debate on identity and difference – have provoked a *theoretical deconstruction* of their own conceptual presuppositions and centred attention on the processes by which ‘reality’ is symbolically, linguistically and cognitively constructed. The question of whether a non-verbal point of reference (‘life’ or ‘reality’, respectively) is to be assumed, plays only a minimal or non-existent role here.

Concepts which view ‘biography’ as the construction of a self-referential consciousness and which substantiate this with systems theory (NASSEHI and WEBER, 1990; SCHIMANK, 1988), cognitive theory or with reference to explanatory models based on biological constructivism (e.g. MATURANA and VARELA, 1987), deliberately suspend the question of (social) ‘reality’. Self-construction appears here to be an *autopoietic accomplishment* of consciousness. Any statements about the aspects of sociality, co-construction or interaction between biographies are meant to be, or can only be very limited in nature (for a critical appraisal, cf. ALHEIT and DAUSIEN, 2000).

⁹ As an example for projects aiming in this direction, cf. Alheit, Haack, Hofschien, and Meyer-Braun, 1999; Alheit, Bast-Haider, and Drauschke, 2004; Herzberg, 2004. In these historically based studies, biographical interviews, documentary analyses and methods of social history are combined in the specific research design.

The same applies to attempts to capitalise on the deconstruction debate, as pursued by French post-structuralist philosophers in particular, and as taken up in gender research, for the purposes of biographical research (cf. SPIES and TUIDER, 2017, for example). They operate between fundamental theoretical arguments against a naturalistic, identity-based construction of biography as a unified, self-contained and fixed model of identity, on the one hand, and the expectation, on the other hand, of finding in biography a non-fixing, more fluid linguistic format for construction that makes it possible to address diversity and contradictions, without any compulsion to disambiguate.¹⁰

Within that context, the concept of *narration* has acquired particular urgency. 'Life histories' are viewed as a medium for the presentation and generation of identity and biography, between the twin poles of representation and construction – narration is seen as a mode that makes social experience not only communicable, thus providing access to subjective constructions of self and the world, but which also intervenes in the structuring of experience, forming and producing identity. To exaggerate the point: the Self is narrated (cf. KEUPP et al., 1999, p. 101ff; KRAUS, 1996). We 'are [...], what we narrate to ourselves and to others'.¹¹ The subject is stylised as its own creator.¹²

10 Among the first empirical studies which tried to reduce the discrepancy between abstract theoretical approaches and empirical research are the conceptual scheme in educational theory developed, with reference to Lyotard's concept of 'differend', by Hans-Christoph Koller (1999), who developed ways of interpreting educational processes using biographical materials, or the 'post-colonial deconstructive analysis' of the cross-linkage of gendering and ethnicisation in the biographies of 'intellectual migrant women', as posited by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez (1999).

11 This phrase comes from a popular scientific presentation of 'narrative therapy' (Ernst, 2002, p. 21).

12 The narrative variant of constructivism relates to a heterogeneous spectrum of theoretical approaches from different academic disciplines such as history, li-

For all the complexities and diffuseness of the debate, the following can be established by way of summary for the third focus on biographical research in Germany, outlined here by way of example:

Biography has finally lost its status as a methodological 'instrument' for mapping an individual or social reality and is now viewed as a mutable, fluid *construction*.

The difference between a subjective *inner life* and an *external* social life, discussed in the other examples and handled in different ways, appears to be no longer constitutive for the concept of biography.

The relationship between *theory and empirical studies* is also less clear than in the two other 'momentary sketches' from biographical research. Fathoming processes of biographical construction, and the freedoms and limitations applying to those processes, using the means of empirical research, have lost importance.

In this situation, *texts* are acquiring enormous importance as research material. Literary texts or interview transcripts are viewed neither as an expression of an 'inner educational movement' (see 2.1 above), nor as 'social facts' (see 2.2 above), but as narrative or discursive constructions which do not refer to 'reality', but to rules governing the construction of reality.

The thesis of self-construction and world construction in the medium of biographical narration joins up with a critique and redefinition of *educational practice* from the constructivist perspective – educational processes are no longer conceived of first and foremost as communication or instruction, but as support and assistance for the biographical work of individuals, as providing the arrangements and the 'enabling spaces' for self-construction and self-education.

terature and cultural studies, sociolinguistic narrative research, sociology, pedagogy or psychology.

Unresolved issues and future outlook

Modernity has changed. The current 'digitalisation narrative' has revolutionised our lifeworlds and our working worlds. It has forced new patterns of division onto late-modern societies, superimposed on old class differences but without qualifying them: between the creative and the low-skilled, between men and women, between the indigenous population and migrants, between hetero- and homosexuals, between urban and rural dwellers, between digital natives and those sceptical of technology, between young and old. It has also called into question the 'subject code' of classical modernity – with very direct implications for the construct of 'biography' (ALHEIT, 2018): the magic of individuality, the autonomy of the subject that successfully opposes the class conventions of pre-modernity and which keeps alive the hope of perpetual progress, has become a myth and has turned into a compulsion to be 'singular', special, with a 'unique feature' (RECKWITZ, 2017, p. 429-442), a compulsion which embraces individuals, organisations, even collectives, and the things of everyday life and forces them into a whirlpool of non-stop marketing. Foucault's prediction, in his lectures on the 'history of governmentality' as early as the late 1970s, of the 'generalisation of the economic form' (2000, p. 261) appears to be coming true – just like the two effects that this trend is producing: the subjugation of all non-economic areas of life, namely social relationships and individual needs, under strictly economic rationales, and the power of global 'cultural capitalism' to subjugate even government policies to a permanent 'economic tribunal' (ibid.)

Does this mean that the modern subject has come to an end? Has talk of a personal biography actually become an illusion (BOURDIEU, 1990)? Does it still make sense to talk of

a liaison of biography and education? Does educationalists' interest in the biographies of learning individuals help to modify the trends described? – Premature *dystopias* fail to realise that, throughout European modernity, biographies have always been threatened by crises (RECKWITZ, 2006; ALHEIT, 2018b): '*Bourgeois modernity*' from the end of the 18th to the end of the 19th century can uphold its ideal of the autonomous, educated subject only by accepting systematic class divisions and banishes the majority of social individuals into dependence and (educational) poverty. By creating corporatist forms of participation in social life, even for the lower social classes, '*industrial modernity*' from the 1880s to the end of the 20th century provided at least a chance of democratic constitutions, and thus surrogate forms of equality for many, yet failed to remove the structural causes of factual inequality, because it helped capitalist economies to become more flexible and adaptable. National Socialism and the neo-socialist post-war societies in Eastern Europe document the dramatic contradictions of this phase in the development of modernity, which did not by any means contribute to the autonomy of all subjects. With a kind of 'hyper-aestheticisation', the '*post-modern*' phase that commenced in the 1970s and 1980s not only threatened to make individuality dependent on markets, but also engendered populist right-wing counter-movements that call its core tenets into question. All these contradictory trends need to be put into perspective and reassessed once again, if one adopts the post-colonial analytical perspective and takes into consideration those social processes that have occurred 'in the shadow' of '*Western*' modernity, or rather as the brutal price to be paid for it, and which have enduring effects to this day. These also have impacts on the formation of subjects and on biographical research (LUTZ, 2018).

Despite these crises and destructive potential in every period of modernity, there are astonishing examples of how resistant the biographical can be – the impressive collection of life stories from the Po Valley in Piedmont, for example, which Nuto Revelli (1977) presented in *Il mondo dei vinti* ('The World of the Defeated'), leads us to the boundaries of conventional biographical rhetoric. It breaks with the euphemism that the 'life story' must be a well-produced document of social integration, and reminds us of the possibility that the very insight into the 'states' that people go through can be enlightening in itself. Revelli's remarkable collection also sensitises one to the less dramatic consequences of modernisation – the 'normal' frictions in contemporary women's biographies (DAUSIEN, 1996), the discontinuities and 'traps' encountered when cultural boundaries and levels of modernisation are transgressed (APITZSCH, 1989), or to changing 'positions within the social space' (MANNHEIM, 1964, p. 526)¹³, the overlapping of potentials for crisis, which can also be identified in late-modern biographies and which can be relativised with laconically reflected acceptance. The impressive autobiographical essay by Didier Eribon, the French sociologist ('*Returning to Reims*', 2015), is a successful example of this resistance, which must be newly created in every phase of history. The formation of biographical identity is a project that never ceases, historically speaking, to impose new demands on us, but it does not look as if we can escape from those demands.

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¹³ This unusually modern expression, coined by Karl Mannheim as early as his classic essay on 'The Problem of Generations' ([1928] 1964, 524ff), is useful for describing the complex relationship between individual biographical uniqueness and the ever-changing influences of the social space (class, gender, generation, etc.).

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Received in: 25.05.2018

Approved in: 30.08.2018

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