1 Introduction: Biographical Research and Historical Watersheds

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Introduction

Biographical research gravitates towards historical watersheds. When one scans the volume of publications employing biographical methods, the period of the Second World War and the Holocaust in Europe stands out. Other versions of the same phenomenon can be seen in the emergence of biographical writings about the transition from apartheid to inclusive democracy in South Africa or writings about the period of the Russian Revolution (Semenova, 2000). This volume reflects that pattern. The period at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the '90s, the change from socialism to post-socialist societies, marked the greatest transition in eastern Europe since the aftermath of World War II. This transition is being reflected in the emergence of a new blossoming of biographical research.

This blossoming of biographical work is hardly surprising. Or is it? Perhaps we should ask why there is this fascination among biographical researchers with historical fault lines. One of the goals of sociological research is to sensitise the observer to that which is usually unremarked – the taken-for-granted everyday behaviours that ‘hide in plain view’.
Biographical research may be guilty of the same laxity. We all know that times of important social transitions receive special attention from biographical researchers, but we have not thought to ask why they merit this attention.

In part, this tendency is driven by the way in which respondents react when they are asked to relate their life stories, especially if they are allowed to do so with a minimum of direction. Given their heads, most life-history interviewees will gravitate directly to the times of greatest change in their lives. The life course provides one axis of orientation – a personal axis. Many respondents exhibit a tendency to concentrate upon the period of the greatest transitions in their own life courses. Many of these events are solely personal: leaving the home of origin; marriage; childbirth; a major illness and so forth. However, when people recount the significant points in their lives, one can often note a striking juxtaposition of the personal and the public. The public events that people relate as being of great personal significance tend to be public events that took place around the time of a person’s transition to full adulthood. ‘Sixty-somethings’ will nostalgically recount the first time they heard Rock around the Clock, those aged in their fifties will belabour the rest of us with accounts of their political awakening in 1968, while later generations have the misfortune of having to make do with Glam and punk rock. It is as much that one was aged 18–24 when certain historical events were experienced that gives them their personal significance as that these events were significant in themselves.

At the same time, however, some events and historical periods are more important than others. A series of related historical events happening in close sequence can have the effect of fundamentally transforming the social and political life in a society so that the events come to be seen as a ‘historical watershed’. For one writing within Northern Ireland, for instance, the events centred on the breakdown of civil order during August 1969 constitute just such a watershed. The events around the transition from socialism in central and eastern Europe centred on 1989 are another such watershed. When genuinely important historical transitions happen to coincide with one’s entry into young adulthood, personal and historical significance interact and intensify. The basis is laid for a cohort generation – an aged-based collectivity of individuals with a common identity distinct in comparison to that of those who came before and those who will follow (Miller, 2000, pp. 29–34).

So, one reason for the tendency of biographical research to gravitate towards periods of transition is that the respondents to biographical inquiries – the interviewees themselves – tend to gravitate towards these periods in their accounts. This, however, is only part of the answer. Even if the respondents did not do so spontaneously themselves, biographical inquirers would inquire about the period or periods of major societal transformation that their respondents have experienced. For instance, a researcher interviewing a German born during the early decades of the twentieth century would be remiss if they did not probe someone who neglected to mention the Nazi period or the Second World War and its aftermath.

Some of the reasons for this are obvious. The respondent who skates around the major historical events of their life span paradoxically draws attention to those very events. Either they are exceptional is some way in managing to have lived through seminal events while somehow remaining unaffected by them, or, more probably, they are suppressing or avoiding the significance of these events. Either way, their account is incomplete in areas that may be most central to their life stories and the researcher will want to probe further. Has the biographical interviewee really managed to have been unaffected by the major events of his or her epoch? If so, they are exceptional and worth further attention. If interviewees are avoiding the relation of these events in their interview, again there must be reasons for their doing so.

It would be difficult (if not impossible) to find any society in the contemporary world that has not experienced some major socially-transforming event or events at some point across the lifetime of its older members. The apocryphal Chinese curse ‘May your descendants live in interesting times’ in fact applies in some degree to everyone’s descendants in all times and places. The difference between present-day societies is not one of the presence or absence of socially-transforming events, but rather one of differences in kind between societies in the degree or intensity of the trauma caused by the events to which they have been subject. Biographical researchers in any society have a fund of social watersheds to draw upon.

The Issue of Continuity

While these motives for centring on historically significant periods are important and legitimate, in a way they are peripheral to the core of the biographical approach. Concentrating solely upon the events that form the unique history of a society will produce an atomised corpus of biographical research concerned with each ‘case’ or society in isolation. Events will be
taking over and driving the biographical impetus. Biographical researchers are also drawn to periods of significant social transition because these periods afford the possibility of discovering how informants have maintained and constructed their biographical identities. This is a more universal project that transcends any given society or generation from which information is being drawn.

Continuity of identity is the problem of biographical analysis that periods of profound societal transition offer some opportunity for solving. Anyone who has carried out biographical interviews with older respondents and invited them to reflect on their lifetimes will often hear their informants remark how, while many things have changed drastically over their lives, the core of their identity has remained constant. Remarks such as ‘But really, inside I’m still the girl I was at sixteen’ are common.’ Remarks of this ilk are posing an implicit question: ‘How is it possible, after all that has happened to me over the years, that inside I’m still the girl I was at sixteen?’ Might it not seem more likely that the personal experiences of a normal life course – a working life, marriage and child-rearing, illnesses and so forth, all culminating inevitably in the loss of loved ones and the ageing of one’s own body forcing a person to contemplate their mortality – would alone be sufficient to cause one’s sense of identity in old age to have little in common with that experienced when one was young?

Counter-arguments also can be made. The same accounts of lives can be interpreted differently, with the discontinuities between youth and age being highlighted. For ill or good, the experiences of a lifetime do change people. The elderly person knows that he or she is not completely the same person as they were when they were young. While the theme of continuity of personal identity between old age and youth is not unusual, it is possible to find respondents who will state emphatically that they have nothing in common with the person they used to be. Furthermore, for those who do claim continuity, this continuity may only be an illusory construction of the present. Real change may have occurred, but it could have been gradual over decades or have taken place so long ago that the point of view of the younger version of the respondent has faded beyond their recollection.

Either situation, however, carries the same implications for the biographical researcher. Continuity of personal identity across the life course – its extent, whether it is real or not, how to deal with it conceptually and the mechanisms and circumstances of its change – is a genuine problem for the biographical researcher. Continuity, whether recognised as such or not, is a central and persisting concern of biographical research and much biographical writing is concerned with how continuity of personal identity persists or is describing the circumstances when personal identity alters.

Habitus

Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, with its associated theorisation, provides a means for beginning to work with the biographical issues surrounding the problem of the continuity of personal identity. *Habitus* is a Janus-faced concept, located between structure and action and affected by, and affecting, both:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at an end or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1990 [1980])

One of the aspects of *habitus* is a set of dispositions to behaviour which are mainly laid down when the individual is young. These dispositions can be inculcated through explicit instruction or admonition: for example, parents telling their son ‘Walk up straight like a man’ or their daughter ‘Nice girls don’t do that’. However, the core of this bedrock of behaviour that will become the *habitus* is laid down without conscious intent on the part of a ‘socialiser’ through the young child absorbing modes of thinking and ideas of appropriate behaviour while experiencing the social milieu of its social class – the ‘all-encompassing field’ of structures and interactions around it:

A product of early childhood experience, particularly of unconscious family socialisation, it is continually modified by the individual’s encounters with the world. To the extent that members of different social classes differ in the nature of their primary socialisation … each class has its own characteristic *habitus*, with individual variations. The *habitus*, then, ‘brings about a unique integration, dominated by the earliest experiences statistically common to the members of the same class [Bourdieu, 1977]’ … (DiMaggio, 1979, p. 1,464)
The young child internalises the world view of its class fraction and gender through its direct experience of the everyday lived world. In this way, the objective social structure and relations of the society are imprinted upon the child, but the view that is imprinted is that which the child experiences directly. It is a view of the complete society, but seen through the lens of the specific social position of one’s origin, high, low or intermediate.

So, in one sense habitus is passive. A view of social structure is imprinted upon the individual which gives him or her a body of knowledge that includes knowledge about the behaviour appropriate to given situations. This body of knowledge is both enabling and constraining. On the one hand, habitus structures the world. It is the systems of categorisation and thinking that are employed to order one’s perception of the social environment. Through the habitus, the child has an understanding of reality and possesses a repertoire of behaviour. On the other hand, the individual is not aware of the social environment beyond the manner in which his or her habitus has ordered it (Schwartz, 1997, pp. 105–7). Hence, the child is constrained, having only the understanding of reality as it is seen from the social class position of its origin and limited in its compass of action to those behaviours understood as appropriate for someone of its origin. Perception of the world and action comes about through habitus, but a person’s perceptions and their dispositions to action have been determined by their origin. Assuming that the imposition of habitus has actually reflected the world view represented by an individual’s social class position of origin, that individual is tightly constrained in having to remain within their class fraction.

At the same time, however, the habitus is active. ‘In Bourdieu’s work the concept “habitus” designates those internalised group norms which regulate the practice of individual human agents according to a logic that mediates social structure and willed human action’ (Garnham, 1986, p. 424). Even more than a body of knowledge and a view of the world, the habitus is also a set of dispositions to behaviour. The ultimate goal of these dispositions to action is to benefit the individual in competition with others for valued or scarce goods – to maximise capital is one of its forms (DiMaggio, 1979, p. 1,463). Some of these dispositions are specific – what a child of their social fraction should do in a specific situation – but the dispositions are also non-specific: modes of behaving that are not bound to any specific situation but are general ways of reacting. The dispositions can be thought of as a ‘feel for the game’ – ‘fuzzy logical’ modes of acting brought into play to maximise a person’s capital in any given situation or field:

The concept has broadened in scope over time ... to emphasise inventive as well as habituated forms of action. The variety of designations, nonetheless, all evoke the idea of a set of deeply internalised master dispositions that generate action. They point toward a theory of action that is practical rather than discursive, pre-reflective rather than conscious, embodied as well as cognitive, durable though adaptive, reproductive though generative and inventive, and the product of particular social conditions though transposable to others. (Schwartz, 1997, p. 101)

To the extent that there were objective constraints on action and exposure to a limited scope of actions when a person’s habitus was laid down, the dispositions to behaviour in a person’s habitus will be incomplete and/or inaccurate: méconnaissance (‘the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eye of the beholder’: Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979). This feature, which in English is usually translated as misrecognition, means that a person’s habitus will be limited, and will probably fail to include at least some of the dispositions to action that could be beneficial to them.

The academic as social analyst has the potential here to play a radical role by undermining misrecognition. A social group disadvantaged by discrimination based on ethnic origin, gender or disability will be limited by the behavioural dispositions of a habitus built up in congruence with a discriminatory social structure. If given the opportunity of becoming aware of this, however, it is capable of evolving a more accurate perception of its position. This can generally be accomplished by recasting previously legitimate but inequitable social relations as illegitimate. With reference to social mobility, predispositions can be altered so that previously unrecognised routes of upward mobility or opportunity become recognised.

Misrecognition links to the denial of self-interest, especially material self-interest, by advantaged groups. The naked pursuit of self-interest can be rationalised by attaching a different symbolic meaning which obscures the self-aggrandisement. For instance, the accumulation of wealth by private individuals or corporations can be legitimised by philanthropy or charitable giving (Schwartz, 1997, pp. 89–91). The self-aggrandisement of intellectual and artistic strata can be seen in a much more favourable light if depicted as disinterested artistic endeavour. And, of course, patriarchy or
paternalism can be portrayed as protection of the ‘weaker sex’ or the inferior.

Misrecognition is based upon power. Those with social power, whether it is based in class, gender, ethnicity or anything else, have the capacity to effect misrecognition through a process of symbolic violence – imposing evaluative meanings on cultural traits to accentuate the desirability of traits possessed by dominant categories and class fractions while simultaneously belittling traits that are characteristic of the lower classes, the disadvantaged and the less abled (Jenkins, 1992, p. 104; Lash, 1993, p. 198):

Hierarchies depend on the social arrangements that sustain and reproduce them. The persistence of these arrangements, says Bourdieu, itself depends on the systematic misrecognition of their oppressive nature by both dominators and dominated. This misrecognition is inculcated, in advanced societies, by differential socialisation of children of different social classes; by the rationalisations advanced by institutions and fields about their own processes; and by a continuing work of ‘euphemisation’, of unconscious self-censorship of communication to render it legitimate according to the structure of the field within which it is to be received. (DiMaggio, 1979, p. 1,462)

A cycle develops, in which limited opportunities and exposure to the social structure from a point of view that allows only a limited repertoire of actions produce a limited habitus, which in turn limits the capacity of individuals to change either the structure or their places in it. This in turn feeds into the next cycle of generation – a process of social reproduction in which individuals in effect impose their own exploitation. In order to be truly socially mobile, the individual will have to overcome the view of the world imposed by their origin and reconstruct the constraining dispositions of their habitus, only then becoming able to recognise and exploit potential avenues of upward mobility (Richardson, 1977).

As time passes, the child becomes older and the situations it encounters change. The petty squabbles and conflicts experienced by the small child graduate later to successively larger stages, eventually culminating in adult competitions. The dispositions to actions must be adapted in order to be applied to new circumstances. The habitus that was laid down in childhood comes to constitute a repertoire of ways of reacting to new situations. Nevertheless, the individual remains constrained by their habitus because the basic repertoire is still that which has been laid down in early life.

However, the habitus is malleable. As time goes by and the individual grows older, it is possible for it to evolve. Exposure to new situations or broader parts of the social structure can lead to elaborations or development of the dispositions to action that make up the habitus. The most immediate stage at which this is likely to occur for most people is when they enter formal education and for the first time are exposed to social institutions outside those of the family. New social structures will impact upon the habitus, new layers of knowledge accumulate, and it is possible that new modes of reacting can develop. However, the initial habitus laid down in early childhood retains primacy (Schwartz, 1997, p. 107). Even if dispositions to action are maladaptive in changed circumstances, they are resistant to being replaced. As the individual ages, the possibility of new modes of reacting being laid down which supplant the existing dispositions becomes ever less. A continuity of personal identity develops that has begun to gel by the beginning of adolescence and has set by its end. There are, however, paradoxes to be observed. The habitus is a set of generalised dispositions to action fundamentally set in concordance with the social structure as the individual experiences it in relation to their class fraction at the time of early childhood. Social structures change with time, and the way in which these dispositions play out in the changed circumstances that the adult may experience decades later can be unpredictable. Furthermore, the behavioural dispositions of the habitus are largely laid down unconsciously as a product of everyday experience and are themselves not usually perceptible. They make up a set of givens that are so close to a person’s centre that they are not easily known. Being unaware of them, the individual normally has little prospect of altering them consciously. At the same time, however, dispositions that may have been maladaptive for a school child or maladaptive in the general society some decades previously may become adaptive in the present, particularly if the society is changing. So, while the behavioural dispositions of the habitus are resistant to change, the circumstances and context in which they are expressed can alter, with the effect that the same behavioural dispositions can result in radically new or unanticipated behaviours, with consequences that may be harmful or helpful.

Capitals

An individual’s habitus can be thought of as the set of dispositions and orientations to action in which the goal of the action is to maximise capital
in one of its forms. The core of the idea of ‘capital’ is that it is ‘social goods’ in limited supply for which people compete. ‘Capital’ can take on a variety of forms. Its most obvious state is material or economic capital—goods, materials or possessions that have a direct monetary value which can be converted relatively straightforwardly into exchangeable finance; obviously cash and stocks and bonds, but also land or other property, valuable possessions with a definite resale value and so forth. But there are other forms of capital that also are valued and capable of exchange.

Cultural capital is the possession of knowledge or skills and the ability to utilise information. The skills needed to carry out specialised tasks and intellectuals, in terms of capacity for working with ideas, makes up part of cultural capital. The idea of cultural capital extends to the individual’s own intellectual capacity: ‘[t]he ensemble of cultivated dispositions that are internalised by the individual through socialisation and that constitute schemes of appreciation and understanding’ (Schwartz, 1979, p. 76). Analogous with Bernstein’s (1977) ideas about people from higher social strata possessing elaborated language codes, the capacity for working with knowledge can also be extended to the individual’s developed capability for dealing effectively with intellectual concepts. This includes possessing a larger vocabulary and more complex modes of using language that facilitate higher mental functioning. The possessors of intellectual capital have a greater capacity for exploiting intellectual material and opportunities effectively and efficiently than those deprived of it. Furthermore, habitus includes dispositions to approach problems requiring ‘thought work’ or intellectual analysis in certain manners that benefit those already advantaged because those coming from upper social strata will unconsciously have absorbed ways of thinking that predispose them to abstract, ‘intellectual’ thought.

Thirdly, there is social capital. This includes networks of friends, acquaintances, colleagues, ‘contacts’ and the like that an individual may develop. Such networks may be considered resources in themselves because they provide their possessor with real competitive advantages such as access to information, social support, opportunities or even physical protection. Social capital also attaches directly to the individual in that he or she may acquire for good or ill a ‘reputation’—an assessment of their virtues (and vices) that they can draw on as a resource. A person’s personal social capital can mean that others will react more or less favourably towards them than would be expected on strictly rational grounds—the ability to attract deference, charismatic adoration, fear, support, and so forth.

An overarching concept that draws together all three variants of capital is that of symbolic capital. As well as having intrinsic worth, the various capitals that a person may possess also have a value that lies in their estimation or esteem by others. This estimation by others usually, but not necessarily, bears a relation to the actual worth of the capital. It symbolises the intrinsic worth. For instance, an educational certificate such as a university degree represents or symbolises the possession of certain types of cultural capital, but this relationship does not have to be exact. Possession of a university degree of a given classification implies a level of knowledge or competence in a subject as well as implying a set of behavioural competencies and social skills that university graduates are presumed to have. It is quite possible for a person to possess knowledge in an academic subject to the level of a university graduate but not to possess the degree. The lack of the certification of the knowledge through the degree will cost the person. He or she will find it more difficult to realise the value of the cultural capital that they in fact do possess. Similarly, the simple possession of a university degree does not always guarantee that the owner actually has the knowledge and cultural traits that one would expect. Nevertheless, the symbolic value of the degree alone has a real value and can impart advantages, including access to material capital through mechanisms like competition for valued employment positions. Similarly, material possessions have a symbolic worth beyond that of their convertible cash value. The display of expensive possessions or status symbols can be used crudely as signifiers of the material wealth necessary for their acquisition. In turn, as a weapon to negate the strategic advantages of conspicuous consumption ‘taste’ can be used symbolically to discriminate ‘old wealth’ from ‘new wealth’, to the advantage of the former.

Symbolic capital perhaps overlaps most with social capital. Others’ estimations of the type of people a given person can include in their networks of friends or business contacts may be of as much importance for determining that person’s own social standing as the actual use-value of the network: the ‘bubble reputation’ is by definition determined by the esteem or lack of esteem in which others hold the person.

The disadvantaged—whether they are distinguished by gender, ethnicity, race, disability or anything else—by definition have, in sum, less access to economic, cultural and social capital. Furthermore, prejudice itself can be seen as a ‘pure’ manifestation of negative symbolic capital.
(Connolly and Keenan, 2000). The negative assessment is at least partially independent of other types of capital and, while individuals may succeed in a given field, the negative assessment of the group cannot be redressed by success.

Watersheds

The *habitus* is a set of dispositions to behaviour whose rationale is the maximisation of capital. Under normal conditions of social stability where societal change is gradual, the set of dispositions to behaviour will remain opaque. While the situations that the person confronts will alter, this is usually due to normal circumstance or to incremental changes as the person moves through their life course. When the *habitus* ‘fits’ well with the objective reality, behaviour appears spontaneous and uncalculated. Furthermore, since the *habitus* has been laid down through the person’s perceptions of the general social environment of their upbringing, the dispositions of the *habitus* can be said to anticipate changes in circumstances as the person grows older. Part of the person’s *habitus* will have been set through their experience of the behaviour of older individuals which they observed as a child. The person will ‘grow into’ the situations they will have seen their elders dealing with in previous decades. This ‘invisibility’ of the *habitus* poses a problem for the biographical analyst. The *habitus* is part and parcel of a person’s identity. If the interviewee is not aware of their *habitus*, how can the researcher hope to access information on it?

A phase of rapid and profound social transformation opens a window of opportunity for collecting information on the working of the *habitus*. If the rules governing how to maximise the various types of capital suddenly change, the dispositions of the *habitus* will no longer operate in the same way and their application will consequently alter. Dispositions that were advantages may suddenly become liabilities and handicaps may become features that facilitate adaptation. When the individual’s society is subjected to a sudden radical transformation which is overarching and which affects virtually all aspects of life the routine applications of the *habitus* no longer serve, and the process of adapting dispositions to action will become much more transparent and capable of being perceived. This is not to say that the working of the *habitus* has been supplanted by ‘strategic choice and conscious deliberation’.

The lines of action suggested by *habitus* may very well be accompanied by a strategic calculation of costs and benefits which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations which *habitus* carries out in its own way. (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989, p. 45)

Nevertheless:

Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed ‘rational choice’ often appears to take over. But, and this is a crucial proviso, it is *habitus* itself that commands that option. We can always say that individuals make choices, as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principle of these choices. (ibid.)

In terms of the various types of capital, what has happened is that the values of the goods that go into making up each type of capital and the mechanisms for converting or realising their values have been changed by altered circumstances. The set of interrelationships between actors centred on a locus of the distribution and control of some category of valued goods – what Bourdieu calls a *field* – loses its stability and goes into a state of flux. ‘The field is the crucial mediating context wherein external factors – changing circumstances – are brought to bear upon individual practice’ (Jenkins, 1992, p. 86). In a time of transformation or profound social change, the symbolic values attached to the various forms of capital will have altered and the processes of symbolic violence that take place to establish and maintain their values must be reimposed with a vengeance. At such times, the workings of the *habitus* are much less opaque and are more open to conscious perception. This opening for analytical insight, when the old rules no longer apply and new rules must be hammered out, is what draws biographical researchers to periods of profound social transformation.

The Transition to Post-socialism

The transformation from socialism to post-socialism in central and eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s was just such a window. The most obvious change was in the rules governing material capital, where the regulations constraining free market economic activity were swept away and replaced with *laissez-faire* economic policies. At the same time, the safety net of cradle-to-grave social support disappeared. The result is that
individuals must alter their modes of acting in order to survive: some learn to (re)apply their abilities to great effect in changed circumstances while others find themselves losing out.

Social capitals go through a similar inversion, with some carefully cultivated networks suddenly becoming irrelevant (or, worse, liabilities) and other networks being adapted to convey access to material wealth in a manner analogous to that which they had used to transfer political power in the past. The possession of cultural capital, which has been documented previously as providing some continuity during the transformation to socialism (see e.g. Andorka, 1997), seems again to continue to operate relatively untouched after the transformation to post-socialism. The worth of skills and knowledge persists, if not the certification systems that validated them.

Lifestyles and ostentatious consumption serve to discriminate between the new élites and the rest. Possession of material wealth is converted into legal title. The stabilisation of the post-socialist system can be seen as a vast process of symbolic violence at a societal level as the interrelationships of fields undergoing transformation are (re)constructed and new regimes of élites consolidate their new-found status by imposing a social view of reality that confirms and validates their status.

Studies of Transition

The readings that make up this volume all relate in one way or another either to the role of evidence in biographical research or to the maintenance of continuity of identity and the mediation of the habitus during the conditions of radical social change that followed the collapse of socialism in Eastern and Central Europe.

The chapters by Roos and Bertaux both present ‘neo-realist’ perspectives on the conduct of biographical research. They are ‘neo-realist’ in the sense that each author provides a thoughtful and critical consideration of the issues raised by ‘the reflexive turn’ in biographical research before arguing for the necessity of relating biographical information to a substantive framework.

A third of the chapters in this volume are concerned directly with the former Soviet Union and arise out of two key components of the context of biographical work in present-day Russia: (1) the revival of a biographical initiative associated with the Russian transition; and (2) the Soviet ‘biographical’ legacy. Contemporary Russian public discourse in this area is characterised by a biographical ‘boom’. This boom takes the form of numerous TV talk shows, the wide publication and discussion of biographies and memoirs in the press, personal notes, biographical competitions stimulated by social scientists, family genealogical searches, and so forth. This of course is part of the transformation of Russian identity which is currently taking place and which has meant that the context in which this discourse is occurring is conducive to biographical research. On the other hand, the same context creates certain research problems: precisely because they are so interested in the study of biography, and personally engaged in constructing it, people are extremely sensitive to interpretation – they are very much ‘ethnomethodologists’ today.

The Revival of a Biographical Initiative in the Russian Transition

The breakdown of Soviet society, and the emerging opportunities and barriers caused by the reforms that have taken place in the last decade, have brought about a phenomenon which is referred to in Russia as an identity crisis (see e.g. Ionin, 2000). Former Soviet sources of identification often do not work in the current context: the borders of the states, the political configuration, the social stratification of the society are undergoing change. These changes demand active reflexive work from post-Soviet subjects, who are compelled to look for their identities – new ones and old ones. The revival of old sources of identity – class, ethnicity, gender, politics – and the establishment of new ones are a feature of the intellectual climate in Russia during this time of transition. This kind of identity search can, to use the terminology of Fischer-Rosenthal (1995), be labelled as biographical work, and in post-Soviet Russia this has often taken the form of the deliberate construction and recovery of genealogical knowledge. In the course of this intensive biographical work, not only do new emerging social agents – individuals and groups – invent life stories, but biographical work also becomes part of the construction of identities and a pivot of the coping strategies via which individuals clarify those assets that they can use in the structuring of their lives (life-worlds).

This mass biographical work can also be seen as a part of the construction of privacy that is so new to the post-Communist transformation. Biographical informants who were asked about the reasons for the genealogical searches in which they are involved gave diverse answers. One reason which needs little interpretation was just ‘interest’: the construction of a family genealogy as a hobby. Another reason is the
demand of collective memory. One is considered to be a cultured, civilised person if one knows one’s background. One more motivation is family pride – having a famous person as an ancestor or being the one with noble origin in the family background. The next reason is looking for new resources for coping with the current situation strategically – resources that will help one find a job, get a child into a school or a summer camp, emigrate, and so forth. One more reason is to consolidate the family as a unit of privacy and an agent of survival. For instance, one informant claimed that she had reconstructed her family’s genealogical tree back eight generations because she wanted her granddaughter to understand her family’s resources and how important the family is for her life. ‘Things could change. Friends come and go, political winds could be good or bad, but actual and virtual relatives will support you.’

The indicators of this popular biographical initiative are numerous. To mention only a few: growth in the publication of life stories, biographies, and the memoirs of leaders of mass opinion and members of elite groups; genealogical searching for families of origin, in which thousands of citizens are involved; formations of oral-history collections spanning different milieus; autobiographical competitions; urban renaming campaigns; and so forth. Biographical social research, with its interest in life stories, is a part of this flow, albeit a small part.

Biographical work as a mass phenomenon gives the biographical research situation in the former Soviet Union a specific flavour and has both a positive and a negative influence on academic biographical research. On the one hand, the interest in self-identity construction, which is replacing the memory-blocking of Soviet-era coping strategies, makes people eager to share their self-understandings and self-constructions. The intellectual atmosphere of voicing identities favours the biographical researcher, who can expect willingness and openness from informants and their emotional involvement in the study. However, the same context can have a negative effect on the study or at least make the research situation more difficult. Cathartic involvement in biographical work, part and parcel of an individual’s coping strategy in previous times of social instability, makes the narrator very sensitive to the inquiries of the biographical researcher. The informant may perceive the sociologist as a political intruder into his or her private life who could very well misinterpret it. If informants are carrying out an autobiographical project themselves, they may see themselves as biographical experts. Consequently, they can expect respect for their self-reflections and are ready to oppose the judgements of the academic. Such research situations require specific research designs and techniques of interviewing. Not only should anonymity and confidentiality be guaranteed (which is normal in most studies) but it is important to share with informants the ideology and the concept of research. In post-Soviet Russia, it is important to make the study interactive and to convert an interview into a dialogue of two partners, in certain cases presenting the research results in the presence of the informants and considering their agreements/disagreements.

The Soviet Biographical Legacy

Soviet ‘rules of the game’ still influence everyday life in Russia including attitudes and expectations regarding communication, and they continue to impact on professional settings. Their legacy in relation to biographical research is twofold. On the one hand, the Soviet system blocked initial biographical work. A great number of experiences had to be eliminated from individual and collective memory – these blockages were part of the reflective coping strategies of the individuals and groups. People preferred to keep silent or just to forget, not only certain experiences of their own but those of their families of origin as well. Certain memories were not only psychologically harmful – as is always the case with human beings – but could also be dangerous in respect of life-strategies. In the Soviet era people did not engage openly in the search for their roots and certain stories were concealed from the younger generation, just to make their life smoother and less traumatic. People changed their family names so as not to be identified as Jews or Germans or Finns; they forgot or did not know that they were kulak or upper-class or had White Guard ancestors. It was safer to live with an anonymous individual biography – to be a Soviet orphan, a mankur (a person without memory), as the Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov (1982) put it. This is one part of the Soviet legacy.

The other side of the same coin is the official biographical forms that were designed by the Soviet bureaucracy and filled in by Soviet subjects hundreds of times in their lives. People were obliged to fill in bureaucratic questionnaires that were extremely detailed and covered not only multiple aspects of an individual’s public and private life, but also those of his immediate relatives, descendants and ancestors. Soviet subjects provided detailed information on official biographical forms on multiple occasions – in medical offices, in educational institutions, in the workplace, and so forth. These files contained, among other things, such facts as: ethnicity;
the social origin and occupations of parents, wives and husbands; relatives abroad; membership of political and Soviet voluntary organisations; affiliation to the Soviet Army; work histories, with relevant lists of rewards and sanctions; detailed information on children; and so forth. While the types of information were not different in kind from those collected in other societies, what was unique was the amount that was collated on individuals. These records were put into archives as personal files, were obtainable from the KGB, and were used in career promotion or prohibition. In the course of dealing with this official biographical work on the part of the Soviet bureaucracy, Soviet citizens did their best to construct politically-correct life histories that fitted the demands of party-state ideology.

These official formulas can be seen as imposed life stories which informants used in their self-presentation to official publics. Such self-presentations during official interviewing or interrogations became part and parcel of a person’s (multiple) Soviet self-identity. For the inner circle of friends and family individuals had other, ‘true’ stories, less selective and less politically correct. Secrets — mainly about distant relatives and ancestors, ethnicity and social origin — were an important part of family memory. Even here, however, discretion was a wise strategy and sometimes, for the purposes of self-preservation, people stayed loyal to their official life story even in private. Formal Soviet biographical work was part of a social control and self-censorship system (Voronkov and Chikadze, 1997).

The influence of such a legacy on the contemporary biographical research situation is severe. It forms part of the legacy of Soviet sociology’s reputation in present-day society (Voronkov and Zdravomyslova, 1996; Zdravomyslova, 1998). Soviet sociologists, equipped with questionnaires validated by the CPSU departments, were seen as interrogators. People provided them with their imposed life stories that had been developed for official occasions. This means that today the sociologist has to invest a great of energy if he or she wants to get an authentic life story from an informant. Any narrator has at least two (but probably more) stories at his or her disposal for official purposes and for trustworthy people (Voronkov and Chikadze, 1997). To take into account such a legacy, it is extremely important in the current research situation to create basic trust as the ground of interaction between the researcher and the informant.

That it is important to identify the context for biographical discourse is an important methodological assumption for the biographical research one carries out. The type of biographical work in which a society is engaged indicates its reflexive capacity. Knowing how people do their life story telling, we can see the opportunities for qualitative research and its consequences. If we can identify the context (or situation) for biographical discourse we can expect, on the one hand, a certain level of authenticity from the individual life story and, on the other, a certain level of representativeness of the life story in terms of the culture it comes from. Here authenticity does not mean ‘truth’, but rather the adequacy of a narrative in relation to the frames and categories the informant uses in constructing his or her identity in the life story.

The chapters concerning the former Soviet Union all have in common an interest in the ‘quasi-public’ or ‘public-private’ sphere: an area of social life which was lived in open spaces but which was concerned with hidden anti-establishment or dissident themes that could not be expressed openly. The chapter by Valery Golofast sets the stage in a general piece that proposes ‘Three Dimensions of Biographical Narratives’: (1) a ‘Routine’ dimension that is concerned with the structural parameters of ‘normal’ everyday social intercourse at the personal, the family and the group level; (2) an ‘Event’ dimension that centres on sources of sequencing in time and the life course; and (3) a ‘Hidden/Covert’ dimension that introduces both the anti-establishment concerns taken up in several subsequent chapters and other subjects, such as sex, that were taboo during Soviet times.

Anna Temkina employs a habitus-like conceptual device in her use of the idea of ‘scripts’ to order how Russian women recount biographies of their sexual experiences. She uses women’s accounts of their experiences to construct ideal types of sexual scripts, and in turn uses these scripts to explain the women’s differing views of sexual pleasure.

Anna Rotkirch provides two accounts of male sexuality in which the case study accounts are used as devices for comparing the psychological patterns of upward social mobility of an immediate post-World War II cohort with those of a contrasting cohort that came to adulthood at the end of the 1950s. The earlier case makes a psychic journey from ‘brute’ to ‘citizen’ while the latter is more opportunistic in his strategy.

Sofia Tchoukina’s chapter deals most directly with dissidence in the Soviet Union. She employs the analytical device of the ‘career break’. This applies the metaphor of a biographical lifetime as a career in which there is a moment of epiphany when the course of that life diverges from the ‘normal’ into a dissident life path. In term of habitus, the unconscious constructions of strategies are re-formed at the point of epiphany along new
lines, the consequence of which is a life transformed on to a radically different pathway. Social structure, in the form of the Soviet establishment, reacts to set the new patterns beyond the possibility of return.

Elena Zdravomyslova continues the focus on 'anti-Soviet' biographies by presenting a retrospective account of the lifestyles centred on Café Saigon. Here, the denizens of Café Saigon occupy a 'quasi-public' niche that parallels political dissidence but can more accurately be termed anti-establishment cultural dissidence. One of the most interesting aspects of this chapter is its follow-up of the habitués of Café Saigon in post-socialist Russia. The effects of the workings of habitus that were expressed in Café Saigon appear quite differently in post-socialism. Some of the most successful proponents of the anti-establishment 'Saigon' culture have failed miserably to make the transformation to the open post-Soviet society, while, for others, their previously iconoclastic stance pays off big under laissez-faire economic conditions.

The division of social life in the Soviet Union into 'public' and 'private' spheres, with a grey 'public-private' area in between in which unsanctioned forms of expression can find a niche, is used most prominently by Viktor Voronkov and Elena Chikadze in their account of the paradoxes of ethnicity experienced by generations of Leningrad Jews. While the common habitus of 'Jewishness' persists across the generations, the experience of being Jewish varies depending upon how it can be expressed in ever-changing social conditions. Voronkov and Chikadze posit four distinct generations of Leningrad Jewry: (1) an idealist, immediately post-Revolution 'internationalist' generation for which Jewishness became no longer the major determinant of identity that it had been in Tsarist times; (2) an 'assimilated' generation for which Jewish identity was no longer salient at any level; (3) an 'anti-Semitic' generation in which the majority remained 'assimilated' while a minority revived a Jewish identity, but only at the private and public-private levels; and (4) a contemporary 'transformation' generation in which the split between 'assimilated' and 'revived' persists, but among whom the issue of Jewish identity is now discussed openly in public.

Ethnicity of a different sort forms the centre of Aili Aarelaid-Tart's contribution, 'Estonian-inclined Communists as Marginals'. The 'Estonian-inclined communists' were post-war officials attempting to work within the system of the Soviet empire while professing to uphold the instincts of Estonian culture. Aarelaid-Tart recounts their mixed success in attempting to operate with an Estonian habitus while constrained by a Russian Soviet system, and argues for a more favourable historical verdict than the one which has been assigned to them by present-day Estonia.

The life stories of former dissidents are also the topic of Vladimir Andrie's chapter, only he deals with dissidence in the Czech Republic rather than in the Soviet Union. His dissidents from Czechoslovakia can be said to have undergone a 'double transition': first, from political pariahs to positions of authority; and secondly, from political power back to private life, only in the post-socialist Czech Republic. Once thrown into the intense twenty-four-hour exposure afforded by the arena of the politically powerful, Andrie's respondents discovered life to be personally fragmented — they found little from their previous lives that could guide them, and a lack of continuity with their previous existence.

Zuzana Kusá takes a long view and attempts to follow poor Slovak families across three generations. Her responses lead to an exploration of the perceived relevance of major political and historical events for the economically excluded. She does find continuity, but a continuity based upon the 'inclusiveness' of the family. The narratives of Kusá's respondents suborn the egos of individuals to the good of the family, even though the material and structural contexts of the families have altered across the generations.

The problem of biographical continuity is dealt with most explicitly in Roswitha Breckner's chapter 'Biographical Continuities and Discontinuities in East West Migration before and after 1989'. Breckner presents two contrasting case studies of migration across the East–West divide. Both display the common features of a double trauma of transformation. The initial trauma was represented by a flight from eastern Europe to life as an exile and a foreigner in the West, and the second by the abrupt removal of constraints upon travel to the country of origin after the end of the Cold War. One case study represents an example of successful assimilation. The individual's habitus, established in his childhood, laid down from the outset a favourable disposition towards assimilation into German society. The end of involuntary exile poses no problems of choice since there is no felt need to return to the country of origin. In the second case, however, the interaction of habitus, history and social has created a 'perpetual foreigner'. The false memory of an intellectually-advanced country of origin prevents assimilation into Germany, and then, when return becomes a viable option, the failure of the nation of origin to live up to the fiction means that the individual is left stranded between cultures.
The meaning of exile within European biographies also forms the centre of John Jackson’s chapter on members of the Polish intelligentsia who suffered exile. Jackson makes use of Anderson’s idea of ‘imagined communities’ to consider the problems posed by involuntary separation from the homeland and the ironic role that this separation can play in nation-building. As with the latter case study in Breckner’s chapter, the maintenance of a false habitus can be functional for coping with exile, but only for as long as return to the country of origin is not a viable option.

Olaf Struck’s chapter ‘Trajectories of Coping Strategies in Eastern Germany’ makes the most explicit use of the concept of habitus, combining it with Goffman’s frame analysis. Employing several kinds of data, both qualitative and quantitative, Struck carries out a genuinely longitudinal study tracing the rise and then the collapse of East German expectations following reunification. He finds evidence in his case study for the consistent expression of the same habitus across vastly altered public and personal circumstances.

The extent to which circumstances can invert utterly is displayed in Barbara Miller’s chapter about the life stories of former Stasi informers. This chapter can be seen as an account of the changing value of social capital, the imposition of symbolic violence and then its radical transformation. Being an informer, a link to the state establishment which provided access both to considerable social capital and to the agencies that imposed symbolic violence in the German Democratic Republic, became, with reunification, an almost fatal social liability. Miller’s respondents recount how they came to realise the adverse implications for them of their participation in the East German state security apparatus as the extent of the revulsion held by the general populace gradually became clear during the post-reunification period. The imposition of a new form of symbolic violence in which the informer becomes a pariah, with its radical symbolic revaluation, means that informants are in danger of having their lives defined solely by one negative aspect, with associated severe consequences. As respondents desperately work to reconstruct their life stories, interesting problems and opportunities of method are created for the biographical researcher. Miller’s interviewees are strongly motivated to engage in a process of rationalising their actions and minimising the significance and extent of their involvement in informing. In such circumstances, the mechanisms by which the habitus is employed become more visible.

Notes

1. The number of biographical references that could be supplied here is legion. Some of the most significant are those of Schütze (1992) on the life story of a ‘typical’ German soldier and the Holocaust narratives of the Rosenthals (Rosenthal, 1998).

2. Or perhaps even a single event.

3. Such observations and remarks are hardly confined to biographical research, having many echoes in everyday life. Most of us can think of similar sentiments being voiced in conversations with elderly relatives or acquaintances. (And the older biographical researcher may reflect ruefully that they also are discovering themselves a young person trapped in an ageing body.)

4. Logical, but not consciously worked out. The authors are grateful to Paul Johnson for this insight and for other observations on this chapter.

5. ‘Pety’ from the vantage-point of the adult, not so petty for the child.

6. Or, of course, the other way round. Dispositions that were adaptive in the past may become a liability in a changed present.

7. The actual university which has issued the degree significantly affects the symbolic worth of these latter cultural characteristics. A graduate of an elite university, even if the level of his or her degree is poor, will be assumed to possess more of the latter features, appropriate behaviours and social virtues than higher-level graduates of lesser universities.

8. To both the observer and the actor.

9. If they could not cover their tracks completely and avoid unwelcome attention (of which Miller’s research is a comparatively benign, though still threatening, example).

References


PART 1

The Potential of Biographical Research