

Editorial: Biographical methods in migration research

THEODOROS IOSIFIDES*
DEBORAH SPORTON**

Biographical methods and research practice

During the last decades, qualitative biographical/narrative methods gained a prominent position within the spectrum of social science methodology and research practice, mainly due to a reaction to the positivist-empiricist dominance and associated views of social reality. After an initial interest to biographical methods, which followed the edition of *'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1919-1921)'* by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), biographical and generally qualitative research methods gave way to empiricist-quantitative approaches and only since the end of 1960 the positivist domination begun to be unsettled (Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Findlay and Li 1997; Tsiolis 2006).

Empiricism reduces social reality to a series of observable and discrete, highly atomistic entities (events, behaviors etc), which may be allegedly categorized and measured with the use of 'objective' quantitative methods by more or less 'neutral' social scientists (Iosifides 2008). The purpose of this, is the discovery of empirical, 'law like' regularities between variables, which are considered to exhaust both social processes and causal relations (Iosifides and Spyridakis 2006; Iosifides 2008). Against this, a view of social reality as consisted by meaningful actions and social interaction, gives great emphasis on individual meanings and interpretations and moves human subjectivity and social inter-subjectivity from the periphery to the center of social inquiry. Instead of variable-oriented law like explanations, such a view adopts an understanding (*verstehen*) approach to social phenomena, granting qualitative methods (including biographical/narrative approaches) an indispensable position in social research practice (Iosifides 2008). Indeed biographical approaches aim at the reconstruction of life trajectories of research participants and of the ways of making sense of the world, of their conceptualizations, meanings and representations of it. We would add to those, the investigation of their practices, actions, interactions, the influence of socio-economic and cultural context and the role of the personal, familial and social material conditions and circumstances (Iosifides 2008).

* Department of Geography, Laboratory of Population Movements, University of the Aegean, Mytilene, Lesvos, Greece. Email: iwsifidis@aegean.gr

** Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, UK. Email: d.sporton@sheffield.ac.uk

Biographical methods in the social sciences lead to an increased appreciation of the role of agency and subjectivity in producing and reproducing social reality, of the ways of mediation of broader social structures by an active human agency and of the efforts of constructing coherent biographies through different and diverse experiences, conceptualizations and events (Katrivesis, 2004; Tsiolis 2006; Apitzsch and Siouti 2007; Creswell 2007). As regards research practice, the biographical interview differs considerably from other types of interviewing, for example from the more focused in-depth qualitative interviewing. The main difference lies to the special role of the researcher as an '*active listener*' of the life story/biographical narrative of participant which is the result of a well designed and carefully formulated 'generative question' (Tsiolis 2006). The main purpose of the biographical interview is the production of a detailed biographical narrative with the least possible interventions by the researcher. After the narration phase, a more active interaction between the participant and the researcher, in the form of classical qualitative interviewing, may follow (Iosifides 2008). Thus, biographical research, aims at the production of a reconstruction of the biography/life history of the participants, which may be simultaneously characterised by elements such as narratives of efforts for the realisation of personal plans, interactions with institutional and societal rules and demands, biographical experiences of powerlessness and weakness, phases of rapid and unforeseeable change and biographical ruptures and the multi-dimensional relations between events, societal influences, meanings, representations, decision making processes and the continuing struggle to formulate and maintain a sense of biographical coherence over time (Tsiolis 2006, 2007; Iosifides 2008). There is probably no other social phenomenon which marks personal biographies with almost all the above ways than migration. For this reason the next sections turn to a more analytic debate of some key issues in biographical migration research.

Biographical methods in migration research

The study of migration phenomenon was, for a long time, dominated by empiricist-positivist approaches, concerning mainly with the process of migration decision making and modeling aspects of the phenomenon as determined by a series of discrete, interrelated variables, either at the levels of the individual and small groups (i.e. family, household etc.) or at the macro level such as country or regional development performance, unemployment rate etc. The call to incorporate biographical/narrative methods in studying migration aims at overcoming the limitations of empiricist approaches in a series of ways (Halfacree & Boyle 1993; Findlay & Li 1997). The first is related to placing agential intentionality and meaning making processes at the centre of migration research practice and thus moving away from deterministic and law-like causal explanations. The second is related to paying attention to the importance of 'practical consciousness' along with the unconscious and the discursive, that is paying attention to the ways which agents act in everyday life without reflecting thoroughly or plan upon their actions.

Finally, other ways include the detailed investigation of the multiplicity and multi-dimensionality of subjective migration experiences and the attention on the cultural dimension of processes related to migration phenomena.

Nevertheless, in many instances, reaction to empiricism in migration studies took, the form of exaggerations as regards the role of agency and subjectivity in producing and reproducing social reality, leading to neglect of broader structural factors, voluntarism and an almost total replacement of efforts to discover and analyze social causation processes with 'interpretative understanding' through lay discourses. In this paper, we adopt a more balanced position as regards the role of biographical methods in migration studies. We view those methods as extremely useful devices for understanding *and* causally explain the complex interplay between meaningful action and structural/cultural context (Laoire 2000; Iosifides 2004).

Key issues in biographical migration research

The quality-quantity debate

Qualitative methods and in particular biographical methods can enrich our understanding of the complex and multidimensional phenomenon of migration as compared mainly to the traditional positivist employment of quantitative techniques to migration studies. This employment entails methodological individualism, a utilitarian ontology of the self and uniform concept of rationality (Boswell 2008: 552). On the contrary, biographical and qualitative methods in general, may help to take into account the social and cultural context of any 'rational' decision making and the meanings and interpretations that actors ascribe to their actions and to the actions of others. Some of the most well-known strengths of biographical, and to some extent of almost all qualitative methods, are the in-depth and holistic understanding of phenomena and processes, the avoidance of imposing commonsensical or the researcher's categories to actors, subtlety, detail and the avoidance of the limitation of the discourses of actors to some (usually pre-selected) quantitative variables (Rubin and Rubin 2005). One example, showing the potentially valuable role of biographical and qualitative methods in general, in researching various aspects and dimensions of migration phenomenon, is related to the different meanings, that some migrants within certain contexts, attach to 'friendship' and in particular to 'friendship with natives'. For them, 'friendship with natives' means 'superficial friendly contact' and not 'more or less stable relations of reciprocity and solidarity'. So the positive response to a question about whether migrants have native friends refers to the former concept of friendship and not to the latter (Iosifides et al. 2007). Thus, only the in-depth investigation of the life course of immigrants and their biographical experiences of social relations in the host country may highlight the reasons for the adoption of this particular meaning of 'friendship with natives' rather than other alternative meanings and interpretations.

Biographical methods in migration studies may be applied to a series of specific domains related to different aspects of biographical migratory ex-

periences such as for example migration decision making and motivation, identity formation and change (see for example Kazmierska 2003), the role of social capital and social networks, processes of social integration and/or exclusion, political/social participation and mobilization etc. Biographical methods can lead to thorough investigation of the above aspects of migratory processes mainly because they place temporality, sequencibility, trajectory paths, and personal and/or collective memory at the center of social inquiry (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007). Furthermore, biographical methods may lead to detailed and comprehensive reconstructions of linking chains between events, meanings/interpretations, actions and practices. As regards practices, the examination of their genealogy and evolution may result in theoretical propositions of embeddedness within broader social structures which function quite independently of interpretations of actors. To give but one example, individual reasons and interpretations of migrants for the acceptance of specific kind of jobs need not have any direct relation¹ to the functioning of 'ethnic specialization' systems in the labour market, which often result in channeling migrants of specific ethnic background or gender to certain economic and labour market niches, irrespective of educational and other skills (Iosifides et al. 2007). This last remark leads us to the examination, in the next section, of the relation between agency and structure, and how this relation can be incorporated in or highlighted from biographical migration research.

The relation between agency and structure

Generally, the relation between agency and structure is probably the most important issue of interest for sociological theorizing, addressed implicitly or explicitly in almost every theoretical and methodological strategy in the social sciences. There has been a quite powerful tendency in social theory either to reduce agency to structure (structuralism) or structure to individuals or interactions between individuals (methodological individualism and situationism) (Mouzelis 1991, 1995; Archer 1995). Efforts to resolve the 'paradox' of structure – agency relations include conceptualizations of structure and agency as mutually constitutive, granting to structure a 'virtual existence' coming into being through the social practices of actors (structuration theory) (Archer 1995). Finally discursive analytic approaches to social theorizing tend to fall either in methodological individualism/situationism or macro-constructionism (Burr 2003).

A thorough critique of the above approaches exceeds the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless it has to be noted that biographical approaches are usually viewed and applied as part of the micro-sociological paradigm in the sense that the existence and influence of structural factors on individuals or social groups are undervalued and the powers (intentional and

¹ In the sense of knowing and conceptualizing the existence and/or the ways of functioning of such systems.

through discourse) of actors are exaggerated. Problems associated with those approaches may be resolved subject to a different conceptualisation of the relations between agency and structure. This conceptualisation entails a view both of agency and structure as existent in a separate way (analytic dualism), holding distinct characteristics and powers irreducible to one another and being in a constant interplay (Archer 1995). In this way biographical methods may contribute in a significant way not only to the investigation of the ways that individual or social interpretations and discourses produce results such as social action but also of the ways broader societal factors and structures condition meanings and interpretations (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007). Returning to the example of immigrant social networking and 'ethnic specialisation' (see previous section), a biographical approach may highlight in great detail the life trajectories of immigrants resulting in social networking along with the associated in depth examination of immigrant's meanings and interpretations related to crucial decisions and actions. But, equally importantly, biographical approaches may contribute to our understanding of how broader contextual and structural features of immigrant's social networks, condition (constrain or enable) actions and meaning making processes (see also Archer 2000, 2003).

The realism-relativism debate

The crucial question about the way of conceptualisation and interpretation of the biographical narrative, about its usefulness and its relation to broader social processes, introduces us inevitably to some form of the realism-relativism debate. Relativist positions, mainly those of the strong version of social constructionism, stress that biographical narratives are the mere product of the communicative interaction between the researcher and the research participant in the present (that is at the time of interaction), and cannot be used in order to highlight the impacts and role of any 'real' processes (see Tsiolis 2006). Thus, a narrative of an immigrant about her trajectory of spatial and social mobility in the host country, about passing different stages and phases resulted in modified social situation and relations, have value only as 'accounts' that is as interpretations or discourses. As those accounts or interpretations/discourses exhaust the domain of the social, they cannot inform us about any 'reality' behind the told story (Steensen n.d.a.).

The problems of strong versions of social constructionism and relativism in general, are manifold². Those versions cannot lead to satisfactory explanations of how discourses are produced and changed and on why some discourses are characterized by more durability and impact than others. This is because strong social constructionism does not acknowledge the dialectical interplay between discursive and extra-discursive elements and

² A comprehensive critique of relativism and strong social constructionism in social theorizing and research practice exceeds the scope of the present article. For a philosophical critique see Boghossian 2006 and for a sociological one see Sayer 2004.

factors, falling to a form of 'discursive reductionism' (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007). Furthermore, those versions of constructionism tend to ignore social hierarchies and the positioning (or conditioning) of discourses within hierarchical social and organisational systems and sub-systems (Mouzelis 1991). Thus, the discourses of migration policy officials, employers, immigrant community leaders and immigrants with different social characteristics do not 'construct' social reality in the same way and to the same extent. Whose constructions matter, when and why, is not a feature of discourse alone but of extra-discursive factors as well (social hierarchies, systems of material recourse and power distribution, structured positions systems etc.).

Those points remind us the centrality of interpretative/action power of human agency along with the fact that those powers are always exercised within given circumstances and structures, are characterized by unintended consequences and influenced by the intentions and unintended outcomes of actions of others (Iosifides 2008). Especially in the field of migration studies, biographical narratives may lead to deeper understanding of social processes and inform policy making, subject to their conceptualisation not just as 'stories', but as reconstructions of the complex and dialectical interplay between agency action and meaning making with certain structural and systemic conditions, constrains and enablements (Archer 1995, Iosifides 2008).

Biographical Migration Research: The Special Issue

In this special edition we include five papers that each, in different ways, address research on migration from a biographical perspective and that collectively develop and contribute to a number of the cross-cutting themes that have been raised in this introduction.

In the first paper Breda Gray draws on an extensive archival project documenting the life narratives of those who stayed behind in Ireland during the 1950s era of mass-emigration. In so doing her work addresses a lacuna in migration studies in general and biographical approaches in particular that have until recently tended to focus on migrant narratives and migration processes crucially ignoring those who stay behind. She argues that the ways in which individuals account for their decision to stay has continuing significance in structuring subjectivity to the present day and, drawing on the archival project, she explores the relevance of different theorizations of social change (late-modern, post-modern and feminist) to our 'obsession' with memory and self-narration in the 21st century (the biographical turn). The theme of increasing individualisation and uncertainty in late modernity (Bauman 2001, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) is also taken up by Anastasia Christou who argues in her paper that migrants increasingly make sense of themselves through biographical accounts - reflexively ordered narratives of self identity. In her research on counter diasporic second generation and return migrants to Greece and Cyprus she acknowledges that subject positions are framed by gender, ethnicity, class as well as social experiences that include selected memories imaginings, and trauma. Mi-

grant narratives are therefore relational, socially situated, and are constructed, (re) negotiated and articulated in different ways in different times and spaces.

Christina Clark-Kazak's paper focuses on biographical research methods and specifically the power dynamics involved in narrative research drawing on a study of young Congolese migrants in Uganda. The paper highlights some of the ethical and representational issues associated with undertaking biographical research that are particularly compounded in the global south where often donor/recipient relationships exist between the researcher and the researched. Jesper Bjarnesen also draws on research from the global south and presents a case study of a young Ivorian Migrant in which he employs a multi-method mobile life history approach as a methodological framework. This is based on four analytical concepts, mobility and mobile livelihoods that embrace the wider socio-cultural context; hopefulness that encompasses the uncertainty associated with migration, vital conjunctures that replaces chronology which has little meaning in many societies; and emplacement that incorporates the meanings associated with particular places.

The final paper in this special issue by Michelle Moran-Taylor focuses on ethnographic research with Guatemalan migrants who have migrated 'north' but also back 'south'. She argues that in-depth understandings of return have been neglected in migration research yet return migration has a profound impact on social life in the country of origin.

References

- Apitzsch, U. and Siouti, I. (2007) *Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies*. Frankfurt am Main: Research Integration, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, University of York.
- Archer, M. (1995). *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (2000). *Being Human. The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (2003). *Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001) *The Individualized Society*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Beck, U., and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization*. London: Sage.
- Boghossian, P. (2006) *Fear of Knowledge. Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boswell, C. (2008) 'Combining economics and sociology in migration theory', in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34 (4): 549-566.
- Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism. Second Edition*. London: Routledge.
- Creswell, J.W. (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

GUEST EDITORIAL

- Findlay, A.M. & Li, F.L.N. (1997) 'An Auto-Biographical Approach to Understanding Migration: The Case of Hong Kong Emigrants' in, *Area*, 29(1): 34-44.
- Halfacree, K.H. & Boyle, P.J. (1993) 'The challenge facing migration research: the case for a biographical approach', in *Progress in Human Geography*, 17 (3): 333-348.
- Iosifides, T. (2004) "Relativist approaches in social sciences: impacts and critique", in *Theseis*, 86: 57-67 (in Greek).
- Iosifides, T. (2009) Review of the book 'The Cultures of Economic Migration: International Perspectives' edited by Suman Gupta and Tope Omoniyi, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 226 pp. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35 (3): 510-511.
- Iosifides, T. (2003) "Qualitative migration research: some new reflections six years later", in *The Qualitative Report*, 8 (3): 435-446. (www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR8-3/iosifides.pdf).
- Iosifides, T. (2008) *Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences (revised edition)*. Athens: Kritiki (in Greek).
- Iosifides, T. and Spyridakis, M. (2006) (Eds.) *Qualitative Social Research. Methodological Approaches and Data Analysis*. Athens: Kritiki (in Greek).
- Iosifides, T., Lavrentiadou, M., Petracou, E., Kontis, A. (2007) Forms of social capital and the incorporation of Albanian immigrants in Greece, in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33 (8): 1343-1361.
- Katrivesis, N.S. (2004) *Sociological Theory. Contemporary Currents of Sociological Thought*. Athens: Gutenberg (in Greek).
- Kazmierska, K. (2003) 'Migration experiences and changes of identity: an analysis of a narrative', in *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4 (3), Article 21.
- Laoire, C.N. (2000) 'Conceptualising Irish rural youth migration: a biographical approach', in *International Journal of Population Geography*, 6: 229-243.
- Mouzelis, N.P. (1991) *Back to Sociological Theory. The Construction of Social Orders*. London: Macmillan.
- Mouzelis, N.P. (1995) *Sociological Theory – What Went Wrong? Diagnosis and Remedies*. London: Routledge.
- Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (2005) *Qualitative Interviewing. The Art of Hearing Data. Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sayer, A. (2004) *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Sims-Schouten, W., Riley, S. C. E. & Willig, C. (2007) Critical Realism and Discourse Analysis. A Presentation of a Systematic Method of Analysis Using Women's Talk of Motherhood, Childcare and Female Employment as an Example. *Theory and Psychology*, 17 (1), 101-124.
- Steensen, J. (no date available) *Biographical Interviews in a Critical Realist Perspective*. Department of Education, Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Denmark (uit.no/getfile.php?PageId=8315&FileId=31, accessed 28.05.2009)
- Thomas, W. and Znaniecki, F. (1958) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1919-1921)*. New York: Dover.
- Tsiolis, G. (2006) *Life Histories and Biographical Narratives. The Biographical Approach in Sociological Qualitative Research*. Athens: Kritiki (in Greek).



*excellent resource for migration researchers
practitioners and students*

2010 Special Volume
on
**RESEARCH METHODS IN ETHNIC AND
MIGRATION STUDIES**

Collaborated by HERMES

Edited by Annalisa, Deianira Ganga and Carla De Tona

This special issue presents revised and improved versions of a fine selection of invited papers presented at the 9th European Sociological Association Conference in Lisbon, September 2009.

<http://www.migrationletters.com>