

Objective and Subjective Perspectives of Life Span Research*

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues for a theoretical renewal of basic perspectives for ageing research. A longitudinal, 'historical' view of the personality is advocated as it is expected to permit a deeper understanding of needs as well as chances for renewal, re-training, prophylactic and rehabilitative measures of and for persons in later life. A psychosocial theory of cumulation of general life conditions and special events, interpreted and reacted to by the subjects, will supposedly enlarge the more static conceptions of 'social factors of ageing'.

Starting from biosociological arguments, as appears necessary in gerontology, historical examples are given for the thesis that instead of an independent age- and age-norm-stratification in society, age norms ought to be viewed as derivatives of production, instruction and school-systems, and as a repercussion of the social impacts and consequences of medicine.

To supplement this objectivist sociological view of age norms and life phases, the biographic self-interpretations of subjects are considered. Limits of their application as a 'method' in social science are discussed and theoretical reasons are given for why and how biographies reflect the past in the light and within the categories of the actual structures and life conditions of the retrospective subjects.

The paper finally criticizes a conception of identity which implies an a-historical anthropology and an invariant linear model of development in quasi-prescribed consecutive stages, as often assumed in certain schools of developmental psychology. It pleads for the consideration of different, conflicting and non-synchronized processes in sectional careers (or 'life-threads'). To study them, a mixture of quantifying and observational

* Paper prepared for the Luxembourg Conference on Ageing and Life Course Transitions in an Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Perspective, 18–20 June 1979.

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methods with subjective-interpretative approaches 'focussing' on biographical areas and topics is recommended.

Reasons for 'Historizing' the Individual

The study of the life span, as well as the significance of phases and periods of time in life spans have begun to play a greater role not only in modern sociology but also in the interdisciplinary scenery of the social sciences and even within medicine.

In this paper several concurrent trends are presented, which have stimulated the present interest in life span and are worthy of more detailed consideration. Together they might suggest paths of reinterpretation of ageing as a social phenomenon.

1. The contact with historical thought through the massive re-introduction of Marxism into the social sciences has strongly enlivened western sociology. At the same time the need for a better understanding of the creative possibilities of the subjects was awakened. This had not yet been sufficiently explored by Marxist writers. The ideas of a historically created society were expanded to the 'historizing' of the individual, the consideration of his historical life experiences. The value-pluralism and the insecurity of institutions do not fulfill the conditions for an interpretation of a meaningful life. The less an individual can affect his world the more important becomes the need for his life to have a 'meaning'.

The working world with its rapid changes in requirements and technologies has already demonstrated that constant training and retraining is a necessity. The process of 'unlearning' deepens the impression that not only survival techniques but also existential orientation, which we learned in childhood, are no longer reliable. A longitudinal view of life seems to be a more appropriate observational method for mastering the pressing problems of establishing the prerequisites for retraining, its facilitation and the avoidance of mistakes and false directions, than an understanding of an ever so differentiated here and now, viewed from one point in time, would allow.

Many findings in learning theory and depth-psychology have already been utilized by developmental psychology. Freud, himself, in his *Perpetual Analysis*,¹ stated that as a consequence of any therapy a continuously analytical relationship to oneself ought to be formed. Presently the aim is to relate these thoughts to a larger social-scientific context and to give them a meaning, beyond psycho-analysis.

2. Interactionism, by renewing G. H. Mead's theories, and especially

following Erving Goffman's work, tries to correlate both the process of self-discovery and self-representation on the one hand, and relationships to relevant interaction partners, according to interconnected patterns of interpretation of the other. This interdependent relationship should now be seen in the developmental context of the life span. Hence comes the theoretical and methodological coalition between life span theorists and interactionists, which was not previously evident.

3. The interpretation of important societal-political events such as the student revolt in the late sixties made it necessary to seek the connection between life span on the one hand and historical conditions on a social macro-level on the other. This led to an increasingly strong empirical use and theoretical elaboration of the concepts of cohort and generation, which was expected to demonstrate this connection. Recently the Italian sociologist Franco Ferrarotti² has suggested that individual life spans should not be studied *per se* but rather in 'bunches' of primary groups, since the individual can only be understood in terms of group processes.

Such concepts of bunches appear in literature as well. Jury Trifonov's book *Fires' Reflection* ('Otblesk Kostra', Moscow 1966) uses such a device. The historical presentation of his father's, uncle's, their friends' and fellow-soldiers' life spans since the 1905 revolution in Rostow, during the October Revolution in 1917 and the fight with the White Russians in the twenties is given. Trifonov integrates the diaries, telegrams, announcements and minutes, which were preserved by his father, with other archival data. Their part in the production of historical processes becomes visible through the individual life stories and the abundance of separate but co-ordinated dealings in the 'bunches' of revolutionary careers. As a result of this example, we can record three things:

- (a) a decrease in anonymity in the interpretation of the October Revolution processes and
- (b) a more correct and individually proven evaluation of the adjacent spheres and subcultures, which had been a basis for the world historical process.
- (c) The 'preparation' of the revolution went on through phases of learning and suffering by revolutionary groups in Czarist prisons, forced labour camps and among the Siberian exiles.

The explanation of societal movements and upheavals (the observation of historical 'rapids') demands documentation of both domains: the *comprehensive structural conditions* which created large groups of disadvantaged people and outsiders, some of whom became dissidents or revolutionaries, and the '*subjective*' reconstruction of the life histories and

foundations of these fringe groups, and their motivations and processes, can be brought to light. An inclusive historical-sociological explanation can then bring together the macro-sociological structural conditions and the micro-sociological ensembles of individual development.

4. The search for a sociological personality theory is growing. In France, sociologists following Lucien Sève have made attempts to create a personality theory which combines certain Marxist preconceptions with life span studies.

Through a sociologically founded conception of personality, institutional identity of the individual and his loyalties might be re-examined. Empirical data from life course research can be used to complete or criticize developmental theory based on Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and the more recent works of Paul Baltes. Important insights into a dynamic personality model may certainly be gained through developmental psychology. Resulting views of invariance in the sequence of the life course, however, are doubtful. Sociological research has attempted to elaborate a variety of types of life phases and life spans: developmental psychology often has not (sufficiently) accounted for such variation.

Moral autonomy, the development of self-reliance and inner security, the capacity for cognitive differentiation correspond to advantaged developments. Stagnation, 'other-dependency' and topical 'poverty' (economic deprivation, lack of stimulation for intellectual curiosity, unidimensionality of explicatory modes of everyday life, and a reductionist, often self-accusing interpretation of basic life events), are typical of disadvantaged development. This can be shown for several life phases on the basis of empirical studies of youth, early adulthood and of ageing.³ Biography has to be integrated into history. When agricultural labourers or domestics in Central or Eastern Europe began to work as children 60 years ago, their 'development' took place under socially deplorable conditions. Their old age is characterized by the historical conditions which affected their childhood and youth, namely, lack of schooling, minimal health education and often submissiveness to all forms of authority. No wonder that the most underprivileged do not understand and cannot sufficiently take advantage of the opportunities now offered by social and medical care. Paradoxically, those who seem to be most deprived socially and economically, due to their inability to perceive their real condition and because of their failure to articulate needs, are far from the ones with the highest rate of declared needs and complaints.⁴

Scanty training and deprived early school careers in the past lives of today's old sick people are often the reasons for their failure to contact

service institutions. The services because of the way they are structured, cannot offer the necessary help. Different elements of deprivation have a tendency to add up and to lead to a state of *cumulative deprivation* in old age.⁵

The internalization of socio-economic disadvantages and the gradual acceptance of low standards lowers expectations even further and reduces or extinguishes aspirations. The individual in a chain of causation, as the last part of this chain, becomes instrumental in his or her own handicap, so that we may speak of 'self induced *social deprivation*'.

Studies of young married couples or of households with young members have shown sociological variations in their development. For example, the age of the founding of a household and attitudes towards personal planning and self-determination in the development of the family vary markedly. Under certain educational and economic conditions, clearly structured life plans are recognizable; under other conditions life careers are amazingly vague and disordered.⁶

5. In this context, the revision of the notion of generation seems urgent. Explanation of societal movements needs to be complemented by the 'subjective' reconstruction of the life spans of individuals for understanding of what is called social or political change. An inclusive historico-sociological explanation brings together the macro-social structures and the micro-social ensemble of individual developments.

The mediating notions of cohort and generation deserve detailed attention. Recent studies show that the cohort is a less strictly definable unit than was originally expected and hoped for. Impacts on identical cohorts do not create equal or even similar effects on all members of the cohort.⁷ The separation of ageing and cohort effects is theoretically necessary and methodologically desirable. However, there is much interplay between the dynamics of cohorts and age standards which interfere with ageing processes. New cohorts tend to change age standards. In addition, it appears to be theoretically more adequate to distinguish not only between (individual) ageing on the one hand and cohort change on the other, but to introduce the 'period effect' as a third analytical category.⁸

Similarly, the concept of generation, the forerunner of the notion of cohorts, needs revision. This notion, developed by Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1870s was changed in meaning and elaborated by Karl Mannheim in the 1920s. It saw a renaissance and has been rediscussed for the last decade after having been neglected for nearly 50 years.⁹ Siegfried Bernfeld in a psychoanalytic maturation concept some 60 years ago had already emphasized the life phase character of youth:

that in the period after childhood there is a special plasticity and receptivity to values. In adolescence, according to Bernfeld, a phase of value-plasticity, basic attitudes are formed that remain for life.¹⁰ Without referring to the value-plasticity hypothesis, Mannheim advocated the idea that for each new generation there is a new and historically unique approach to culture. The actually existing elements of a culture at any specific time will be taken up, enforced, and internalized by youth. These values then survive over the entire life spans of the 'members' of the generation. Mannheim in this respect tacitly agreed with the psycho-analytic internalization-theory of Bernfeld. Mannheim's view had a major influence on various developmental sociological inquiries during a decade in which simple and sometimes crude empiricism due to conceptual clarification and empirical contributions by Matilda Riley and co-workers¹¹ was overcome. Today we have reasons to doubt that values once taken over in youth remain integrated for life to the extent Mannheim expected them to remain. Social and cultural change affect life-styles and values repeatedly, if not continuously. Important changes in mid-life, like revision and re-integration of values, can no longer be ignored under conditions of social and political pluralism. This necessarily entails the differentiation of the traditional concept of cohort and generation. On the basis of Glen Elder's investigation of historical cohorts during the Great Depression, it is demonstrable that there is no homogeneity in the realization of value legacies. For example, deprivation during the depression years influenced the careers of the 1950's cohort in very different ways, depending on the individual's earlier life histories and on their environments.¹²

6. In addition, life span considerations are furthered by those research efforts of sociology affiliated with social policies and social work. If, for example, gerontology is urged to establish the needs of older people, it is not enough, according to M. L. Johnson, to list 'barren responses to swiftly delivered questions about "What do you need?", delivered by clipboard interviewers eager to press their instant replies into a computer'.¹³ To find the basic problems of elderly people for whom social help is relevant, it is much more necessary to identify the path of their life history through a biographical reconstruction and in this art and manner to uncover their present problems and 'concerns' that these life histories have generated. One can not even recognize *priorities* in needs except through a life history. Similarly relevant are the respective pre-histories for the study proposed by Martin Kohli of determining the various types of reactions to changes in the estimation of work strength in the ageing process, especially in the decade before retiring.¹⁴

Such approaches are valuable in establishing subjective fulfilment possibilities; strategies for life-satisfaction and for achieving happiness. They permit insights into individual historical life contexts.¹⁵ In the area of recreational research, C. Attias-Donfut has demonstrated how such findings can be fruitfully employed.¹⁶

Our own inquiry into family relationships and their quality and durability has clearly shown that, for example, the relationship between children and parents-in-law – if the parents become old – can only be properly understood when the beginnings from the original partner choice of the children, are taken into account.¹⁷

Such problems which are economically and medically relevant to the task of looking after and caring for the elderly make it imperative to use life course development of life span analysis.

Historico-Socially Structured Production of Life Phases

Some authors see life as a process in which ageing unavoidably comes with a pre-determined uniform rhythm for everything living. We wish to disagree with this view by ascertaining the many forms of the life course and their relationship to the wider social organization of society, for the nature and form of social organization has a decisive influence on animal as well as human survival and evolutionary prospects. The survival and higher development of the more advanced animals need differentiated experiences and learning results, which have to be transferred to the young individual during a life phase when it needs the protection of its parents. The more developed an organism is, the more urgent is its need for a socially guaranteed learning phase in which its learning abilities can be developed. We find that:

- (1) the parent individuals (as in humans) live past their procreative phase; that ageing as a period for transmitting experience has an important social meaning even when the physical strength of the elders is already declining; the meaning of experience transmission has in the course of the history of the division of labour changed from transmitting a knowledge of physical economic reproduction existence to applying a knowledge focussed on handling psychological experience;
- (2) in inter-generational social life, when the young individuals become sexually mature before the completion of their learning phase and when still living in familial groups, the incest problem must be solved. The compelling result is the introduction of power controls, norms and regulations which we find expressed in the form of incest taboos.

With the beginning of human culture, but probably and more correctly, before its beginning and for its feasibility, it is supposed that in the pre-human evolution incest restrictions of and for the family existed.¹⁸

The prolongation of the learning phase (the preparation for the production and the application of learning gains) and the necessity of social regulation of the generations living together has played a decisive role in forcing the development of exogamy. It is reinforced by recognition of the perpetual sexual preparedness of man. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss and the literature based on his writings, exogamy resulted in the introduction of various traditions from other groups by the marriage to women from outside. This can be interpreted as the conscious taking up of new forms and practises and thus marks the beginning of culture. Culture, according to Lévi-Strauss, is based on *intervention*, the replacement of accident and hazard with the organization of exchange.¹⁹

The development of the division of labour – and its impact on extended survival and evolutionary chances – decides in animal and human society which life phases of the individual can be patterned or extended. But at the same time, the occupants of these life phases have to regulate their lives together in a system permeated by norms. Not only the establishment of life phases and their patterns but also the social interconnection of the phases is dependent upon the state of actual development. The human being in his stage of knowledge and power accumulation with his manifold reproduction and creativity, produces from this general basis ever new prerequisites for his development. Consequently, essentially unshiftable sequences in life spans, that is, uniform periods of ageing which are always occurring, can *not* exist for man. The essential conflicts in ageing individuals or between representatives of generations, the specific prejudices and devaluations can be sociologically determined and recognized only in their historical context, according to the state of our research.

Primate sociology as well as theories of early man permit us to identify the fundamental impact of *social organization* on chances of survival and existence mastery. This organization tends towards a social ‘utilization’ and standardization of the biologically anchored, but ontogenetically as well as phylogenetically enormously modifiable, human ages.

The interplay of genetic factors with cultural learning in man created a specific survival profile which proved to be functional to the evolution of intellectual and spiritual capacities and values.²⁰ The plasticity of life phases in the human species was one important aspect of this ‘survival profile’.

Different from animal society the *planned organization of production* for survival (be it even on the level of hunting and early cattle raising or primitive farming) formed a linkage between the genetically determined behaviour and the cultural variations that arose. This 'planned organization' and the planfully evolving division of labour in the process of production became a pre-requisite not only for the reproduction of the race but also for its creativity. The dignity of human ageing is not solely based on a moral imperative. It is intimately connected with the phylogenetic destiny of man. Age is the product of internal social necessities; it is not just the result of a 'role system' in society which happens to develop for reasons of internal co-ordination. The age structure and (often conflicting and changing) *age norms are derivatives of production, instruction and school-systems* at all levels, and – at an increasing rate in the development of human history – of the support provided by medicine and social care. Age norms regulate access, and are also the result of the power conflict over the fruits of production.

Elsewhere I have tried to exemplify the dependency of life phases on the division of labour in various phases of European history.²¹ Here I will only refer in a sketchy way to the rise of new life phases in the last third of the nineteenth century in economically developed European societies. Thus I am trying to supplement the biosociological argument with an historico-sociological one.

Where the labour movement had seized a decisive footing, the limitation of working life *before* the end of the entire lifetime was introduced as a product of governmental social policy (in Central Europe propagated by Bismarck). Thus a new age category was classified, that of the *pensioner* among those dependently employed (wage-earner). At the other end of life's ladder, the *expansion of primary school* was made necessary because of the complex new production forms and the new forms of societal organization. The differentiated school system with secondary levels, the *gymnasium* (and later other forms of higher education) were accessible first only to the privileged; later they became more generally available. This allowed the emergence of a second new type – the age category of *adolescence*. Step by step universal compulsory education prevailed in the last third of the nineteenth century, often against the resistance of the poorest who lost the income from child labour when their children went to school. Thus the state brought about a fixed period between childhood and the beginning of the 'productive phase'. However, it was the higher schools and their teachers that offered the milieu (external to the family) that was the fertile ground for the life philosophy advancing youth freedom, which brought forward the ideology of youth culture and stimulated

the youth movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus the life phase of adolescence became defined and recognized.

Student youth had already in the Middle Ages become acknowledged as a group and offered conflict material. The presentation of the heroic or literary youth was a key figure in the world of ideas in Central and Western Europe as well as in Russian Romanticism. However, at the turn of the century, the notion of adolescence came to be considered the passage between childhood and adulthood.

Childhood and adolescence, or at least the 'favoured adolescence' of the higher schools became just as unproductive (i.e. freed from work obligations) as retirement. Here one can see very clearly how life phases are being defined by the inner structure of the division of labour and the dynamics of production joined with the school development. But on the other side, the limits of social structure as a determinant of life phases through work division must be seen. This is especially true of the inner ambiguities, the crises and the alternative forms of lifestyle offered in the present society.

In a new publication, Martin Kohli²² has tried to trace the still vaguely defined midlife crisis (which rests on a 'discrepancy between aspiration and reality') to the discrepancy, diagnosed by Claus Offe, between political aspirations to equality and the pervasive existence of inequality which results from our economic system. When the obligations of employment in early work life cause unrealistic aspirations to arise, the disappointment of the wishes leads to the breaking out of discrepancies in the individual.

Dilemmas of the Biographical Approach

We can now build on the preliminaries gained from the previous section, that the societal division of labour with its structural variations creates 'chances' for life phases which as far as socially approachable, can be subjectively perceived and seized. But now we deal with the recognition of subjectivity, the reconstruction of which W. I. Thomas treats in his *Polish Peasant*, where he writes 'that not only because of the schematic tendencies in our everyday understanding but also because of the (by us cultivated) "science itself" it is so difficult'.²³

The famous biographically oriented Chicago School represented by G. H. Mead and C. H. Cooley philosophically and by its efforts to return to the concrete problems (immigration, drugs, prostitution, crime and vagrancy) of the social destiny of the American large cities of the early twentieth century laid a decisive basis for a study of subjectivity. I have not yet been able to determine whether besides the late Hegelianism

coming to Chicago via Scotland it was also influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey's preference for biography. It is most unlikely that W. I. Thomas knew the proper theoretician of biography, namely Dilthey, in his publications between 1900 and 1910. In addition, the relevant works of Dilthey dealing with the notion of biography which he had presented in his lectures at the Academy of Science in Berlin during the time up to January 1910 were first published posthumously in Volume 7 of the collected works in 1927. Especially relevant are *Outlines for a Criticism of Historical Reason*,²⁴ *Categories of Life*,²⁵ and *About Biography*.²⁶

Even though important objections must be advanced and decisive modifications will be necessary, Dilthey's conceptualization is still the best starting-point for interpreting subjectivity in a way that it can be made theoretically fruitful for problems related to the life course. He starts from the assumption that life as known 'from within' is a category that can not be penetrated further.²⁷ The development of the humanities, oriented toward the understanding of life, as opposed to the natural sciences,²⁸ rests on the 'deepening of experience' (of the scientist!!) and the 'exploration' of the content of these experiences. At the same time the humanities have to turn towards 'objectifying' these experiences, that is, the field of cultural accomplishments, in order to understand the different aspects of life with the help of a continually improving methodology. *The humanities manifest themselves in a three-pronged process of: experience, expression and understanding*. Experience is a very precarious process, it can even be ruined through 'observation'.²⁹ It is therefore important to pay attention to the *expression* as the tangible 'substance of experience'.

Expression, 'obtained' from the content of experience, becomes something independent and permanent. From this explanation, we understand the strong emphasis on the use of diaries, poems, descriptions, self-reports and the use of archival methods by Charlotte Bühler and Siegfried Bernfeld,³⁰ who were both influenced by Dilthey, in preference to every form of interviewing.

All experience, according to Dilthey, is brought forward from the *self* and is to be regarded as a part of the self.³¹ The manifoldness of experience relates to the unity of the consciousness like the part to the whole.

Can we empirically find Unity in the Life Span according to the Unity of Consciousness?

First experiences of larger research projects in which life course narratives (reports on sections of one's own life span) are contained, show that a *unity* of life (at least as far as subjective perceptions of respondents and narrators go) is frequently represented. Louis Morin³² in reviewing the first

analysis of a Canadian research project of the Institute for Human Sciences at the University of Laval emphasizes that he was struck, however, by the paucity of information and the repetitiveness of self reports on life histories, although acknowledging a certain unity of perceptions of the individual informants existed, whether they reported about religious experience, work life, the family, or some other segments of their personality or 'life fields'.

Such general affirmations must be further explored to find whether this 'unity' is to be found

- (a) in the manner of remembering or verbal representation, or in an attempt to integrate various segments of experience and action;
- (b) in an ascription of meaning to such an integrative linkage;
- (c) in the searching for continuity of a 'thread' in the life course and in the establishment of a meaningful relationship between life phases.

For Dilthey, the life course is closely related to the elaboration of biography or autobiography. Today this is less self-evident since we cannot only use other longitudinal methods but must use them in order to meet the demands of sociology to study effects of micro- and macro-structures.

The discussion of Wilhelm Dilthey's theoretical design in his late works was chosen by us since the inclusion of an approach to subjectivity was necessary for the understanding of the life course. This comprehension is in turn indispensable for a renewed and expanded theorizing about individuality within the context of the social sciences. Dilthey's ideas seem useful inasmuch as they contribute to a conception of the individual in its effort of *reconstruction of the connections of experiences* and their comprehensible objectification.

Dilthey does not call biography, as so often occurs now, 'lived life' (as, for example, the formula '*vécu*' used by Louis Morin³³), rather the (oral or written) *exposure* of a connection which has expired and become visible through time and which individually has its own actual meaning.

Writing biography according to Dilthey means the 'verstehend' tracing of a 'formation process out of boundlessness',³⁴ a process which had already occurred in life. Therefore in self-understanding (autobiography) as well as understanding the other (biography), the reconstruction must refer to the constitutive formation process of life. This means that remembrance-energy must be applied, and this energy of reflection must be directed toward 'meaningful moments'.³⁵ This brings forward the difference from Sigmund Freud's revolutionary theoretical as well as practical concept of the *unconscious guiding* of 'recollection' through associations, but parallels Freud's emphasis on the reconstruction of meaning as a *work* process.

The past should, in and through this energy of reflection, obtain a 'second life'.³⁶ Given the newly popular euphoria with biography, it seems important to bring back to mind Dilthey's emphasis on the 'energy of reflection'. This can be related to the concept of psychological 'conquest work' which Freud's disciple Balint later denoted as the process of uncovering.

Certain contact points between the biographical hermeneutics and 'recollection' through psychoanalysis are obvious. However, in the latter, the search for regularities in the service of operative therapeutic changes is clearly recognizable. Moreover, in psychoanalysis *procedures* have been established and in spite of the manifestation of psychoanalytic schools, can still be described relatively clearly.³⁷ Psychoanalysis and *verstehend* biography both remain in their epistemology 'ideographically' oriented toward the individual.

The problem which is already present here and which still does not seem to be solved, is how Dilthey's biographical 'understanding' with its justified request for an 'energy of reflection' for purposes of recollection, is to be stretched to include several or even many individuals and how these individuals are to be *compared*. One can not overlook that Dilthey saw biography in the end only as art and understanding, as an irreplaceable act of the individual oriented towards an individual – himself or another one. Understanding in its final consequence is presumably either therapeutic psychological understanding or 'art' in the sense of Friedrich Engel-Janosi.³⁸

Already, the pioneer of the Chicago School, W. I. Thomas, who together with F. Znaniecki brought forward the life course data of Polish immigrants in the U.S.A., in reviewing his monumental work by reflecting on his use of *biographical method*, came to the suspicion that the *scientific notion* was inadequate for approaching subjectivity. Does that mean that the notion of science should and *can* be changed to suit the content of biography? Or does that mean that biography and autobiography actually involve dimensions of human creativity which exceed even a broader notion of science? No matter how one wishes to answer this question, I am inclined to plead for an expansion of the notion of science and of scientific conceptology to suit biographies. But in spite of that I suspect that finally there is an incompatibility between scientific procedures and certain concluding 'crowning' performances of biography.

In spite of the manifold subtleties of his thinking Dilthey did not entirely escape from illusions about the study of biography. Only Edmund Husserl's observational acuteness in his theory of the consciousness at least brought fruitful unrest to life history by his method of phenomenology. The principle formulations which refer to this developed around

1912 and can in part be traced back as far as 1906. Husserl was concerned with the continuous, reciprocal transformation of actuality and inactuality in the consciousness. 'To the very essence of the flow of experience of a true Ego it belongs. . . that the continuously flowing chain of '*cogitationes*' be surrounded by a medium of inactuality, which is always prepared to switch to a modus of actuality or conversely from actuality to inactuality'.³⁹ The extrication of this oscillation from present to past in the consciousness is as important for the understanding of motivation as for that of life practices.

In any case, Husserl's allusion to the intertwining or *transferability* of the actual and the remembered spheres points out a principle problem in using biographical 'material', namely that this latter must continually be seen before the background or in the evaluation – or motivational – frame of the *actual* consciousness. *The mutual or comparable use of biographics must therefore take into consideration the actual situational and structural foundation of the consciousness of those who produce statements about their past life or areas of their life experiences.*

The Social Conditions of Recall

Daniel Bertaux and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame, attempted to show how conditions of the actual social situation bring forth differences in retrospective life accounts (*récits de vie*). They found differences in the verbal representation of earlier life phases between groups of 60-year-old bakers of today when reflecting on their careers. Their evaluation of their past depended on whether they had managed to become self-employed, that is master (patron) or not. Those who remained employed describe their third decade differently from those who became self-employed describe their third decade differently from those who became self-employed and 'owners' of, for the most part, small shops. The accounts of those who remained employed, even when 60 years old, emphasize the important role that the bullying of their former masters had played.⁴⁰ Accounts in this respect are completely missing from those who became masters, 'patrons'. Additionally, in the latter accounts all experiences are seen as pivotal to their upward social mobility. This result does not seem trivial to me, since the opposite hypothesis can also claim to be meaningful: namely, that those who rose can present their learning phase as being marked by special difficulties and having been bullied to create a more effective descriptive background to their achieved success.

Continuing from the example of the bakers, one must not in every case assume that this type of retrospective meaning and evaluation of careers found by the Bertaux' creates the only useable hypothesis for other auto-

biographical life course presentations. One would presumably have to take into account more self-aggrandizement from those with higher education, especially those who have made large steps in social mobility, for example, the petty bourgeois child who becomes a top-manager, politician, or professor.

Some other research results from Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame should be taken into consideration when formulating further hypotheses. In particular linguistic differences between the sexes should be noted. Men in their autobiographical language more frequently use the 'active I' than women, whereas women report situations and 'scenes'. Instead of 'I' the 'we' appears most, or an impersonal report form such as 'then *one* could even. . .'. The reports by males display a tendency to present *actions*; the females place *relationships* in the forefront.⁴¹

The results of Bertaux and L. Morin show the necessity of considering matrices of significance⁴² which are *currently* present in the personality of the narrator in order to analyze the presentation of life spans. How is this significance-matrix constituted? It seems, that on the one hand it is constituted through the sociologically determined life situation and its connected life practice yet on the other hand, through the continually reformulated self-image.

It must not be overlooked, that there is a circular process between the *significance-matrix* and the *remembrance process*. We 'go round' in 'hermeneutic cycles'. It may be a shrinking or an expanding circle. He who in interpreting and participating *remembers*, also *changes* his self-image when and if not defence-mechanisms prevent him from doing so. And as a further consequence, under certain conditions he might also change his life practises on account of a hermeneutic 'recall'.

Methodical Issues in Life Span Studies

From what has been said so far, it may have become clear that subjective data of an interpreting self-report which are related to a continuity like *récits de vie* (life histories), have a highly complex psycho-social constitution, which we still have to recognize and about which at the present time we might come to very different theoretical conclusions.

Large surveys in the province of Québec, using biographical data, show that beyond the fascination with the expected comprehensive and original statements (that is, not depending on established categories which pre-determine the results as with questionnaires) three factors can be shown:

- (a) The life course method leads to unmanageability and confusion, especially with a larger number of life span presentations, unless a very

carefully worked out thematic-theoretical plan for the research goal and the data analysis is available for the provocative material. There is, especially if theoretical concepts are indeed available but not precise enough, a gulf between this and the 'material'.⁴³

- (b) This difficulty will be increased in oral-history-research. Even with scientifically trained personnel, oriented towards the documentation of the personal life history, their theoretical pre-conceptions will gain an enormous self-momentum and a high heterogeneity of results will be produced. Many of the interviewers emphasize further elaboration of objective everyday occurrences while others stimulate principle statements about value-problems. . . .⁴⁴
- (c) The life-history-method shows for a not inconsiderable number of persons a surprising 'paucity of statements'; with this finding, one is reminded of the reasons which led for example Paul Lazarsfeld to return to the questionnaire in his study of proletarian life course development – this despite the fact that he was a disciple of Charlotte Bühler and Siegfried Bernfeld who emphasized the biographic and 'unobtrusive' methods.

Our exploration of some problems of the study of life phases and the usage of biographical methods does not permit us a simple summary. It has shown to us, however, that some sort of balance between objective and subjective approaches is necessary to penetrate deeper into life-course development. We saw that the subject finds himself within a historically and sociologically predetermined 'objective' structure of life phases yet may on the other hand view and evaluate his own past according to a practically infinite variety of perspectives rooted in his changing actual situations.

We thus avoided a naïve evaluation of the methods of biography and life-history-accounts of the subjects themselves; we ought to add some caveats concerning the notion of identity and express ourselves on the question whether a joint application of biographical and other longitudinal methods appears to be desirable.

The dominant identity (development) theory implies a rather *unhistorical* anthropology that requires a single (even if complex) invariable main model with quasi-normative fixed sequences; this, however, stands in contradiction to the empirically founded sociological research hypotheses which stipulate the societally dependent self-formation.

Many new impulses that have come from ageing research and social gerontology⁴⁵ show that for example Erikson's normative formula of 'integrity versus doubts and disgust' as a psycho-moral assignment for the advanced phase of the second half of life is not free from subtle

regressiveness. Even under conditions of health or social handicaps, activation (with the necessary inner and outer encouragements) or at least readiness to accept innovations in the later life phases, yields more support than the search for 'integration' as such.

We must subject the concept of 'identity' in its 'preformedness' by philosophical idealism to a renewed critical examination and must then, closer to Freud's original ideas, talk about various identification *processes*. In social science identity is probably mainly a co-ordinative marginal concept, in the sense of e.g. a connection of sectorial careers with their respective specific relationships to self-image and life-practices. As opposed to a stabilizing notion of identity, *chances of renewal*, however conditioned and limited by societal structures, milieus and constellations of relationships will have to be dealt with.

Instead of 'id' ego may develop, and the super-ego may in principle be revised. That the resources and capabilities for such a revision are socially distributed unequally and therefore are to be examined in their variation by sociology has already been underlined above when we discovered socially different paths of development.

Furthermore, identity should not be viewed as compact 'oneness'. A multitude of life-threads, different types of continuity within one subject ought to be studied. Areas of activity develop into sectional careers. But exactly the question of complementarity or polarization of various sectional careers of one and the same person (or of an identical group in various sections of their lives) would already allow a formulation of more concrete hypotheses.⁴⁶

The concentration on alternative 'careers' ought to play an important role in the new interdisciplinary ageing research, especially in view of the various rehabilitation problems. How can, for example, an especially 'ego'-involved career in athletics, emotionally characterized by a strong connection to the (socially approved) self-image be compensated when sickness or physical handicaps appear? Isn't a certain aspect of 'disengagement' or rather an *inner distance* required, as Munnichs asserts (in spite of the justified general criticism of disengagement theory) to achieve a substitution through another activity?⁴⁷ Here we hit upon the question of a psycho-sociological 'flexibility', the ability to exercise emotional balancing, the creation of new identification in the life span, the necessity of *balancing and revising the fields of activities in career, familial and other 'ego'-involved relationships* in the second half of life.

Which sectional 'careers', life course 'threads' (partly conceived as learning phases but always to be seen in connection with an ego-theory) are especially relevant for the maintenance of self-esteem? Those which are socially visible and supported through *public* recognition? Or perhaps

areas of intimate experience which are only known to the individual or a very small group? What possibilities for compensation arise? Of the content of one sectorial area (e.g. professional recognition) by another, e.g. already vaguely present or to be newly created by the individual? Under which social contextual conditions of emotional 'support' may this changing over to a 'new horse' occur? Can predictions about specific flexibility be made for certain professional groups, educational levels and cultural prerequisites of individuals? Which theoretical understanding proves to be useful in overcoming inhibitions and blocks in the process of self-fulfilment? Can the representations of psychoanalysis be useful in a theory of value change furnishing the concept of super-ego-revision and the freeing of the ego?

Social Perspectives: the Study of Dynamic Context

Let us end with a methodological remark. Life course analysis need not necessarily be approached only by biographic methodology. Age group comparison or longitudinal research using questionnaires including projective techniques permit to investigation of class and milieu-specific forms of development.⁴⁸ On the basis of such methods it becomes possible to study origins and conditions of cumulative disadvantages in developmental and ageing processes. This can be shown by various types of data. Demographic, survey and longitudinal research point out how disadvantages cumulate, how they may become internalized and even lead to self-destructive processes.⁴⁹ Sociological research thus cannot refrain from quantitative perspectives and methods. Life course research has to be defined as one of a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research and the relationships of the two to each other. Particularly this latter aspect of the problem is the crucial one. The topical and theoretical bridge between quantitative and qualitative elements is difficult to build. Low income and a bad state of health often lead to avoidance-wastage behaviour. Examples are: never consulting a physician, ignoring medical advice, or not following dietary regulations, buying unnecessary gadgets, spending foolishly after persuasion. However, this self-infliction is socially dependent: in the course of the life-long socialization processes, class-specific attitudes are developed that may be substantial impediments to planned and 'rational' behaviour from which the individual might have benefited, or might still benefit, given different social encouragement and support.

The social devaluation not only generally reduces the chances of social participation and of access to resources. It also works as a multiplication of factors in terms of *cumulating disadvantages* of the economically

weakest and socially most isolated groups of the aged.⁵⁰ Differences between socioeconomic strata are thus greater among the elderly than among the younger and middle aged cohorts. This is due to greater differences in their *initial* social situations and to biographically created conditions which lead to a progressive reduction of chances of the deprived of coping with their ageing processes.

The state of health is substantially worse in the lower socio-economic classes. The difficulty of activating the deprived, be it in their ecological setting, in medical institutions, in clubs of the aged, or day centres becomes obvious. The deprived tend to retreat to the social fringes. Applying the concepts of *socially dependent self-infliction* and the mechanism of cumulative deprivation⁵¹ to the isolated widowed, we can show that these groups practically never go on a vacation, often are too weak to move and lack the initiative to leave their usually poor living environment. In cases where help is needed most, it is usually most expensive, most time-consuming, and most difficult to furnish it. The greater the need in one dimension, the more this need is coupled to other types of deficiencies. The resources of society are being wasted because of the self-inflicted, society-dependent resistance against individual intentions to help, and because helpful social action is not being properly realized.

Cumulative deprivation it is in both senses: *multifactorial* (bad health, poverty, low education, little access to resources, low mobility, psychic depressiveness, etc.) and *longitudinal*, i.e. the result of drawn-out processes which have added up to it.

Such methodical points ought to be considered if a *sociology* of the life course is envisaged.

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