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# **What Autobiographical Narratives Tell Us About the Life Course. Contributions of Qualitative Sequential Analytical Methods**

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## **Abstract**

The paper discusses the benefits of certain qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis for research into the life course. These methods of data collection (i.e., the extempore narrative interview by Schütze) and sequential analytical approaches of data analysis (i.e., narration analysis by Schütze and documentary analysis by Bohnsack and Nohl) provide unique insight that can address some of the current challenges and open questions of life course research. This is because the sequential analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews makes it possible to distinguish between reported and experienced life history and to reconstruct tacit knowledge and action orientations, which are partly unconscious. In particular, autobiographical extempore narrations offer unique avenues to understanding biographical decision-making and the layers of biographical experiences and planning, to investigating the question of how individuals link different spheres of life, and to exploring different types of agency and thus driving forces of a person's life course. To illustrate the potential of these methods, data from a project on modes of living in the German middle class are presented that illuminate biographical decision-making in the transition to the labor market.

## 1. Introduction

Life course research aims to understand the movement, pathways, and patterns of action of individuals and groups over time within a certain historical time and cultural setting. There have been remarkable developments in life course research during the last few decades, primarily as a result of increasing interdisciplinary cooperation, theoretical advances, and methodological innovations. Yet there remain unresolved issues, challenges, and open questions, namely, issues revolving around the interdependence of life domains, interdependencies across levels, and time-related interdependencies, as depicted in the “life course cube” by Bernardi et al. in the introduction to this special issue. For example, how do people link and balance different spheres of life, such as family obligations and their career (i.e., interdependencies between domains)? How do social networks affect individuals’ biographical decisions (i.e., interdependencies across levels)? How do past experiences influence current perceptions, orientations, and actions, and how do individuals organize biographical transitions? Do they draw on long-term plans, or are they just muddling through (i.e., time-related interdependencies; *ibid.*)? These questions also encompass more general aspects, such as multidimensional behavioral processes and the driving forces behind individual life courses. In this sense, the most challenging questions concern individual agency, including how much and what type of agency is involved in shaping individual life courses (Settersten/Gannon 2005) and how are subjective and objective aspects interrelated (Hitlin/Kwon 2016)?

Qualitative studies, which are primarily concerned with the subjective perspective of individuals on their life history or parts of their life history, tackle some of these issues, most often by analyzing data generated through semi-structured interviews, letters, and diaries (cf. Giele/Elder 1998, Kelle 2001, Verd/Lopez 2011). As I will show, there is more to be gained from biographical data. Specifically, there is considerable potential for narrative approaches to data collection and analysis to serve as a powerful means of addressing some of the current challenges in the investigation of life courses, pathways, and patterns of actions.

In this paper, my focus will be on the use of oral interview data, or more precisely, biographical interview data collected by means of the “narrative interview” (Schütze 1976, 2008) and sequential analytical approaches to analyze these data. It is just recently, that sequential analytical approaches (e.g., Schütze 1976, 2008, Oevermann et al. 1987, Rosenthal 1993, Nohl 2010) have become more prominent in biographical research (cf. Miller 2005, Harrison 2009,

Breckner 2015).<sup>1</sup> However, (← p. 1) neither the narrative interview (which is a promising means of collecting life course data in its own right) nor sequential analytical methods of data analysis have been taken up in life course research so far (e.g. Giele/Elder 1998, Heinz et al. 2009, Shanahan et al. 2016). As I will show by referring to the narrative interview (Schütze), narration analysis (Schütze) and documentary analysis (Bohnsack, Nohl), these methods can serve several purposes in life course research that cannot be addressed equally by means of quantitative or other qualitative methods (like semi-structured interviews). This is because the sequential analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews makes it possible to distinguish between reported and experienced life history and to reconstruct tacit knowledge and the orientations guiding action, which are partly unintentional or even unconscious. The paper will extend the potential of these methods to life course research and demonstrate how they are particularly well-suited to inform some of the questions in life course research raised above. In particular, autobiographical extempore narrations offer unique avenues to understanding biographical decision-making and the layers of biographical experiences and planning, to investigating the question of how individuals link different spheres of life, and to exploring different types of agency.

To illustrate the potential of these methods and how they can be used in effective ways, I will draw on data from a project on modes of living in the German middle class. The data used for illustration focus on biographical decision-making in the transition to the labor market. In the subsequent part, I will discuss how these methods can be applied in ways that yield theoretical and empirical insights and how they might be used in combination with other data and techniques to increase the scope and the generalizability of results.

To begin, however, we must first reflect on what biographical statements, narratives, and accounts actually represent and what the special features of (oral) extempore autobiographical narratives are.

## 2. Extempore autobiographical narrations and the “narrative interview”

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<sup>1</sup> One obvious reason is that major works of this strand of research have been translated into English language only decades after their first publication, as in the case of Fritz Schütze (1976, 2008), who developed the narrative interview, which has become the dominant means of collecting biographical data in German-speaking countries. Occasionally, these approaches have been labeled as the “German school” in biographical research (cf. Bertaux/ Kohli 1984; Apitzsch/Inowlocki 2000). However, it must be noted that these approaches neither form a coherent school nor are they rooted in German traditions alone. Instead, these analytical approaches rest on quite different methodological assumptions. Schütze’s approach derives from symbolic interactionism (sensu Strauss) and linguistic theory, Ulrich Oevermann’s objective hermeneutics from structuralism (Oevermann et al. 1987), Ralf Bohnsack’s documentary method from Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack 2010, 2014), and Gabriele Rosenthal’s adaptation of Schütze and Oevermann from gestalt theory (Rosenthal 1993). What I seek to emphasize here, however, is that, by distinguishing between reported and experienced life stories and reconstructing tacit knowledge and latent action orientations, these methods share some common ground, which makes them especially suitable for research into individual life courses.

What is the relation between life history as it is experienced and as it is reported? Autobiographical data are typically retrospective accounts of earlier experiences and events, which are told (or written) from one's current perspective, within a certain situation, for a certain audience, and to serve specific purposes. As with all retrospective data, they are subject to reinterpretations and are necessarily selective on the factual level. This raises the question of whether it is possible to gain an understanding of a field of action or of "social reality" on the basis of biographical statements at all. In fact, some researchers state that biographical accounts are mostly representations of the interviewee's "structured self-images," something that has little to do with social reality (cf. Kohli 1981, Schütze 2008). Pierre Bourdieu (1986) even spoke provocatively of a "biographical illusion."

We would certainly be mistaken to take biographical accounts at face value, as some studies unfortunately do. The assumption that interviewees are honest is not necessarily helpful either (cf. Kohli 1981). Autobiographical accounts can neither be taken for granted, nor can they be assumed to simply mirror "social reality" (Schütze 2008, Rosenthal 2006). Biographical accounts are influenced by several factors. Among them are the frames and situations in which the reported events were experienced, the attitude of the interviewee at the time when the events were experienced along with the interviewee's *current* general attitude regarding his or her own biography, and the perception not only of the current situation of recalling past experiences but also of the person(s) to whom the life history is being told (ibid.; Wundrak 2015).

At the same time, biographical accounts are neither fully made up, nor do they depend solely on external factors such as the interviewee's current situation. Here we can draw on the work of Fritz Schütze (1976, 1984, 2008),<sup>2</sup> who developed some of the most elaborate methods in biographical research. The basic distinctions made by linguistic theory between different types of texts are crucial here, namely, three elementary communicative schemes of representing life and world, i.e., descriptions, argumentations, and narrations (Labov/Waletzky 1967, Kallmeyer/Schütze 1977). As Schütze argues, extempore (or impromptu) narration, in which individuals tell their history or single events in an unrestricted way (i.e., a spontaneous narrative told off the cuff and without any preparation) best represents past experiences and action orientations with regard to structure and chronology as well as to referential content. As opposed to descriptions and argumentations, which are more strongly bound to social frames (in the case of descriptions) or the interviewee's current situation (in the case of

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<sup>2</sup> Schütze developed this method in the late 1970s, but its methodological foundations as well as descriptions of the narrative interview and narration analysis have only recently been published in English (Schütze 2008). Prior to this, Schütze's work was primarily known in the international arena through the adaptations and reformulations of Rosenthal (1993, 2006), Wengraf (2001), and Witzel (Witzel/Reiter 2012).

argumentations), certain pressures associated with the tacit rules of storytelling (Schütze speaks of *Zugzwänge*, which has been translated as “constraints” [2008]) are at work in oral extempore autobiographical narrations. Once a person has started to tell a story, these pressures—or constraints, to use Schütze’s term—compel the narrator provide sufficient referential context by making three moves: (a) to focus on what is relevant to him or her and to emphasize what the key points of the story are with regard to its overall meaning and moral (*constraint to condense*), (b) to tell his or her story as it actually happened in terms of the time sequence and succession of events (*constraint to go into details*), and (c) to round out the cognitive figures in order to make them understandable to the listener (*constraint to close the textual forms*).

In sum, the extempore autobiographical narrative “aims at clarifying (...) what is important and what is the overall gestalt and meaning – in all those mundane affairs, one is involved in and what is the impact on the narrator and other *dramatis personae* (...) [It] drives her or him into a time-consuming recollection and presentation process of their detailed (although at the same time meaningfully ordered and condensed) re-staging and re-enlivening” (Schütze 2008: 174). The constraints of the extempore autobiographical narration are the reasons why Schütze speaks of the “pivotal epistemic power of autobiographical story telling (and especially autobiographical interviewing)” (2008: 168).

On the basis of the theoretical foundations of storytelling, Schütze developed a method of data collection, the *narrative interview* (Schütze 1976, 1984, 2008, Kallmeyer/Schütze 1977), which has become the dominant method to elicit biographical data in German-speaking countries. The narrative interview consists of three parts: the primary narrative phase (Schütze uses the term “main story”), a narrative questioning phase, and a descriptive and argumentative questioning phase (Schütze 2008). The aim of this data-collection technique is to elicit (“trigger”) a story with a narrative stimulus and then to provoke additional narratives. The initial opening question plays a special role in this approach. It ensures that interviewees structure the narrative themselves and that they choose what to tell and how to tell it. During the primary narration, the interviewer makes only minimal utterances (e.g., nodding, “uh-huh”) in order to encourage the interviewee to continue. In the narrative questioning phase, the researcher asks questions to tease out specific aspects of the reported story in more detail (e.g., “How did this happen exactly?”) and elicit additional narratives. Questions that drive toward subjective perspectives, evaluations, and argumentation (“why” questions) are then—and only then—asked in the last part of the interview.

Insofar as autobiographical extempore narrations are closer to past experiences, they are *more* “real” (i.e., more valid) than descriptions (← p. 2) and argumentations, at least in terms of the chronology, completeness, and authenticity of the story. By contrast, descriptions and argumentations are more dependent on current circumstances and the conditions of the interview situation. In this regard, the narrative interview enriches the referential content of biographical interview data. By comparing passages from narratives with current interpretations documented in descriptive and argumentative parts of the interview, the researcher is able to account for reinterpretations of experiences and events (Schütze 2008: 171f).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the data collected with the narrative interview even allow the researcher to reconstruct tacit and action-orienting knowledge, which is partly unconscious.

This is possible with *reconstructive, sequential analytical methods* such as narration analysis according to Schütze (2008), the documentary method (Bohnsack 2010, 2014, Nohl 2010), or objective hermeneutics (Oevermann et al. 1987, Wernet 2014), whereby the researchers interpret the interview data sequentially (word for word, line by line) and take into account differences between communicative schemes of representing one’s life and perception of the world (i.e., text types), especially whether it is a narration, a description, or an argumentation, as well as the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. For example, the *narration analysis* developed by Schütze (2008) involves five steps. It starts by differentiating text types (according to the communicative schemes mentioned above), followed by a sequential structural description and the analytical abstraction of the individual cases. After the individual case analysis is completed, the different cases are contrasted to reconstruct elementary biographical process structures, such as “biographical action schemes” or “institutional expectation patterns” and the sequence and interface of biographical process structures over the life course. The analytical core of the structural description and the most important step of the analysis is the line-by-line analysis of textual microstructures of narrative units, which consist of specific presentation operations (such as frame-switching, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative detailing) as well as background constructions of a narrative or argumentative nature to better understand difficult experiences, and argumentative commentaries by which the interviewees explain or legitimize their assessments (ibid.). As Schütze states, the extempore storytelling of personal experiences as elicited in an autobiographical narrative interview and analyzed in a structural description exerts the epistemic power of expressing outer

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<sup>3</sup> These advantages might be the reasons why the narrative interview is so widely used in German-speaking countries, even when the collected data are not analyzed using narration analysis. Here it might be of interest to note that the narrative interview was originally developed as a means to conduct expert interviews (Schütze 1976, Riemann 2003). It was part of a project on community power structures in which Schütze and his research group investigated how the merger of three local communities was executed, how the respective events were concatenated, how local politicians were involved in these events, and how the events were experienced by the political actors.

and inner experiences, identity changes of the narrator as story carrier, the self-theoretical activities involved in such processes, as well as rationalization and legitimation activities (ibid.).

In a similar vein, the *documentary method* (Bohnsack 2010, 2014), a socio-genetic approach following Karl Mannheim (1982), aims to understand the reconstruction of the implicit (atheoretical, incorporated) knowledge of social actors and the orienting frames that guide their actions.<sup>4</sup> It also implies a change in analytical stance from asking ‘what’ to asking ‘how,’ from immanent or literal meaning to documentary meaning (Bohnsack 2010): “It is the change from the question *what* social reality is in the perspective of actors, to the question *how* this reality is produced or accomplished in these actors’ everyday practice” (ibid.: 102; italics in original). When analyzing this ‘practice,’ documentary method refers to the practice of action as well as of talk, of presentation and of argumentation and draws, like narration analysis, on the differences between different communicative schemes or text types (Bohnsack 2010, 2014; Nohl 2010).

In the following, I will demonstrate what can be gained from narrative biographical data collected through the narrative interview and the use of reconstructive, sequential analytical methods for understanding individual life courses. I will focus on a specific life course transition, the entry into the labor market, and how individuals deal with this transition, including their orientations, decision-making, and adaptations over the course of this transition.

### **3. An empirical example: Biographical decision-making during the transition into the labor market**

#### *3.1 Data and Methods*

In what follows, I will present a case analysis from the project “Investing in Status as a Mode of Living – Practices, Conditions, Disturbances.”<sup>5</sup> The study investigates the conduct of life in the German middle classes and how current economic and societal changes are reflected in practices, planning, and decision-making (and possibly unsettle the traditional middle-class mode of investing in one’s status). By focusing on different spheres of life (work and the labor market, intimate relations, parenthood, long-term asset-building, personal relationships, and

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<sup>4</sup> As a synonym for frames of orientation Bohnsack also employs the term *habitus*, which explicitly refers to Bourdieu’s concept and its ‘generative grammar’ (Bohnsack 2014: 221).

<sup>5</sup> The research project “Investing in Status as a Mode of Living – Practices, Conditions, Disturbances” is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG; project code HO 2120/7-1, funding period 2016–2019). The research team consists of Karin Gottschall (PI), Betina Hollstein (PI), Stefan Holubek, Nils Kumkar, Uwe Schimank (PI), and Rixta Wundrak. The case analysis presented here has also been discussed with Monika Wohlrab-Sahr.



societal participation), we are studying the life of persons with regard to both synchronic coordination of their activities and diachronic biographical perspective and planning. The final sample will consist of 42 men and women from different fractions of the middle class and, as contrasting cases, of lower social strata, which have been and will be drawn from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) according to socioeconomic status characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

For data collection, we slightly modified Schütze's narrative interview to be more in line with the focus of the study. The narrative stimulus reads as follows:

*"In this project, we are investigating the mode of living of people in Germany today. Therefore, we would like to know more about your personal situation, what you are doing, your perspectives, and your experiences. Everything that is important and meaningful to you is of interest to us. Our experience has been that it is also helpful to know something about your personal life history. Therefore, I would like to ask you to begin by telling us a bit about your life history. I will just listen and will not interrupt you. I will just be taking some notes and will ask follow-up questions later. Take as much time as you like."*

The narrative questioning phase is subdivided into the "immanent" and the "exmanent" questioning phases: *Immanent* questions ask for additional aspects and situations related to the primary narrative (i.e., to aspects that have already been addressed by the interviewee). *Exmanent* questions ask for aspects that have not been introduced by the interviewee. (← p. 3)

In the immanent narrative questioning phase, which looks to evoke additional narratives on actual situations (interactions, decisions), the interviewer follows the interviewee's thematic sequencing, ordering structure, and relevancies as told by the interviewee and noted by the interviewer during the primary narrative. We consider the immanent narrative questioning phase to be of special importance since the primary narrative—although autonomously shaped by the interviewee—usually does not fully bring out his or her system of relevance. The primary narrative may still be oriented towards social desirability, social norms, expectations, and consistency, such as a certain developmental or success story. The narrative questions seek to reveal additional aspects, themes, and details that further illuminate the interviewee's system of relevance. It is these data, together with the primary narrative, that have proven especially helpful in reconstructing the interviewee's relevancies and how the different domains are

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<sup>6</sup> For our sampling, we combine a systematic search for meaningful cases based on theoretical considerations with theoretical sampling in accordance with grounded theory (Glaser/Strauss 1967). In the first phase of the project, the case selection was based on variations of certain socio-structural data that we expected to be relevant when it came to possible variants of the modes of living (income, education, sex, and age). This procedure also ensures that different fractions of the middle class and lower social classes are represented. In later phases of the project, after the first portion of the cases have been analyzed, we will draw additional cases depending on the preliminary results (theoretical sampling).

meaningfully linked (e.g., interrupting one's occupational career in favor of taking care of a parent).

The subsequent exmanent questioning phase looks specifically for themes that have not been mentioned up to that point in the interview and that belong to the five spheres of interest. This is to ensure that we will acquire data on all five areas of interest and improves comparability across cases. However, the interviewee's system of relevance is also taken into account since the questions start with themes that have clearly been neglected in the person's prior narrations.

The third phase seeks to draw out subjective perspectives, evaluations, and argumentations. In this study, this takes the form of general questions about the interviewee's life course (e.g., especially good or difficult times) and serves to obtain some general idea of what life looks like from the interviewee's perspective. Finally, we have added a fourth phase of questioning that includes standardized questions on socio-demographic data in order to ensure that we acquire comparable data on the socio-demographic background of the participants and that we are able to locate the cases within the societal class structure.<sup>7</sup>

To give a clearer idea of the nature of the data revealed with this method, I document the primary narrative and the first immanent questions of the interview with Mr. F. in Appendix A. Note the coda at the end of the primary narrative that explicitly indicates its end. The example also illustrates that often there is not a pure narration but rather a specific mixture of narrative, descriptive, evaluative, and argumentative accounts. Appendix C.1 depicts the formal interpretation and differentiation of text types, which is an essential step in Schütze's narration analysis as well as the documentary method. The example illustrates that one of the communicative schemes frequently dominates. Also, the narration is sometimes more detailed, sometimes rather rudimentary. Those differences are even more pronounced if one compares the primary narrative documented in Appendix A with quotes from the immanent narrative questioning part cited in section 3.2 (lines 711–722), which comprises a dense narration and documents the emotional involvement of the interviewee.

For data analysis, we are using a variant of the documentary method developed explicitly for the analysis of narrative interviews (Nohl 2010). It consists of four steps: the formulating interpretation, the reflecting interpretation, the comparative analysis of cases, and the construction of types (ibid.). The *formulating interpretation* summarizes the topics mentioned in the interview (cf. Appendix B for an example) and allows one to identify topics most relevant

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<sup>7</sup> It should be emphasized that it is important to add those standardized elements at the very end of the interview in order to minimize the influence of these standardized questions on the interviewee and the interviewer–interviewee interaction.

to research, either because they directly refer to the question under study or because the interviewee talks about them in great detail, “passionately and/or metaphorically” (Nohl 2010: 204), and which might correct the topics chosen by the researcher (ibid.). The *reflecting interpretation* aims to reconstruct *how* topics are elaborated with reference to both the formal and the semantic level of utterances. Drawing on Schütze’s work, the *formal* interpretation (cf. Appendix C.1 for an illustration) distinguishes between different text types, with argumentations and evaluations primarily informing us about explicit knowledge (Mannheim’s ‘communicative knowledge’) and narrations, and some descriptions informing the researcher about the experiences of the actors (pre-reflexive or ‘conjunctive knowledge,’ Mannheim 1982: 203). The *semantic* interpretation aims to reconstruct certain regularities of experience and the framework of orientation. Appendix C.2 illustrates the semantic interpretation of the first lines of the interview; Appendix C.3 summarizes the reflecting interpretation of the primary narrative. Both interpretations suggest that locality might play an important role in the life of the interviewee. However, these interpretations are considered only preliminary until the reconstruction of the whole interview is complete, since the reconstruction of the orientation framework of experiences “involves identifying continuities across a series of action sequences or narrative sequences about such actions” (Nohl 2010: 208)<sup>8</sup>.

In the following, I present a summary of the analysis of Mr. F.’s transition into the labor market.

### *3.2 Integration and recognition in the local context and active adaptation, step by step*

Mr. F. was born in 1963 in a small village close to a university town. He stated that he originally wanted to study veterinary medicine, but his grades were not good enough, so he started studying “something along similar lines” [I08, 22<sup>9</sup>], hoping that he would secure a university placement for veterinary medicine at a later date. This did not happen, and Mr. F. completed his studies with a degree that qualified him to teach biology and political studies in the advanced track of German secondary school (*Gymnasium*); as he comments, “[Y]ou just finish what you began” [I08, 594]. It was during his practical year, which comes at the very end of teacher training in Germany, that he realized that he was skilled teaching a class. As he said, “It was for the very first time that I thought, ‘Yes, you are in just the right place.’ Everything else with

<sup>8</sup> With regard to the semantic interpretation of a single line or short segment of text there are usually several different plausible interpretations (cf. Appendix C.2). When moving forward in the analysis and looking for the implicit regularities of experience and the orientation framework that connects a sequence of segments, only some of these interpretations can be validated and thus remain (cf. the summary of the reflecting interpretation of the primary narrative in Appendix C.3). However, it is important to note that this methodological focus on regularities does not imply that moments of rupture and changes in orientations will be ignored. Regularity refers first of all to „continuities across a series of action sequences or narrative sequences about such actions” (Nohl 2010: 208). Shorter segments will be interpreted within the context of a certain time and place within the life course. By comparing different phases and events it is possible to identify changes in orientations over the life course, similar to what Schütze calls a sequence of biographical process structures (Schütze 2008).

<sup>9</sup> The first number refers to the number of the interview, the second to the line in the original transcript.

regard to my occupational choice was some sort of path dependent, and then I noticed ‘it’s going quite well with the pupils; for me it’s just fun to teach’” [I08, 662–664].

However, when Mr. F. earned his degree in the early 1980s, Germany had a high rate of unemployment among teachers. In this environment, Mr. F. was unable to find employment. At some point, a friend from his soccer club offered him a position at a local bank. As he had begun accepting the idea (“already resigned myself to accepting it” [I08, 704]), someone told him to turn to an acquaintance, a director at a comprehensive school not far from his home (“just go there and ask” [I08, 705]). Mr. F. was invited for an interview: “And then the head of (← p. 4) the committee read ‘soccer’ at the very bottom of my CV. He had in mind a class of tenth-graders in the lowest track of secondary school (*Hauptschule*)—13, 14 boys, mostly asylum seekers, no interest in school, their teacher had just left the school—and he asked, ‘Could you imagine teaching in the lowest track?’ What can you say? Of course, you say, ‘Yes.’ Then he said, ‘You play soccer. I think that could work. I want you to teach the sports class’ ... I never had any teacher training in sports. Then, together with a colleague, I went to the class, where the pupils had just received their midterm report cards. When we arrived, they threw their report cards and books out of the window. I thought, ‘Okay, you’re starting here on Monday? I wonder how this will turn out.’” [I08, 711–722].

As Mr. F. put it, the lower track was initially a form of “culture shock” for him [I08, 42]. But it did work out. He struck the right ‘tone’ (“I scythed some of them down two or three times [in soccer matches during gym class]” [I08, 724]) and earned the pupils’ respect (“they listened to no one else but me” [I08, 723]). Finally, after five years, he was awarded a permanent contract. At that time, he was switching between the advanced and lower tracks: “And then I just had to make a decision. It was one of the very few times that I said, ‘This is just too exhausting. It just isn’t working anymore’” [I08, 740]. Mr. F. decided to stay in the lower track. As he said, he “was fond of those boys” [I08, 751] because of their “honesty” [I08, 754] and their “uprightness” [I08, 751]. The pupils from the advanced track “just didn’t need me as much” [I08, 750]. He proudly reported that a son of one of his former pupils had just entered the advanced track. Furthermore, by teaching in the lower track, he had more “freedom to act” [I08, 755] and “more room for creativity” [I08, 758].

Reconstructive analysis of the detailed accounts by the interviewee reveals systems of relevance, action-orienting knowledge, as well as patterns in biographical decision-making and the organization of biographical transitions in Mr. F.’s life. On the whole, recognition and esteem within his local context (e.g., his pupils, colleagues, soccer club) seem to be the strongest

driving forces in his life. With regard to his occupational orientation, recognition from pupils and colleagues matters to him more than mere formal occupational status.<sup>10</sup> These aspects form the orientation framework, which is only implicit in Mr. F.'s utterances. In addition, his soccer club, where Mr. F. had played since the age of six and where he formed long-lasting friendships, plays a crucial role not only in terms of integration and support but also with respect to most of his biographical transitions, including his occupational career. The team and its relationships were the reason why he stayed in his hometown and studied nearby. When he received an attractive offer from a renowned soccer team, he declined it because he did not want to leave his team. After he graduated, it was his friends from the club who offered him a position at the bank and suggested the school where he is still employed today. His friends helped him find his first apartment and build his own house. Owing to his sports activities, he even got to know his wife, a nurse whom he met following a sports accident (he called her “my most beautiful injury” [I08, 892]).

With regard to biographical anticipation and planning, Mr. F. turns out to be neither very strategic (he began his teacher training at a time of high teacher unemployment with a combination of disciplines (biology and political studies) with little strategic value nor very visionary when it comes to long-term plans. However, it seems as if he always had at least a vague sense of direction, and, once on a particular path, he was determined to press onward. He found himself in situations that forced him to reroute several times. But, with the help of some curiosity and pragmatism, Mr. F. was able to seize opportunities and actively adapt, later acknowledging the positive aspects of the results of these unexpected turns of events—a pattern that we dubbed “re-appreciation (*sich umfreuen*)” in the analysis. As Mr. F. commented at the end of the interview, he usually plans one year ahead. For him, the five years of six-month contracts were the most difficult period because making concrete plans was impossible.

Mr. F. moved forward step by step. Today, at 53, he heads the lower track at the comprehensive school and lives in his own house together with his wife and two daughters. Although some of his earlier plans have gone unrealized, he is content with his life and feels quite privileged. Asked to subjectively assign his class status, he describes himself as a member of the “upper class” [I08, 1513], comparing himself with some of his poor migrant pupils. Mr. F. attributes his good situation mostly to “accident” [I08, 956] and “luck” [I08, 672]. We might also add that members of his social network acted as gatekeepers and provided support when needed.

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<sup>10</sup> This is also captured in the fact that Mr. F. decided to swap to the lowest track, not to the high-status advanced track (*Gymnasium*), and that he just declined the opportunity to become the director of the school. As he puts it, he could not envision himself having the required individual talks with his colleagues in the context of annual performance reviews.

#### 4. Discussion

This brief example from an ongoing project should illustrate what kinds of data are collected through extempore autobiographical narrative interviews and demonstrate possible results of applying reconstructive analysis to a specific life course transition. However, the full potential of these methods unfolds when different cases are compared and typologies are developed that cover the full range of phenomena in a specific field of action. In the following, I will discuss the bearing of narratives and reconstructive approaches on life course research as well as prospects for future research.

Compared with other forms of interviews, the narrative interview is the most open interviewing technique. It gives the interviewees the highest degree of freedom to express *individual meaning, goals, systems of relevance, and action orientations in the context of their biography*. This is due not only to the primary, uninterrupted narrative and the constraints of narrations but also to its combination with immanent follow-up questions, which elicit further details and counteract the tendency to present a coherent story. For life course research, this method of data collection opens up an avenue toward rich data on the *organization and texture of biographical transitions and decisions* that has not been adopted so far. Instead, most qualitative studies in the field of life course research employ more structured interviews, such as focused or problem-centered interviews. At first glance, the narrative interview brings forth a great deal of information that does not seem germane to the topic at hand. But, as I want to stress, very often these are exactly the kinds of data that help us to understand actors' relevancies, how past events are concatenated, and how different life domains are interrelated. Additionally, by applying a reconstructive, sequential analytical method, such as narration analysis or the documentary method, it is possible to reconstruct implicit knowledge and pre-reflexive action-guiding orientations.

##### *Interdependence of life domains – different layers and mechanisms*

The case of Mr. F. illustrates two different mechanisms of how interdependencies of life domains help us to understand the course of a life. First, with regard to his occupational career, major decisions were driven by Mr. F.'s strong *orientation towards other life domains* (spill-over), especially his soccer club, his long-term friends from the club, and his local environment. This explained why he did not look for employment further away from his hometown and why he rejected an attractive offer from another soccer club – with both decisions having a strong impact on further career opportunities (path dependency). Second, the primary narrative and the immanent questioning phase of the interview revealed important details about the

*concatenation of events*, which might not have been discovered otherwise. The data clearly show how members of Mr. F.'s social network (friends and acquaintances from the soccer club) were involved in significant steps of (← p. 5) his occupational career (door opening) as well as his private life (e.g., purchasing property, construction of his house), thereby providing insight into his opportunity structure and uncovering a mechanism similar to what Lin and Ao call the “invisible hand of social capital” (Lin/Ao 2008).

#### *Interdependence across levels – the surplus of mixed methods*

The aforementioned example also illustrates how important the *personal network* can be in understanding individuals' movements through time and place, which refers to interdependencies across levels (Bernardi et al., in this issue). Of course, there is also influence in the other direction, namely, how individuals select their network partners and actively shape their social network. Here, narrative interviews can also shed light on the mechanisms of changes in relationships and social networks (e.g., Hollstein 2002). Narrative approaches can be seen as one route (among others) to bridge life course and network research and to better understand how the social environment affects individual life courses and vice versa. However, when collecting data on such complex issues as personal networks and the structure thereof, it is necessary to systematically ask for these aspects in the exmanent questioning phase. On the one hand, this facilitates the comparability of cases. On the other hand, a smart combination of narrative approaches with more standardized approaches to data collection and analysis can help to increase the scope and the generalizability of results (Hollstein 2014).

With regard to multilevel analysis, narrative approaches also inform us about how individuals deal with *institutional settings*, or put another way, about linkages between individual orientations, life courses, and meso or macro structures. A good case in point is the study by Neusüss and Maedje (2000) on different ways of how single mothers deal with the opportunities and constraints of the welfare state. For such questions, a multi-method design has proven worthwhile. This involves combining narrative accounts of the individuals along with documents on legal regulations and expert interviews on institutional practices in order to gain a more complete understanding of the institutional opportunity structure of individual life courses and thus the external reality to which individuals relate themselves.

#### *Time-related interdependence – shadows of the past and shadows of the future*

Even if one is primarily interested in a certain life course transition, such as family formation or the transition to retirement, it might be worthwhile to begin the narrative interview with a

prompt to elicit the subject's entire life story, as was done in the study described in this paper. This is because the narrative interview provides the most detailed account of *layers of biographical experience*. The palimpsests of past experiences do, to some extent, shape one's current perceptions, decisions, and anticipation of the future. For example, another respondent in our current study, Mr. Sch., a craftsman, experienced two failed attempts to emigrate and several other failed attempts to gain a foothold in his occupation. Over time, he became more and more cautious about making a "new start." His narrations together with his cognitive representations (as articulated in argumentations and evaluative comments) give a clear account of the "*shadow of the past*," of how experiences accumulate over the life course, and how they might affect later orientations and actions, thus providing reasonable indications of possible causalities and empirically grounded hypotheses and theories, e.g., regarding the organization of turning points (cf. Hackstaff et al. 2012). That also holds true for what Bernardi et al. (this issue) call the "*shadow of the future*," that is, the question of how individual's anticipation of the future, including expectations, specific time horizons, and planning perspectives, shape current actions and decision-making. As Mr. F. described it, for example, he felt somewhat restricted during the period in his life that he was given only short-time employment contracts, but once he got a tenured position he started long-term projects, such as the construction of his house. It is this kind of synergy between past and the future, between (past) experiences and future expectations that makes narrative methods especially well-suited to providing useful and enlightening information and to (further) stimulate advancement of life course theory (cf. also Bidart, this issue).<sup>11</sup>

### *Agency over the life course*

The connection between the past and the future is also relevant when it comes to the questions of what actually drives the life course, how structure and agency work together (Diewald/Mayer 2008), and how subjective and objective aspects of agency are linked (Hitlin/Kwon 2016). In this way, reconstructive, sequential analytical methods, such as Schütze's narration analysis (2008), the documentary method (Bohnsack 2010, 2014, Nohl 2010), or objective hermeneutics (Oevermann et al. 1987, Rosenthal 1993, Wernet 2014) enable researchers to distinguish between *explicit knowledge* (i.e., subjective representations) and *tacit knowledge* or *action orientations*, which are *partly unconscious*. In doing so, these methods provide a means to

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<sup>11</sup> Although extempore narrative autobiographical data and sequential analytical approaches make it possible to reconstruct past experiences and also changes in biographical process structures, they are not a panacea. How past decisions have been shaped by anticipations and expectations—what one might call "*the shadow of the future regarding past actions*"—can only be approximated. These data are more strongly bound to the current situation and to the interviewer–interviewee interaction. Here longitudinal studies promise rich data on changes in subjective perceptions and anticipation and how they affect biographical decisions over the life course or parts thereof.



reconstruct different types of agency, how people relate to external circumstances through their actions, and the degree of autonomy they experience. Furthermore, it is possible to account for the *genesis* of such agency, or rather, “how an individual develops certain ways of reacting to difficult situations and experiences in the past” (Breckner/Rupp 2002: 299, cf. also Wohlrab-Sahr 2006). In his own seminal studies, Fritz Schütze reconstructed four types of *elementary “biographical process structures”* (2008) and how they change over the life course. “Biographic action schemes” are characterized by a high degree of autonomy, whereas “institutional expectation patterns” characterize institutionally shaped and normatively defined courses, such as career trajectories within an organization. In “trajectories of suffering,” people only react to overwhelming external events. “Transformations,” by contrast, refer to individuals actively dealing with biographical events that did not turn out as originally planned. Mr. F.’s entry into the labor force and the way he actively adapted to unexpected situations (“re-appreciation”) is a good example. Such elementary process structures, especially institutional expectation patterns and trajectories of suffering, are of particular interest for life course research since they represent quite weak types of agency (if any at all) that have not received much attention in prior studies (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002, Settersten/Gannon 2005). Future research should investigate which (internal and/or external) events trigger different types of agency, how they change over the life course, and also how prevalent they are with respect to social class, culture, societal organization, and in a historical perspective (cf. Kohli 2007).

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that life course research can benefit from certain qualitative methods that have become prominent in biographical research over the last decade. The extempore narrative interview and reconstructive, sequential analytical approaches of data analysis, i.e., narration analysis by Schütze and documentary method, could provide important insights regarding open questions of life course research, namely, issues revolving around the interdependence of life domains, interdependencies across levels, time-related (← p. 6) interdependencies as well as the multidimensional behavioral processes of individual agency and driving forces of a person’s life course.

These are only some aspects of how biographical and life course research could be linked and by doing so be further developed. In this regard, exchange between biographical and life course research could yield promising results. Yet institutional and cognitive hurdles to a productive

exchange seem to be higher than ever. With regard to institutional aspects in particular, fragmentation into different communities and increasing specialization of both biographical and life course research make exchange more difficult. Furthermore, “narrative” and “constructivist” turns in the social sciences seemed to have reinforced cognitive hurdles to cooperation by intensifying rather unproductive and somewhat misleading stereotyping (such as “post-modern” or “constructivist” on the one hand and “naturalistic” on the other), thereby reintroducing fronts between hermeneutic and positivistic traditions. Instead, it could be worthwhile to focus more on communalities, on common topics, and common research questions—such as the dynamics and driving forces of life courses—and to develop research designs that engage quantitative life course research and qualitative biographical research in an intelligent dialogue that benefits both sides, as is done in this special issue with regard to different disciplinary perspectives.

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## Appendix A –Primary narrative following the initial opening question and first follow-up questions of the immanent narrative questioning phase (Transcript I08):

Key:

(...) = duration of a pause, “.” per second.

// (utterances) // = short utterance by interactive partner

[...] = explanations by the author regarding the German original

[Lines x–xx] = Line numbers refer to the original transcript

[Lines 14–17] Mr. F.: Okay (.) yes, so, a rough sketch, so, born in 1963 (..) not far from here, across from A-town (.) or in B-town but here since the year I was born (.) later on I went to secondary school at the *Gymnasium* in C-town [upper track of German secondary school] (..) after that I went into the *Bundeswehr* [German armed forces] for compulsory military service

[Lines 17–20] (..) started working at the age of 15 in between, well, during the holidays (..) which I continued later on during my university studies, on contracts subject to social security contributions, so on the side (..)

[Lines 20–29] university studies means that I actually wanted to study veterinary medicine. Passed the final exam with a 2.4, at that time 0.9 was *numerus clausus* for veterinary medicine [*numerus clausus* is the required grade for a certain study; grades range between .7 (excellent) and 6.0; 2.4 equals “good”] (..) then I thought, well, you [should] start studying biology, it’s along similar lines, and see whether you have a chance to get into it (..) That wasn’t the case, a diploma was no longer possible, so I started pursuing a teaching degree for secondary school (.) chose a second field of study and then (.) stuck with it. // Mhm //

[Lines 29–34] today I am pretty happy about it or very happy (..) have then, so, at (..) moved away from (.) home during my preliminary studies, across the way in A-town, because I wasn’t able to afford it despite working in the interim (.) converted an empty attic [to living quarters] on my own during my degree studies, then moved into it (.), was able to live there for three years rent-free. Worked, as I said, during my university studies (.) as well as in the exam phases always in the reception area of the clinics //mhm// on contracts subject to social security contributions (..)

[Lines 34–43] and then (.) passed my first state examination here in C-town. Politics and economy and biology as subjects (..) and then went to D-town for a traineeship for two years (..) (.) that is a *Gymnasium* [advanced track of German secondary school], so I studied L3 [teaching degree for the advanced track of German secondary school] (.) When I finished (..), am no good at remembering years (..), took me a while (...), ’93 (..), after the traineeship, at any rate, the teacher unemployment rate had reached its peak, I had already resigned myself to doing something else (.) and then by coincidence (...) and luck had the opportunity in E-town to get a short-term contract, though in the tenth grade at a *Hauptschule* [lower track of German secondary school] (.), that was a little bit of a culture shock (..), worked there for more than five years on contract (.) continuously, but always with fixed-term contracts //mhm// (..)

[Lines 44–55] then a position was posted for me, then I was employed on a permanent basis (..), after a period teaching at the *Gymnasium* level, where I was also involved in administering the final exams, I chose the *Hauptschule* [lower track] (.) and have now been heading the

*Hauptschule* [lower track] department for 15 years //mhm// (...) Yes. Family (..) children 16 and 11 (..) hm met my wife nearly 20 years ago (..) have always been a soccer player, that was my most beautiful injury //(laughing)// (..) she is a nurse/physiotherapist //mhm// (laughing) met her (..) (..) yes. The two girls (..) We built a house 15 years ago HERE. (...) so I didn't make it far from home. (..) yes (4) The children are both in an *Integrierte Gesamtschule* [comprehensive school] (..) the small one (..) now in sixth grade and tenth (..) uh the big one in tenth grade and then moving (..) next year to a trade school here in C-town. //mhm// (8) Yep (..) that's it so far. [Lines 55–71] I: (4) Okay then, thanks very much //mhm// for that to start with. Uhm, that's exactly the point I would simply start the enquiry fresh. //mhm// Uh, you said you grew up nearby. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Mr. F.: Yes, so, it was across from A-town (..) mhm still a separate location in those days. Then when I was young it became a district of C-town //mhm// yes, I think (..) still very much a village (..) my parents, my father [was] employed from the beginning, my mother since primary school. My father a construction engineer (..) for the road construction department, my mother a nurse (..) hm (..) actually strongly influenced by soccer (laughing). For my entire youth, there weren't many other options, well, all my buddies played soccer and, yes, but we had, we had a lot of open space, so we were outside most of the time. A lot of forest around here//mhm// either on the soccer field or in the woods //yes//, well, I grew up so (..) sheltered, I would say. //mhm// I: (5) You mentioned your parents uh, your father who is a construction engineer //mhm// could you tell me a bit more about him? ...

## **Appendix B: Formulating interpretation of lines 14–29:**

Born 1963, Gymnasium, armed forces, part-time work, parallel to school, owing to *numerus clausus* he didn't study veterinary medicine but biology instead, “stuck” with teacher training, in the end “happy” about it.

## **Appendix C: Reflecting interpretation**

*C1. Reflecting interpretation – formal interpretation and differentiation of text types of the primary narrative*

Lines 14–17: rudimentary narration with attached, explanatory argumentation. (← p. 7)

Lines 17–20: rudimentary narration with attached, explanatory argumentation.

Lines 20–29: differentiated narration with argumentation as permanent background construction and summarizing argumentation in the descriptive mode.

Lines 29–34: differentiated narration with inserted argumentation.

Lines 34–43: differentiated narration with inserted argumentation and summarizing description.

Lines 44–55: rudimentary narration with argumentation as background construction and start of a thematic new, detailed narration with summarizing description.

*C2. Reflecting interpretation – semantic interpretation of lines 14–17*

After the initial opening question (i.e. the narrative stimulus documented in the data and methods section) one could respond in different ways. One could focus on the present and the contemporary perspective or one could talk solely about the past. One could give a brief summary of the past in order to move quickly towards the present or one could briefly refer to current event(s) and then focus on the past. With the term “okay,” Mr. F. responds on a relational level and indicates that he understood the request and is willing to respond to it. After the narrative stimulus, Mr. F. does not start with the present (which would also be a possible response) but instead reports relevant data and status passages such as date and place of birth, dates of schooling and service in the armed forces. He does not give detailed information. Instead his descriptions read like a list of items from a résumé. He only deviates from this pattern when he elaborates on his place of birth. This might indicate that locality is meaningful to Mr. F. By using the term “since,” he stresses the continuity of locality.

In addition, Mr. F. talks about a “rough sketch.” This could indicate different ways of dealing with the request. Alternative 1: Offering a brief sketch of the past in order to move quickly to the present could indicate a focus on the present and possibly on stability. Alternative 2: It could be an indication that there is much more to tell about the past. Alternative 3: It could indicate uncertainty in how to respond and demonstrate that he is responsive to external requirements (opportunistic account). Alternative 4: It could be a mode of presenting oneself as someone who decides how to respond (signaling dominance).

“Not far from here” might indicate that local roots are important to Mr. F. It could also indicate that continuity is important. However, it could also be just an attempt to relate his story to the current (interview) situation and by stressing commonalities (“we are both here”) as a positive signal to the interviewer.

### *C.3. Summary of the reflecting interpretation of the primary narrative (lines 14–53)*

The reflecting interpretation of the primary narrative revealed the following action-guiding orientations: (a) A strong orientation towards local roots and continuity over the life course. (b) A traditional work ethic towards fulfilling one’s obligations and being down-to-earth—an orientation that we coined as a ‘secularized trust in God,’ meaning that things will work out if one tries hard. (c) Striving seems to take priority (“go for it”) so that the actual content of the goal seems to be of secondary importance, and (d) there is a high emotional attachment to “soccer” and “family” (i.e., the social context). (← p. 8)