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## Ups and downs of teaching the biographical approach<sup>1</sup>

### Höhen und Tiefen in der Lehre der Biographieforschung

**Abstract:**

Being a scholar and researcher teaching and using the biographical approach I have gained not only professional experience but also lots of doubts which I will present in this paper. After my introductory remarks I will begin by introducing the biographical approach as a specific perspective of analyzing social reality. Then I will discuss a stereotypical image of biographical research and try to contrast it with the perspective of a scholar who uses the biographical approach. This reflection is accompanied by references to my teaching attempts and experiences. In the last section I will point out some difficulties and problems related to the teaching process. I pose questions to reflect on the issue, though I dare not to give final answers.

**Keywords:** biographical approach, sociological imagination, university education, interpretation

**Zusammenfassung:**

Als Wissenschaftlerin und Forscherin, die den biographischen Ansatz lehrt und anwendet, habe ich nicht nur viele professionelle Erfahrungen gewonnen, es haben sich auch viele Zweifel eingestellt, die ich in diesem Aufsatz präsentiere. Im Anschluss an meine einleitenden Bemerkungen werde ich den biographischen Ansatz als eine spezifische Perspektive zur Analyse der gesellschaftlichen Wirklichkeit vorstellen, bevor ich ein stereotypenhaftes Bild dieser Forschungsrichtung diskutiere und es mit der Perspektive einer Wissenschaftlerin konfrontiere, die diesen Ansatz anwendet. In dieser Reflexion beziehe ich mich auch auf meine Versuche und Erfahrungen in der Lehre. Im letzten Abschnitt geht es um einige Schwierigkeiten und Probleme im Ausbildungsprozess. Ich werde Fragen stellen, aber mir noch keine endgültigen Antworten zutrauen.

**Schlagworte:** Biographischer Ansatz, soziologische Phantasie, universitäre Ausbildung, Interpretation

## 1. Introduction

Considering the focus of my paper that the discussed topic refers to the biographical approach I would like to start with some personal comments on my biographical experiences as both a learner and then a teacher. I got acquainted with the biographical approach as a student a bit more than twenty years ago. I

remember first lectures and workshops conducted by Fritz Schütze when he was invited to the University of Łódź and my fascination with the method. From the very beginning of my work I have tried to apply the biographical method in my research, yet still not in teaching since I felt somewhat intimidated by the representatives of the awe-inspiring Polish cultural and biographical sociology – wise scholars like Florian Znaniecki, Józef Chalasiński, Jan Szczepański or Antonina Kłoskowska – and since I still acquired knowledge and experience from Polish and German colleagues whom I have regarded as more mature. Gradually from the position of a student and inexperienced scholar I (had to) move towards the position of a teacher – a process that still remains confusing once in a while. First of all, being more mature also means getting older what is not easy to deal with in the life course, but above all it is associated with the feeling of increasing responsibility for work to be done and tasks to be taken. Secondly, getting more experience means as well having more doubts – according to Socrates' saying *I know that I know nothing* – about my knowledge, educational engagement, certain aspects of the used approach (Kazmierska 2004). Some of the doubts have recently increased due to changes in the educational system what makes the process of teaching the biographical approach not easy, if not problematic. Thus, for those twenty years I have moved from the position of a fascinated neophyte to a critical, though faithful believer in biographical research.

By introducing these few personal thoughts I want to stress that biographical research also includes a self-reflective attitude towards one's own autobiographical experiences. In the field of the interpretative approach it is an obvious, if not a banal statement. Yet its triviality does not suspend its importance. Thus, in this paper I will try to discuss those features of the biographical approach which seem to be obviously constitutive for this kind of sociological reasoning. I apologize to the reader, though I think that sometimes it is worth relating to problems and aspects that are perceived as taken for granted, ergo obvious – we can call them “thinking as usual” in the field of biographical research. In my opinion such reflection is needed especially when discussing how to present to students the most important and constitutive features of the biographical approach. Besides, the social nature of biography creates the illusion that biographical research is altogether easy to deal with (since everyone is an “incumbent” of his/her biography), because each of us, thanks to the social nature of biography, is entitled to know something about it. I will allude to this conviction very often in the paper.

I will begin by introducing the biographical approach as a specific perspective of analyzing social reality. Then I will discuss a stereotypical image of biographical research and try to contrast it with the perspective of a scholar who uses the biographical approach. This reflection is accompanied by references to my teaching attempts and experiences. In the last section I point out difficulties and problems related to the teaching process. I pose questions to reflect on the issue, though I dare not to give final answers.

## 2. The biographical approach as a source of sociological imagination and sensitivity

“Complex personal social experience and the ability to conduct its interpretative analysis as well as the construction that is built upon it constitute the basic precondition for the sociological aptitude. Without this aptitude, a sociologist remains no one but a skilled technician who gathers the external facts of the collective life. Therefore sociology is not merely a science and partially a philosophy, but also an art of a kind. This is why so much sociology can often be learnt from outstanding novelists, and just as much can be found repellent due to the outcomes of patient yet talentless erudition. And verily there is no other written source that would broaden and enrich our personal social experience equally to the autobiography.” (Chęłasiński 1979, pp. 39–40)

The quotation comes<sup>2</sup> from the book “Drogi awansu społecznego robotnika. Studium oparte na autobiografiach robotników” (Paths of a worker social upgrading. A study based on workers’ autobiographies”) whose author, Józef Chęłasiński (1904–1979), is a well known Polish sociologist considered as the most talented and consistent follower of Florian Znaniecki. The analysis of social reality requires specific abilities that generally can be described as sociological imagination and sensitivity. Although it is difficult to clearly define these two terms, I use them mainly to underline creativity in thinking and curiosity to analyze the social reality according to Peter Berger’s (1963, p. 23) statement:

“It can be said that the first wisdom of sociology is this: things are not what they seem. This too is a deceptively simple statement. It ceases to be simple after a while. Social reality turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole.”

The term “sociological imagination” was well grounded in sociology by Charles W. Mills according to whom it “enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise” (2004, p. 6) what constitutes his original theoretical input in sociology (Szacki 2002, p. 834) and it is very important in the analyzed context. Yet when relating to students’ education I am more concentrated on the need to evoke basic skills than discuss the matter as a theoretical concept.

Coming back to Józef Chęłasiński, the Polish sociologist, the intention of the author was to expose advantages which come from the analysis of life experiences and abilities that such analysis both requires and trains. I hope that researchers who use the biographical approach would agree with the statement that being involved in a biographical study specifically affects personal experiences. The direct encounter with a narrator during an interview very often cannot be just defined as a “goal oriented” task. The analysis of narratives can be a source of reflection not only in the researched context but also in frames of those problems which due to the narrators’ stories can be discovered or start to be meaningful for a researcher – not only in the contexts of her or his academic activity but also in a broad sense of biographical experiences. Following Chęłasiński’s thought, biographical materials remain a very rich source of knowledge about social reality where social problems, processes and phenomena can be contextualized. They stimulate sociological imagination and sensitivity, but first

of all they require it. I use Chałasiński's statements here as the main frame of my reflection, even though they might appear as matter of course, especially in the perspective of qualitative studies.

### 3. The stereotypical image of biographical research

We can enumerate a few assumptions constituting the stereotypical image of the biographical approach: biographical research is easy to be done though strenuous; its results are blurred, subjective and not representative; it is difficult to estimate its accuracy and reliability; one does not need special skills to do biographical research and to analyze materials, thus everybody can do it. These stereotypical convictions are, in my opinion, equally spread among both academics and students. Unfortunately some of them claim to use the biographical approach themselves. Therefore I will comment on the mentioned assumptions showing their negative influence not only on the "outer" image but also "inner" processes occurring in the field of biographical research.

The presupposition of effortlessness has various negative consequences. Sometimes, or quite often, biographical research is trivialized because if it does not require any specific skills (e.g., knowledge of statistics and/or sophisticated computer programs) it means that everybody can do it and no particular education is necessary. As the consequence some researchers and students do biographical research although the results of their work could be described as "the outcomes of patient yet talentless erudition", what generally supports the stereotype, especially in the eyes of critics of the biographical method. This image is also supported by frequently posed questions (mostly from the position of the quantitative approach) about representativeness, accuracy, reliability and subjectivity. The ongoing discussion in this matter leads to the conclusion that although qualitative methods have been rehabilitated after the time of the domination of the structural-functionalist approach and the normative paradigm, the biographical approach though recently very fashionable, is quite often not considered as a serious part of main stream sociological thinking. As the result, the biographical approach and those who practice it are quite often in a marginal position in the social world of sociology (to use Anselm Strauss's concept of "social world"). It is a sort of a paradox that the popularity of biographical research does not guarantee its central position, to the contrary I would say that it is rather a "niche" sociology.

The strenuousness of biographical analysis, including the stage of collecting the material, as well as what critics would call subjectivity and what from the perspective of qualitative analysis is the process of interpretation<sup>3</sup>, are additional circumstances which deepen this marginalization. Besides, the biographical approach is truly associated with a specific life style of being a sociologist, that is required when doing biographical research. This style, which I would associate with the idea of *universitas*, is originally represented by a sociologist familiar with a particular academic tradition, based on ongoing discussions, seminars not necessarily limited by strict schedules, free from time pressure and the constraints of meeting formal requirements of research projects. And so, in days of temporary projects, effectiveness, evaluations and an "overload" of didactics,

this style of life seems to be awkward, if not passé. Observing contemporary academic reality, I think that doing biographical research quite often may mean being an outsider and this is not a positive self presentation to students who may perceive such person as maybe knowledgeable but not effective academically. In other words, it happens that students are not interested in this style of work, especially when they discover that the image of effortlessness appears to be the false assumption. Thus, the question arises whether, when teaching the biographical approach, one should develop certain strategies to make biographical research more attractive in terms of contemporary expectations of students and institutional constraints of university education. I will come back to this problem later.

Last but not least, the stereotype of the lack of the need to have special skills to use the biographical approach results in a visible boom of this kind of research. Here I see at least two difficulties. Firstly, a lot of people want to use the biographical research but very few share the described style of doing it. As the result sometimes studies are done quickly<sup>4</sup> without interpretations grounded in primary data and their results appear not convincing enough to support the need to use the biographical method. Secondly, the fashion of doing biographical research in different fields of human sciences complicates the situation also within the very sociology where we meet a diversity of approaches, not always grounded in methodological assumptions what results in diverging qualities of certain studies.<sup>5</sup> Being a frequent participant of conferences devoted to the biographical method (e.g., organized by specialized groups in the International Sociological Association or the European Sociological Association) I observe a big mixture in this field. In other words, the diversity of currents and schools within the biographical approach is not sufficiently founded on knowledge about possible analytical frames and theories on which they are based. The lack of shared knowledge sometimes leads to misunderstandings or even worse, trivializes the discourse among users of the biographical method. As the consequence, the stereotype that everybody can deal with biographical research has led to a more postmodern jigsaw of attitudes and ideas than we can observe in other fields of sociology. Therefore the question arises what should be presented to students as a core knowledge considering the biographical approach.<sup>6</sup> The answer is as difficult as it is not easy to do/have an overview of biographical studies inspired by national sociologies and diverse theoretical frames.

#### 4. The biographical approach from the perspective of researchers who do it

Having in mind the described elements of the stereotype I move on to present the image of the biographical approach from the perspective of those who do research in this field. Since I identify with this perspective, I will also explain what I try to do in order to present this image to my students, namely to teach them what is the most important when doing/using biographical research. Whenever I teach a class on biographical research I realize that most beginning students have such stereotypes as I described them. Therefore, against the im-

age of effortlessness I put the need of interdisciplinary knowledge; against the charge of subjectivity the process of interpretation which requires sociological imagination and sensitivity; against the assumption of a lack of accuracy the need to have background knowledge to contextualize the material; against reliability – procedures of structural text analysis.

First of all, a contemporary perspective in qualitative studies is/should be interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity requires systematic knowledge from such fields as discourse analysis, social psychology, narratology, the theory of literature, sociolinguistics etc. Obviously these competences cannot be acquired at equal level and the sociological approach should be the main frame of reference there. Yet, I agree with Norman K. Denzin's and Yvonna S. Lincoln's (1994, pp. 2–3) statement that the multiple perspectives put a researcher in the position of a *bricoleur* who "works between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms. The *bricoleur* understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity". The result of this work is also called a "patchwork" by the authors (2009, pp. 24–28). Nevertheless, describing biographical research in those terms does not mean the postmodern manner of merging frames and sources. What is not always clear for students, especially when they do not understand the idea of *bricoleage* (this observation comes from the class of cultural anthropology I have for first year students). Nevertheless, when teaching I always try to show them that interdisciplinarity helps to multiply perspectives and enriches the process of interpretation which is another important feature of the biographical approach.

As we know, the process of interpretation is usually undertaken not only with the help of certain procedures but also as a collective activity. I always try to convince students that this type of analysis requires collective work in all research contexts, e.g. when we analyze materials during the class, when they will eventually work on their own materials for completing their theses, when biographical studies are carried out.<sup>7</sup> This activity is supported by assumptions of the interpretative approach emphasizing the social construction of reality (Berger/Luckmann 1966) as well as the conviction that interpretations are negotiable and the very process should be open according to the thought that "reality over and again surpasses our expectations. Whereas we are sometimes so attached to our ideas that we miss reality".<sup>8</sup> I doubt whether we can teach students an art of interpretation since this ability comes from practice and experience and it is a never-ending process. Yet we can propagate the attitude of an open mind and show them the sense of the process of interpretation. It is not always an easy task because it may be simplified or even trivialized<sup>9</sup>, especially when students do not understand what sociological imagination and sensitivity mean.

Sociological imagination and sensitivity can be evoked and developed when working on different kinds of texts. The core material I usually focus on consists of biographical narrative interviews, written biographies, diaries, and memoirs. Another group consists of stories, poems, novels which are biographically contextualized by their author(s). The last type consists of such texts of culture which I call para-biographical because they are not directly related to one's biography, nevertheless they can be interpreted in this context, thus such texts have a meta-narrative character.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes it is not easy to convince students to engage in the analysis of classical biographical material in terms of in-depth

interpretation, let alone to make them think analytically seriously enough about those texts of culture that really require them to develop their sociological imagination. As I have already mentioned the greatest didactical risk is connected with the shallowness of the process of interpretation. Then, from the students' perspective, watching a movie or reading a novel may be treated as doing funny or bizarre things, something not too serious and difficult to follow what may create the general impression of doing nothing (special) or doing "cool" things. Nevertheless, I try to encourage students' sociological imagination and sensitivity, with different results, sometimes feeling no constructive response but quite often observing true involvement and reflexivity. I use a few strategies usually beginning with showing the path from (to use Clifford Geertz's term) "thin" to "thick description" and analysis. I try to stress that both of them are valuable at the respective stage of analysis. With regard to detailed structural text analysis<sup>11</sup> I try to explain and demonstrate how analytical procedures are necessary to interpret and how important it is to use any other sources of knowledge that one has in order to develop the process of interpretation. I encourage students to activate their background knowledge as well as appeal to their own biographical experience. Again, quite often it is not the easy task, because students sometimes think that if some source does not have a "scientific license" and belongs to common sense knowledge it is not worth taking into account. Here once more the tension of the didactic situation is related to thin limits between conscious interpretation and superficial simplification.

One more strategy to develop imagination and sensitivity is analyzing a social problem or phenomenon by using diverse types of the biographical approach related to different frames of reference and social or cultural contexts. It helps to see the problem from complementing perspectives. In such cases I usually choose the problem which may be a part of students' biographical experience or at least it can be imaginable to some extent. To give an example, we discuss the problem of biographical work in the reference to the experience of illness. We analyze studies of the school of Anselm Strauss, biographical narrative interviews with ill people, other theoretical texts, a novel written by a man with the locked-in-syndrome and a film based on the book.<sup>12</sup> Working with this last material is followed by another strategy that I would call sharing the emotional experience of the analyzed problem. The film shows vividly the tragic aspect of the biographical situation of the ill man, I leave students with their impressions (it is the last part of our meeting) and emotions to let them perhaps discuss it afterwards among themselves or pass their experiences to others. I do not think that such way of teaching should be dominant, yet sometimes I find it very useful in terms of a postponed effect. I do believe that such materials "work" in students' biography and they may come back to problems after some time when they really start to be interested in or/and they discover the value of the sociological inspiration they experienced.

Another important issue refers to the need of having sufficient cultural background for interpreting a biography. This, again obvious statement, appears to be crucial when different cultural and historical frames are confronted. The most transparent example relates to cross-cultural encounters. For instance, many times I took part in three-national workshops for Polish, German and Welsh students organized by our universities.<sup>13</sup> Students, together with their teachers, analyze different biographical materials representing cultural contexts of each mentioned nation. These very creative encounters show how

important the knowledge of local (cultural, historical, political etc.) frames is and how it opens or closes interpretative abilities. Especially such international meetings show the importance and value of exchanging perspectives. A cultural stranger in Alfred Schütz's (1976, pp. 93–97) terms exemplifies the incoherence, partial clearness and contradictions of the knowledge applied in the process of interpretation. On the other hand, the position of Schütz's "man without history" proves how necessary is the recognition of cultural and historical frames.

Coming back to the Polish context, working with students also requires establishing a field of discourse where a common cultural background is needed as well as different perspectives must be taken into account. In the process of education it is always a problematic issue. First of all, one should always take into account the generation gap between students and a teacher. Yet it is not only the discrepancy between perspectives of youth and adulthood but it is also in Karl Mannheim's (1952, pp. 276–322) sense the cultural and historical difference between the following generations because "members of any generation can only participate in a temporally limited section of the historical process".

In the case of Polish experiences the generational turning point, considering recent times and events, is the end of the communist system in 1989. Being brought up in the Polish People's Republic (PRL) I experienced a reality which for contemporary students remains a part of history and collective memory. Although it is a communicative memory (Assmann 1997) still alive in family stories, I cannot relate to this memory as a common shared repertoire of experiences, namely a common field of discourse. This historical event for sure belongs to those types of experiences which sharply divide generations in their cultural background. In the context of the didactic process it may be defined as a "nuisance", but in the frame of biographical reflection it is a very interesting circumstance for my research and teaching experience as I can see to what extent students are able to take the perspective of the other and vice versa to what degree I am able to share with them this part of my biography which belongs to, in a way, a different symbolic universe.

Yet, another aspect of generational differences is related to recent dynamic changes of (post)modern society where both the amount and quality of events strengthen differences between generational experiences and their interpretations. From this point of view we can observe a phenomenon that may be called a drastic limitation of shared time perspectives. In some contexts a decade or two can be characterized by so huge and dynamic changes that it remarkably reduces a common cultural background. Especially this phenomenon from the sphere of technical progress has recently spread its influence to other spheres like cognitive styles or ways to construct knowledge.<sup>14</sup> One of those differences has been described by Margaret Mead (1978) as a form of prefigurative culture in which the younger generation educates the older one. Hence the old generation loses the monopoly of creating frames of knowledge and skills that are defined as basic.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps one of the results of this perspective is another distinctive change (initiated at least in Poland by the reform of the educational system in 1999) which refers to the very idea of what and how should be taught and learned. The most significant feature of the contemporary education is the shift from knowledge to skills. As the result, it is more difficult to draw on some common stock of knowledge that used to be defined in so called canons of national and interna-

tional culture and which students were expected to have when entering the university. It causes difficulties to create a common background for interpretation or just discussion not only in the case of the biographical approach but also in other fields of social studies. Additionally, skills that students are expected to possess are usually not aimed to develop patient and in-depth reflection on social reality, let alone on theoretical problems. It can be particularly recognized during the analysis of sociological texts. The main doubt in this context refers to the contemporary status of the “traditional” mode of university education. Whether it should be defended as a core item of academic standards or should it evolve according to students’ needs and expectations?

## 5. From the idea of *Universitas* to the *Bolognization*<sup>16</sup> of university education

Whereas in the previous sections I tried to describe what are general frames influencing the didactic situation when teaching the biographical approach, I would now like to concentrate mainly on some structural and institutional aspects connected with the design of the university education to which I alluded in the last sentence of the previous section. At my university, as well as in other Polish universities, we are at the stage of changing the system from five year studies finishing with a MA degree into the Bologna system – three years of BA studies, then two years of MA studies and PhD studies for those who want to continue university education (but not necessarily planning an academic career). Because we are in the process of changing the system, there are still students who continue within the old system and there are newcomers who pursue their BA. This situation provides a good perspective for comparison which refers at the same time to university education and to the results of the reform of the educational system in Poland because students who are now finishing their studies according to the old system are also epigones of the previous primary and high school education. Although my diagnosis is based on didactic experiences in teaching biographical methods, it should be stressed that the problems related to the process of implementation of the Bologna system are not limited to this field. To the contrary, the structural frames introduced by the BA/MA system lead to problems concerning academic education in general and the development of methodological competencies in particular. It is the problem both of the lack of time for training and application of methodological skills as well as the attitude of students concerning their ability and willingness to face intellectual challenges, since the changes of the system refer not only to the structure but also the contents. Current curricula, especially on pre-university level, mainly aim to limit the stock of knowledge, and stress the need to develop skills defined as an ability of text interpretation (sic!) and solving problems. Consequently, this way of teaching is limited to superficial knowledge and corresponds with the lack of analytical thinking. Thus, the criticism I express commenting on difficulties when teaching the biographical approach can be related to the broader context of university education in the time of the Bologna system.

Let me return to the old system for a moment: Students of sociology enrolled in a five year course at my university were offered a number of specializations. We<sup>17</sup> proposed the specialization called Culture, media and communication. Among students it was regarded as the most academic specialization, focused on analytical thinking and intellectual development what in the eyes of some students meant not giving practical skills and requiring intellectual background in order to deal with the challenge. I will not comment whether this image has been false or true but as the result, for a few last years the specialization was chosen by very good, if not excellent students. Teaching the class called Biography and social worlds I was in a very comfortable situation – each week for one semester I was working for six hours with a group of approximately 20 students who were very intelligent, active and interested in the subject matter. Those meetings were both a didactic challenge and pleasure for me. I appreciated the situation and was conscious that it was a sort of privilege but considering that it occurred regularly – each year students were really interested and involved – I stopped asking myself what would happen if I met those who were not interested, passive participants of the class. I can treat these positive circumstances which I was confronted with as “ups” of teaching the biographical approach – thanks to the students’ intellectual input and due to conditions in which we could work. This general atmosphere helped to foster situations that were additional stimuli for me as a teacher, like informal workshops (organized on students’ requests after finishing the class) to work on students’ materials, optional seminars which I proposed following students suggestions that they would like to attend more classes devoted to the biographical approach, or the book that I have recently got, edited by my previous student who is a PhD scholar now, with the dedication “everything started at your class...” alluding to her contemporary research interests. I give those examples to illustrate how students’ interests may develop if they find educational proposals inspiring. We should be aware that not everybody was reacting so affirmatively, yet the positive cases have been a source of true satisfaction for me.

But the system has changed: What had been offered to students during their fourth year of their course (i.e., during their seventh semester), is now taught during their fourth semester (the second year of BA studies). As the result the class Biography and social worlds appeared to be a complete failure. I did not feel any reaction and involvement of students. The contrast between the good response in previous years and the total lack of interest in this case was a didactical shock for me.<sup>18</sup> The fact that my colleagues had the same impressions during their classes was not a relief. The situation developed a year ago, this year the specialization (which is called a “module” now) has not been chosen by students. We were discussing the problem in our team and arrived at the rather pessimistic conclusion that there is hardly a space for this kind of educational mode which we propose and particularly for the biographical approach in the new system. On the one hand, there is no space provided in the curriculum for promoting the biographical approach – BA students at this stage don’t seem to be mature enough to engage in biographical reflection beyond thin interpretation or to take the responsibilities required by the method. For example, I usually ask students to do a biographical narrative interview at the end of the class. During the class last year which I regard as a complete set-back none of the interviews resembled narrative materials. They were a few pages journal-

like interviews, presented to me without any reflection about the quality of the collected material. Whereas this year some of students have been collecting biographical narrative interviews for their BA theses (since I am a supervisor of BA I encourage them to use the biographical approach) and the material was much better and far more interesting. I appreciate that within a year some students have apparently developed their sociological sensitivity and involvement though students in general have not had the time to develop analytical skills for analyzing their materials in a broader context and remained on a rather basic level. There is no time and intellectual space for analyzing biography as a topic (Helling 1990) by referring to the structure of narratives, argumentation, and biographical processes.<sup>19</sup> I am afraid that during the second degree course (MA studies) there will also be no place and time for it, since MA seminars devoted to work on MA theses have just been limited to the two last semesters what in practice means having altogether between nine to ten months for writing the thesis counting the time from the first encounter with a promoter, doing research, writing and passing the MA exam.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, students seem to be less interested in this way of doing research because such studies are regarded as too time consuming, not effective and not that easy to get done. The expressed lamentation is generally shared by academics complaining about the intellectual aspirations and involvements of their students. I must say that I was satisfied with the fact of not being chosen for this year but I realize that it is a short time strategy of putting the problem off.

This critical diagnosis should not be mistaken as a typical lamentation about the present times and the glorification of the past. It evokes reflection on the status of the described specific paradigm of studying and teaching where creating a specific atmosphere of intellectual work is possible because both students and scholars are eager to take an active role in and responsibility for this process. Since such a paradigm seems to decline, the question arises: whether we should change the way of teaching as it appears to be no longer adjusted to the needs of the contemporary world/current students who generally are more interested in getting practical skills than taking part in sophisticated yet, from their point of view, “unproductive” intellectual discussions and activities. As I have already declared, I dare not to give the answer.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Gerhard Riemann and Lena Inowlocki for insightful suggestions which helped me to write this text.
- 2 I have come across the idea to use the quotation after my older colleague, Janina Tobera, who told me that she had read those words each time during her first lecture on sociology.
- 3 By interpretation I mean the process of analysis structured by certain methodological assumptions and not intuitive or naïve statements separated from any theoretical background.
- 4 I know a researcher who collected 100 interviews in two months – interviews which she called “biographical narrative interviews”.
- 5 By the way, it is also a problem of other, though similar approaches, e.g., according to William Moss (1988, p. 5) “Oral history is a peculiar beast. It defies easy definition. A technique in the service of many disciplines, it fits into no particular discipline, and it is found in many activities outside the world of academic disciplines”.

- 6 For example, the third edition of *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (ed. Denzin, Lincoln), published in 2005, is much more extended than the first one from 1994. The third edition was published in Polish in 2009 as a handbook. In the second volume there is a 40 pages chapter on the narrative interview by Susan E. Chase, entitled "Narrative Inquiry, Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices". The text is mostly based on rich American sociological literature, though, e.g., it hardly comments on Chicago School input in biographical research. Although the author emphasizes the fact of a variety of voices, there is no comment devoted to the work of contemporary European sociologists from this field. The additional problem of this text is related to the Polish translation where "narrative inquiry" has been translated as "narrative interview".
- 7 Sometimes students have a chance to see this process in progress together with its "ups and downs" and they take a creative part in analytical procedures. For example in the international project *Euroidentities* ([www.euroidentities.org](http://www.euroidentities.org)) in which I am also involved, Polish, German and Welsh students took part twice in workshops devoted to the project's material analysis.
- 8 The quotation comes from "Vademecum of the general" of one of the monastic orders. It is addressed to the newly chosen superior and it is subtitled "What to do and not to do when a power is in your hands" (Tygodnik Powszechny 2009).
- 9 Once a student said, „Well so now that's like at a lesson of Polish language at school when we were to say *'What did the author (of the novel) wanted to say'*". This kind of expression has a sarcastic meaning in Polish alluding to those teachers of the Polish language who are defined as noncreative and schematic, since asking this question – that is the assumption – they never expect an individual and original interpretation but they want to hear "the proper" commonly accepted version that they also share.
- 10 As the example may serve, in my opinion, the film "The Pianist" directed by Roman Polański who is a Holocaust survivor himself. As he mentioned, he never had in mind to use his biography in his output. On the other hand, he wanted to make a film about the war and for years he had searched for an appropriate screenplay. As he said, "The Pianist is a comeback to my childhood but it is not the film about me" (<http://film.onet.pl/F,7799,1093337,1,artykul.html> [28.06.2010]). Thus the film being a piece of artistic creation based on the authentic somebody's else biography, at the same time became the meta-story about Polański's life experiences – his voice in the discourse about the past which has been a part of his life.
- 11 I relate to the structural analysis of biographical narrative interviews proposed by Fritz Schütze.
- 12 The book "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly" was written by Jean-Dominique Bauby, a well-known French journalist who at the age of 43 suffered a massive stroke. As the result, he was paralyzed and speechless, he could only blink with his left eyelid. He wrote the book, being a sort of memoir, by blinking when the correct letter was reached by a person slowly reciting the alphabet and writing his words. The book was published in 1997 just before his death. In 2007 the film based on the book and having the same title was made.
- 13 Three-national workshops are organized by the University of Magdeburg, the University of Łódź, and the University of Bangor on the basis of an ongoing both formal and informal educational project. In the past the Department of Social Work of the University of Bamberg had also been involved.
- 14 As an example I will refer to the discussion in the field of collective memory where researchers observe a new type of historical sensitivity based on the privatization of memory, different ways of building links with the past (mostly by emotional and not intellectual experience), a change of cognitive patterns, e.g., interactive exercising of the past, the need of having "authentic contact" with it (Szpociński 2007, pp. 28–29).
- 15 Margaret Mead in her book "Culture and Commitment. A Study of the Generation Gap" (1978) distinguishes three types of cultures which characterize different relationships between generations of parents and children considering the process of education. Prefigurative culture as described above is typical to modern society.
- 16 I take the expression *Bolgonization* from Daniel Bertaux who used it during the discussion after the presentation of this paper at the Annual Conference 2009 of the Sec-

- tion of Biographical Research of the German Sociological Association at the University of Applied Sciences, Frankfurt am Main.
- 17 The Chair of Sociology of Culture at University of Łódź consists of the following colleagues who also took part in the discussion on the issues being analyzed here. I would like to thank them for inspiring thoughts which helped me to write this paper: Zbigniew Bokszański, Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawełek, Kazimierz Kowalewicz, Mieczysław Marciniak, Renata Dopierała.
  - 18 In face of these circumstances I was rather satisfied to have a 4 instead of a 6 hours class in the new system.
  - 19 The lack of time is partly connected with institutional frames, if students want to continue the university education they have to register for MA studies until the middle of July what means that they should complete their BA in the end of June.
  - 20 When listening to the comments of my German colleagues I have realized that we are still in a not so bad situation at Polish universities. That is why the expressed complaints may appear exaggerated from the perspective of German academics. On the other hand, I express my doubts from the position of the Polish university life, witnessing the ongoing changes which aim to “modernize” education by making it more effective and economical whatever those terms may mean.

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