

## Conceptual foundations of qualitative life course research

**Walter R. Heinz**

University of Bremen, Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences

### **Abstract**

Analyzing biographies is a main field of qualitative social research that studies individuals’ sense-making in regard to transitions and life projects. The paper presents concepts for linking the macro-social and micro-social levels in life course analysis. First, the concept of “status passage” is reviewed, with a focus on social structure, institutions, and biography. Second, the concept of “self-socialization” is introduced, highlighting the notion of the “biographical actor”. Third, recent elaborations of the concept of “agency” in life course research are discussed. Fourth, two examples of qualitative longitudinal research are presented: one on occupational careers, another on the process of family formation. Finally, methodological implications are sketched.

Keywords: biography; status passages; self-socialization.

### *As raízes conceptuais da investigação qualitativa do curso de vida*

### **Resumo**

A análise de biografias é um dos principais campos da pesquisa social qualitativa, e que se centra no sentido que os indivíduos fazem das suas transições e projetos de vida. Este artigo propõe conceitos que pretendem ligar os níveis macro e micro da análise do curso de vida. Primeiro, o conceito de “passagem de estatuto” é revisitado, com especial atenção dada à estrutura social, às instituições e à biografia. Em segundo lugar, o conceito de “auto-socialização” é introduzido, sublinhando-se a noção de “ator biográfico”. Em terceiro lugar, algumas re-elaborações recentes do conceito de “agência” no estudo do curso de vida são discutidas. E em quarto lugar, são apresentados dois exemplos de investigação longitudinal e qualitativa: um sobre carreiras ocupacionais, outro sobre o processo de formação familiar. Por fim, são discutidas as implicações metodológicas da introdução destes conceitos na discussão sobre a investigação qualitativa do curso de vida.

Palavras-chave: biografia; passagens de estatuto; auto-socialização.

### *Les racines conceptuelles de la recherche qualitative du cours de la vie*

L'analyse de biographies est l'un des principaux domaines de la recherche sociale qualitative qui met l'accent sur le sens que les personnes font de leurs transitions et de leurs projets de vie. Cet article propose des concepts qui visent à relier les niveaux macro et micro de l'analyse du cours de la vie. En premier lieu, le concept de « passage de statut » est revisité, apportant une attention particulière à la structure sociale, aux institutions et à la biographie. Ensuite, le concept d'« auto-socialisation », soulignant la notion d'« acteur biographique », est introduit. En troisième lieu, nous traitons certaines réélaborations récentes du concept d'« agence » dans l'étude du cours de la vie. Nous présentons ensuite deux exemples de recherche longitudinale et qualitative : l'un sur les carrières occupationnelles et l'autre sur le processus de formation familiale. Pour finir, nous traitons les implications méthodologiques de l'introduction de ces concepts dans la discussion sur la recherche qualitative du cours de la vie.

Mots-clés: biographie; passages d'état; auto-socialisation.

### *Las raíces conceptuales de la investigación cualitativa del curso de la vida*

El análisis de biografías es uno de los principales campos de la investigación social cualitativa y se centra en cómo los individuos hacen sus transiciones y proyectos de vida. Este documento propone conceptos que tienen como objetivo conectar los niveles macro y micro del análisis del ciclo de la vida. En primer lugar, el concepto de «cambio de estado» se ha revisado, con especial atención a la estructura social, las instituciones y la biografía. En segundo lugar, se introduce el concepto de «autosocialización», subrayándose la noción de «actor biográfico». En tercer lugar, se discuten algunas reelaboraciones recientes del concepto de «agencia» en el estudio del curso de la vida. Y en cuarto lugar, se presentan dos ejemplos de investigación cualitativa y longitudinal: uno sobre las carreras profesionales y otro sobre el proceso de formación de la familia. Finalmente, se discuten las implicaciones metodológicas de la introducción de estos conceptos en la discusión sobre la investigación cualitativa del curso de la vida.

Palabras clave: biografía, pasajes de estado, auto-socialización

## **1. Introduction**

Qualitative life course research aims at reconstructing biographies with a focus on decisions and actions in the life spheres of education, work, family, and retirement from narrative interviews, whereas quantitative methods register the course of events and transitions from questionnaires, aiming at discovering sequences and standard patterns (event history).

What is a biography in the social sciences? A life story told to another person, the subjective view of a life course, the curriculum vitae (CV), as a series of expectations, experiences, and outcomes. In contrast to an algorithm, a biography is a reflected look into the person's past, comprising aspirations, goals, life events, social relationships, and turning points, a balance of gains and losses.

Qualitative Research does not test hypotheses but follows a heuristic methodology which permits empirically based accounts of perceived means-and-ends relations or subjective causality in individual lives. It uses methods of discovery (Abbott, 2004), most often procedures in the framework of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

There are several methods: open narratives, more structured interviews like the Focused Interview or the Problem-Centred Interview ("PCI", Witzel and Reiter, 2012), using an interview guide. Applying such methods requires a solid footing in state-of-the-art research, a careful elaboration of themes in order to succeed in (re)constructing the meaning people attach to their living circumstances, transitions, and life plans.

The theoretical background of qualitative life course research is interpretative sociology in the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) which assumes that social structure, interaction and actions are linked and also affect each other over time. This perspective is expressed very well by Strauss (1992, 3): "We cannot make adequate microscopic studies without careful and precise identification of relevant structural conditions nor adequately understand macroscopic structures and actions without considering the identity conditions that impinge on the macroscopic".

In life course research, the most advanced proposal is Glen Elder's (Elder and O'Rand, 1995; Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe, 2003) approach for linking mechanisms between society and personality in a time and place related framework, recently with the emphasis on "agency" by which individuals construct their own life course in the historical context of opportunities and constraints.

Notions like "agency within structures" and "bounded agency" indicate the complexity of the task to study life courses as biographies and are crucial for better understanding how people develop subjectively meaningful and coherent biographies in response to objectively contingent life courses. Therefore, a sophisticated research agenda must start with a mapping of the social and economic conditions and the institutional environment as contexts of biographical actions (Shanahan and Macmillan 2008).

## 2. The macro-micro-puzzle

On the macro-social level, the life course can be analyzed as a sequence of events that are embedded in the economic and political conditions of a historical period, their timing, durations and outcomes. Panel studies, like the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) or the German Socio Economic Panel (SOEP) are tracking the life courses of cohorts and permit to analyze how the economic and political context, social and gender inequalities, and social policy affect the timing and results of transitions and trajectories.

On the surface, life course regimes are age-graded, status changes depend on achievements, skills, and age. A closer look, however, shows that it is not the chronological age but the persons' participations in various status configurations and institutions, like the family, school, university, companies, and labour markets that regulate and organize the timing and duration of transitions (see the introductions to the sections in Auther et al., 2009).

Today, life trajectories are joint ventures of biographical actors, institutional gatekeepers, opportunity structures, social networks, and living circumstances that demand an active shaping of life phases. This puts agency into the spotlight and requires studying biographies as moving targets, as more or less successful arrangements of projected and realized transitions and trajectories. On the micro-social level, passages from one status-configuration to another are based on decisions between options and pathways. Moving between social locations, from family to school, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, and employment, from cohabitation to marriage and to parenthood, must be arranged in the context of institutionalized time-tables and negotiated in the social network.

The individual construction of a biography, thus, is guided by institutional standards, models, and social relationships. Furthermore, it must cope with the unequal distribution of material, educational, and social resources. Such limitations, however, must not be experienced as fateful constraints - they can be overcome by individual agency, interpersonal support, and social assistance. By initiating and accomplishing status transformations and by overcoming obstacles, young people develop negotiation

experiences that contribute to the competence of biographical action in face of changing social contexts and institutional arrangements.

### **3. Status Passage**

In their book "Status Passage", Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1971) presented a concept on the micro-social level that permits to formulate a heuristic model about the connections between social mobility, institutions and biographical action in a temporal perspective. Several years ago (Author, 1996), I suggested to define status passage as a mechanism for linking actors and institutions by time-tables and entry as well exit markers for transitions between status configurations.

On the micro-level, status passages are constructed by biographical actors who commit themselves to invest time and energy for acquiring competence, credentials, and credibility for transitions. Actors select or are referred to social pathways in the process of constructing their individual life path. On the macro-level, status passages refer to the institutional guidelines for entering and leaving transitions in the life course dimensions of education, employment, family, and welfare. Opportunity structures and the distribution of life chances are also part of macro-level contexts.

Glaser and Strauss did not develop a Theory of Status Passage either in a life course or biographical framework. They rather proposed a set of dimensions that refer to the temporal articulation of transition sequences from the perspective of the passenger and the institutional programs which are represented by gate-keepers. We used their ideas as conceptual heuristics for studying the micro-social aspects of the life course without losing sight of the macro-social structures that define opportunities and restrictions of shaping one's biography.

Understanding status passages requires taking note of both the individual agency and the social structure across time. This means to conceptualize the "biographical actor" in respect to institutions and opportunities as a situated, context-related decision-maker who is shaping her/his biography and to map the timing and sequencing of transitions as longitudinal dimensions of their life course.

The structural perspective focuses on segments of a biography, defined by sequences of events or episodes in the various domains of the life course and institutional

contexts, while the actor is treated as a member of a cohort (life course). Status passages differ according to the extent to which they are interrelated, institutionally regulated, and reversible.

For qualitative life course research the focus is on the actors' aspirations, competence, and awareness in regard to pathways, options, and outcomes. Individual agency dominates when a status passage is under little institutional control, has a specified awareness context, and is independent and reversible. However, independent status passages are rare since according to the life course paradigm (Elder: "linked lives"), there are no single passages. This is evident in regard to the process of family formation from getting to know each other, cohabitation, and marriage to parenthood.

The proposed classification serves at least two purposes: first, to distinguish between several types of status passages with more or less scope for biographical action and second, to assess the latitude for negotiating the timing and duration, that is for shaping individual passages.

The social mechanism of status passage alerts researchers to observe and to understand the different ways by which the actors coordinate the relationship between multiple status changes and overlapping, sometimes conflicting pathways across time.

#### **4. Self-socialization**

In contrast to the traditional notion of socialization, which emphasized the internalization of norms and values, I defined self-socialization as the process of learning and coming to terms with the outcomes of one's own decisions and actions by constructing a subjectively meaningful link between the biographical past and future in the present (Author, 2002).

As pointed out above, cultural modernization, the flexibilization of careers, the pluralization and differentiation of family trajectories, and the weakening of institutionalized time-tables for life course transitions have been promoting the individualization of life courses. These changes are altering the meaning and direction of socialization. It shifts from parental instruction to individual construction, from internalized social control to self-initiated life-long learning. Biographical choice is not an isolated act, but rather is made "in a context of many other's choosing", says Abbott (1997:

97) and it has to be made in constrained circumstances, taking into account time and place, collaborative and competitive occasions.

During all phases of the life course persons have to make decisions with the possibility of reappraising their experiences and social status in view of new options, alternative pathways and relationships, and declining guarantees for biographical continuity.

Though the family still is the primary context of socialization, peer groups, social networks and media, education and work settings are fields of interaction providing experiences and challenges that demand to renew or at least to modify the person's profile of competence. In the evolving biography the increasing variety of pathways and diversity of action contexts call on the person to actively select, collect, and combine resources for continuity and for dealing with the unexpected turns of one's life course.

For example, careers are turning into flexible, sometimes precarious employment trajectories which are characterized by interruptions and breaks at transition points. This also hold true for the increasingly precarious transitions in the course of family formation and maintenance, especially regarding the division of labour between couples after the birth of a child and the spread of patchwork families. Such discrepancies between aspirations, expectations, and possibilities have to be managed and negotiated with others by the person as the coordinator of living circumstances, life plans, and opportunities.

These social changes give socialization a new meaning: it implies self-initiated and reflexive learning in all dimensions of the life course. Thereby individuals prepare themselves for coming to terms with the temporal variations of life chances and living arrangements, foremost in regard to work and family. This also means that participating in linked lives demands that individuals invest agency in order to negotiate sustainable arrangements and to maintain their self-identity.

A person's life history is not just defined by events, but also by a social recognition of the results of biographical decisions. Rom Harre (1993) referred to the life course as a "moral career" (a concept coined by Erving Goffman). Contemporary examples are facebook and selfies, ways of medial self-presentation with the expectation to arouse many "likes" and to gain reputation.

Constructing one's own biography means to actively engage in hazards, because it depends on material and social resources, social recognition, institutionalized pathways

which provide the occasions for hazards, i.e. actions with uncertain results, like cohabitation, living apart together, examinations, job-interviews, or border crossing of immigrants.

In this framework, the role of narratives in the retrospective construction of the self is central -as a way of establishing a time-related self-portrait in terms of one's biography. Narrated biographies are organized in respect to significant others, critical episodes, fateful moments (success and failure). They are the experiential basis of further life planning and also tell us about the intended and unintended outcomes of decisions across the life course – it could have turned out otherwise and one could have acted otherwise...

Social change and the flexibilization of everyday life have increased the subjective and social relevance of the biography as the temporal and experience-based organizer of initiating, implementing, and appraising actions. Linear concepts like "career" are of limited usefulness for understanding the temporal aspects of socialization and biography because the timing of engaging in education, work, family, and retirement has lost clear age-related time-tables and has become less predictable for entry and exit transitions across the life course (Author 2003a).

Temporary, overlapping, and potentially conflicting role configurations that require combining episodes of public and private involvement are spreading, for example an unemployed single mother in a work creation program, a low-income family on welfare or a student with part-time jobs. Career interruptions, occupational turning points, unemployment, and a precarious marriage have more or less lost their cultural and personal definition as a serious life course crisis in the modern welfare state, though countries differ in their capacity to provide repair services for transition failures and career breaks.

The notion of "self-socialization" accounts for the ways individuals are connecting agency and biography, based on two principles:

First, individuals construct their biography by coming to terms with opportunities and constraints concerning transitions, pathways, and life phases. Second, individuals select pathways, act and appraise the consequences of their actions in terms of their self in reference to social contexts which are embedded in institutions and markets.

These two principles incorporate the idea of the self-as-an-agent of the person's biography who is constructing a life project that mediates between living conditions, institutions, past experiences and aspirations by planning, negotiating and redirecting

pathways across the life course. The individual timing and duration of transitions are informed but not determined by shared cultural meanings, institutionalized guidelines, and social networks which facilitate -and sometimes restrict - the pursuit of life projects.

Self-socialization highlights that people learn from their actions and the appraised consequences as central mechanism of constructing a subjective reality that is linked to changing social contexts. The components of self-socialization in the life course are mental and emotional representations of experiences with significant others (foremost partner, spouse, children, relatives), institutional gate-keepers like teachers or personnel managers, and the appraisal of outcomes of biographical actions. Self-socialization promotes biographical reflexivity in regard of exploring, initiating, and evaluating transitions, social relationships, and status sequences. One's own life course is the major context of self-socialization because it is constructed as an emergent structure from appraised outcomes of the persons' actions concerning the investment in, the timing, and duration of transitions and life phases.

## **5. Agency and life course dynamics**

The concept of agency has been introduced in life course research quite late. Hitlin and Elder (2007) called agency "a curiously abstract concept". It is used with different meanings: as human capacity to make a choice, as individual resources, as behaviour that reflects intention, and as the social and physical structuring of choices.

The first meaning is the one that fits biographical research best. Agency as the capacity for making choices implies awareness, the ability to act intentionally, planfully, and reflexively in a temporal mode. The matter of time-horizon is crucial because it relates to the timing of transitions and the coordination of potentially conflicting institutional prescriptions and interpersonal expectations with the persons' biographical rhythm.

Agency is one of the linking mechanisms between changing times and the life course and was sketched first by Glen Elder in many publications since the 1990s, together with the other four principles: the life-span (personality development is a life-long process); time and place (the biography is embedded in and shaped by the historical periods and socio-ecological settings people experience across their life phases); timing (antecedents and consequences of events and transitions vary according to its timing in a

person's life); and linked lives (socio-historical influences are mediated in networks of shared relationships).

The complexity of this framework is well expressed by Mike Shanahan and Ross Macmillan (2008: 82): "transitions are at once an institutionalized status passage in the life course of cohorts and a personalized transition for individuals with a distinctive life history."

Though Elder's linking mechanisms imply the concepts of agency and self-appraisal, they do not fully specify the pivot for the subjective translation of socially structured opportunities and constraints, as well as of institutionalized pathways and of social relationships into a biography. In knowledge and service societies the translation mechanisms centre on the initiation, performance, and appraisal of biographical actions. Reflexive self-development in the sense of self-guidance becomes mandatory: the self-agent initiates and appraises actions which accumulate experiences and become building blocks of the person's biography.

Since the contexts of the life course change from cohort to cohort and differ within cohorts according to the distribution of economic and social resources, socialization as a self-initiated learning mechanism gains in importance.

Transitions and life phases require persons to integrate their experiences and socially anchored knowledge and practices into their respective biographical project which centres on balancing work and family without giving up one's self-direction. Such a transformation is based on the exercise of agency.

Nominating agency as a core concept of socialization in a life course perspective means to take into account the persons' capacity for actively shaping their biography by responding to the temporal, institutional, and social dimensions of their life. This view is also expressed by Glen Elder (and O'Rand, 1995; 457): "Despite the empirical evidence on links between life transitions, the agency of individuals and their life choices ensure some degree of loose coupling between social transitions and stages."

From my point of view, the main challenge for qualitative research is to illuminate the social mechanisms which operate in the sphere of loose coupling - one candidate could be self-socialization.

A most recent elaboration of "agency" by Hitlin and Johnson (2015) adds the aspect of "forward looking" by proposing a two-dimensional concept that combines the

perception of the future with the appraisal of one's mastery. This proposal reconceptualises agency in a social psychological framework, assuming that individuals develop the competence for meaningful and sustained action across the life course and have the potential to change their circumstances: Persons who believe in their capacity to realize their aspirations and to reach the expected living circumstances and social status will commit themselves to a certain pathway with a sense of self-efficacy and a positive outlook towards the future.

This combination of a positive self-appraisal with the belief that there is a bright future ahead characterizes the ideal preconditions for successful transitions in all life course domains. It is doubtful, however, that individuals who are confronted with the unequal distribution of opportunities in the education, labour, housing, and marriage markets will be able to exercise their agency without material and social resources. Obama's famous slogan "Yes, we can" seems to be the subtext of this version of "agency" which is typical for the optimism in the USA: to make it against all odds. The German subtext would refer to the responsibility of institutions and the welfare state to facilitate the exercise of agency, especially in the domains of education and employment. The subtext in Portugal very likely tells you to rely on family, relatives, and neighbours.

## **6. Research examples**

The examples are very condensed reports from a research program carried out in the 1990s.

We conducted a longitudinal mixed methods study with young adults in two German cities with different job markets and unemployment rates in the 1990s (Author *et al.*, 1998, Author, 1999). Research questions focused on the extent to which there was a decoupling of vocational education and training (VET) and job start and how the work biographies of young adults were related to their planning of family transitions: How do young skilled workers come to terms with changing opportunities in regard to career decisions and how do their job experiences influence the timing of forming a family?

Based on a series of problem centred interviews (Witzel and Reiter, 2012) with 120 young skilled women and men representing six occupations (crafts, office, and trades) over a period of ten years, we constructed two empirically grounded typologies of modes of

biographical action orientations in the life course domains of work and family (based on a data bank with over 770,000 lines of text).

We explained the modes of biographical action as resulting from self-socialization in the transition process from vocational education and training to employment. The modes varied according to transition contingencies, stretched across work and non-work situations, and they generated different patterns of life course decisions. The typologies were heuristic devices for reconstructing the different ways by which young adults actively shaped their transitions in the employment system and how they anticipated the timing of family formation.

First, there is the summary of the action orientations in the field of occupation (see Witzel and Kühn, 2000).

We distinguished three main biographical action orientations:

1. Status Arrangement, comprising two modes: Identification with the firm, good relationships with colleagues and management are important; and Wage-worker Habitus: Employment is regarded as a necessity and burden, job security and improvement of work conditions are central.

2. Career Ambition, comprising two modes: Career Orientation, advancing in the company and improving one's position through further education; and Optimizing Chances, occupational success through shifting jobs and changing employers and keeping further pathways open.

3. Personal Autonomy, also in two modes: Pursuing Preferences, occupation and job are perceived as spaces for self-development; and Self-employment Habitus, autonomy is highly valued and risks are taken for becoming an independent artisan, shop keeper or businessman.

These action orientations document a wide range of social mechanisms, invoking subjective causality for linking experiences with the opportunity structures and employment experiences.

The majority of young skilled workers were shaping their occupational biography in the traditional frameworks of Status Arrangement and Career Ambition, with gender differences: identification with the firm was dominant for women, wage worker habitus for men. The two modes of Career Ambition were used by more men than women in the shaping of their careers. A minority of the young skilled women and men were shaping

their occupational path by the criterion of personal autonomy, more women with the mode of individual preferences, while more men favoured self-employment.

Statistical analysis of the quantitative panel data about our respondents' career lines documented that discontinuity dominated in the 1990s and that there was a variety of transition patterns. The ways of arranging with these uncertain circumstances were related to the respective modes of biographical action. For example: young workers who identified with the firm or who developed a wage worker's attitude tended to reduce their aspirations while the ones with a career orientation explored the range of options, for instance by accumulating additional certificates as tickets for entering new career lines.

Our exploratory study suggests that there is a correspondence between the modes of biographical action, the handling of transition discontinuities, and the personal shaping of further career lines. The young skilled workers, whose transition sequences we began to record over a period of ten years, starting before they graduated from VET, developed different modes of subjective causality for reflecting on their training and work experiences. They were drawing conclusions about their decisions in the past and were planning their future according their respective mode of biographical action orientation.

There is a lack of studies that investigate how young adults are constructing the process of family planning in reference to their work biography. Therefore, in a further step of analyzing the interview transcripts of our qualitative sample, Thomas Kühn (2004) developed a typology of the biographical shaping of family formation during the years after graduating from VET, when the respondents were in their early twenties.

Biographical planning was introduced as a heuristic concept in order to understand the time horizon and the interlocking of family plans with the work career. The concept builds on Anthony Giddens (1991: 85): "Life planning is a means of preparing a course of further actions mobilised in terms of the self's biography."

In Germany's labour market, which is structured by occupational qualifications, the timing of family formation is strongly influenced by the young workers' career. In this structural context, young people must find ways of arranging their timing of family transitions with an ambivalent mixture of interpersonal expectations, cultural models, social norms, and resources. Moreover, the gendered division of the life course domains of family and work has lost its normative obligation. There are ambivalent guiding principles: domestic happiness (children, housing, and living standard) and occupational success as

well, and reconciling employment and family life (for women: "three-phase-model": working, child birth, interrupting employment, returning to the job market; for men: continued employment as main household provider). This perspective makes for uncertain planning and requires young women and men to actively coordinate the occupational and interpersonal aspects of their biography and to anticipate how to synchronize each others living patterns. For young people, linking lives is a process of creating a joint status passage by negotiating the right time for family transitions.

Our typology of biographical plans for shaping family transitions (Kühn, 2014) shows how young skilled workers anticipated the transition to parenthood in coordination with their occupational biography. Several types of biographical planning were distinguished, grouped into three main groups:

1. No plans yet (dominant mode);
2. Early planning, with four variants: coordinated/not uncoordinated with work career; planning/postponing to interrupt employment.
3. Plans and action did not fit each other.

The majority of the young men and women were postponing the turning point of family formation as long as possible. There was an affinity with the biographical action orientations in the field of occupations. For example: family planning of women with the mode Status Arrangement and Career Ambition hinged on the quality of the relationship and on the occupational career of the partners, for men employment security and occupational prospects were more important. Women and men with the mode Personal Autonomy did not anticipate steps toward family formation in the conceivable future showed, resembling the model of dual carer couples.

In general, there were clear gender differences: women showed more planning uncertainty which was an expression of the tension between occupational career options and the timing for having children. Men postponed the turning point of fatherhood, planned to continue working, to keep occupational options open, and to follow their leisure interests.

## 7. Methodological implications

Qualitative research serves the discovery of different ways of sense-making or subjective causality assumptions in individual life courses in regard to decisions and outcomes that shape the biography. Paramount is to invest sociological imagination in order to delineate a heuristic conceptual framework and to identify the core research questions:

What do we want to understand about the laws of motion of a biography and what does it entail to explain a life course from a micro-sociological perspective?

For example: did a biographical turning point happen to a person or did she initiate it? How are the causes of an event and its outcome perceived by the actor: is it regarded as a fateful moment in the person's life or as temporary/passing episode? Do the attributions of causes differ by life experiences, age, gender, ethnic background, levels of education, social origin, and living circumstances?

If we do not specify our research agenda, we end up with narrative research that borders at naïve empiricism. Without focused questions and a conceptual framework for explaining the course of a human life we are lost in space!

Authors, like the Nobel Prize winner of 2015 Svetlana Alexijewitsch, can do better than biographical empiricists when she combines conversations and life stories about the experiences of war, social unrest, and political transformations in Russia by way of documentary prose: "writing up people".

In our period of economic turbulence and cultural diversity standard variables like age, gender, and social class are insufficient for an adequate understanding of the variations in the timing, duration, and outcome of transitions and life events. For explaining why people opt for certain pathways and reject others and how they come to terms with precarious living circumstances qualitative data are essential. Such data can be collected by interviewing carefully selected (theoretical sampling) cases in a cohort, comparing them, and constructing multi-case narratives. Instead of competing or substituting each other, quantitative life course research and qualitative biographical studies both can contribute to a better understanding of how social structure and individual agency articulate each other in biographies: Whereas quantitative methods register trajectories and map the landscape of pathways and life events, options and constraints of

biographical action, qualitative methods illuminate why certain paths are taken and neglected by different actors.

Our life course research centre at the University of Bremen developed a program (1988-2001) for exploring a combination of longitudinal quantitative surveys (questionnaires) and qualitative interviews (PCI) in a series of thematic questions that dealt with societal issues ("Status Passages and Social Risks in the Life Course"): VET, job-start, gender inequality, unemployment, public health, social welfare dependency. Mixed methods (Author, 2003b; Kelle, 2006) were used in a complementary way, in a sequential application of questionnaires (large samples) and PCI (small samples selected from the survey data). For exploring biographies both the standardized recording of life histories in a macro-social perspective and the narrated self-reporting of the meaning of life events and transitions in a micro-social perspective are highly recommended.

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**Walter R. Heinz.** Professor emeritus of Sociology and Psychology. University of Bremen, Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (BIGSSS), (Bremen, Germany). Corresponding address: BIGSSS, Universität Bremen, D-28334 Bremen, Germany. Email: [walter.r.heinz@web.de](mailto:walter.r.heinz@web.de)

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