Gabriele Rosenthal, Artur Bogner (eds.)

BIOGRAPHIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Life Stories Embedded in Figurations and Discourses

campus

Biographies in the Global South

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Preface

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Gabriele Rosenthal and Artur Bogner

Introduction

Gabriele Rosenthal and Artur Bogner

The main purpose of the authors and editors of this book was not only to study and write about people from the "Global South", their life stories and how they are interrelated with other people, but also to give *a voice* to these people themselves. All the articles are in the tradition of social-constructivist biographical research, the aim of which is to reconstruct the "subjective" perspectives of the people concerned in their *lived past*, and in the present when speaking or writing about their experiences (see Rosenthal 2005). It is important, firstly, to show how the people themselves are the *actors and authors* of their history and their stories, how they carried out activities and made decisions which affected their later life, how they *interpret and comprehend* their past and present life, and how they present themselves and their conduct to "Western" social scientists. The idea of "construction" in the term "social constructivism" refers to the fact that people always, from the very beginning of their history, live in a 'world' that is actively interpreted by them. This process of construction is "social" or collective because this world is constantly, without interruption, being produced and reproduced, both by the joint (through not always conflict-free) practical actions of many people, and by their joint or collective *interpretations* of it. This is an essential basic assumption of our understanding of social human reality and of the methodology needed to study it.

Secondly, the authors and editors believe it is important to understand the social constellations of circumstances which influence and very often constrain the people concerned, which can force them into relatively powerless, and sometimes extremely powerless, positions, and which can make their voices silent, or hard to hear, in the public discourse. It is also important to understand the way they are influenced or determined—or, to borrow a term from Michel Foucault, "permeated"—by predominant discourses, or by prevailing patterns of interpretation in collective discourses. The authors combine this approach with that of "figurational sociology", a research tra-

dition based on the work of Norbert Elias. This means that they do not restrict themselves to the life courses of individuals, but show how these are intricately entwined with bigger social or collective processes and actualities. These bigger actualities include the public pictures and images of the individuals concerned and their we-groups—whether these are local or supralocal we-groups, or even transnational (like a lot of Christian churches, but also many other associations, organizations or movements). The importance of such we-groups for the individuals concerned differs in many cases, and is often very different at different times. Not least, they include families or kin groups, as well as socio-historical generations, which are created and shaped by the shared or simultaneous experience of a collective process (usually a so-called "historical event").[1]

There is a strong tendency among social scientists from the "G7" countries to focus on their own lifeworlds, and one of the aims of this book is to counteract this by concentrating on the biographies and circumstances of people living in the "Global South". The studies presented here were all carried out in the contexts of our own research, under the supervision of one of the two editors. They represent a form of biographical research which we call the *figurational biographical approach*. This approach, and the reasons why we have chosen to adopt it, are presented and discussed in detail in the first chapter of this volume.

The articles in this book are devoted to the life stories and life courses of individuals as components of bigger groupings or we-groups (such as religious or political organizations or movements), or parts of the dynamic *figurations* formed by these individuals and groupings. The authors look closely at the interdependencies between individuals and collective processes, and the entwinement between collective discourses and the stories told by individuals about their experiences and their life trajectories. As indicated above, it is important here to consider the historically changing *collective* concepts and patterns of interpretation (including the we-images and they-images of groups and their members), which people use in order to give structure and meaning to what they experience.

Some of the studies in this volume are from the field of sociological research on violent conflicts (including very long-lasting conflicts), and on "peace processes", or post-violence processes, with a geographical focus on

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1 See Karl Mannheim (1952a [1928]). The members of a historical generation may *experience and interpret* the same event in different and even opposing ways, as in the case of a change of government, or a conflict involving real or threatened violence.

northern Uganda and Palestine/Israel. Others are devoted to refugee, migration and border research, with a focus on people in the Spanish enclaves in North Africa (including migrants from Syria and from sub-Saharan countries). Attention is paid in particular to members of outsider groupings and their unequal power chances in relation to the established in their local setting or region. We think in the first place of the established-outsider configurations in their countries of origin, but migrants without a legal right to stay are of course a very obvious example of "outsiders" in the sense discussed by Elias and Scotson (1965; 2008)—and the web of relationships and interdependencies between them and long-time residents with full citizenship rights is a typical kind of established-outsider figuration.

Focusing on outsiders in their social contexts means looking in particular at power relations in their social figurations and in the collective discourses. The first chapter is programmatic: it discusses the importance of adopting the perspectives of figurational sociology and discourse analysis when analyzing individual biographies. We believe that these two perspectives are indispensable complements to social-constructivist biographical research. In this context we suggest that the term 'discourse' should be understood as an *intermediary concept* between 'biography' and 'figuration'. This chapter presents these three concepts, and discusses the theoretical and methodological advantages of combining them in order to be able to comprehend empirically "the *mutual constitution* of societies and individuals". This combination requires that the process of remembering during a biographical narration should always be considered in the context of social figurations and discourses, and attention should always be paid to the power inequalities and power balances between individuals, and between groups or groupings of people, that are inherent in figurations and discourses. The consequences of this theoretical and methodological approach are shown in this book by analyzing biographical self-presentations of individuals in Uganda, in Palestine/Israel, and in the Spanish enclaves in North Africa. Some may even argue that considering the dynamic webs of asymmetrical interdependencies and the associated collective practices of (re-)producing patterns of interpretation or collective "knowledge" was part and parcel of, or implicit in, the practice of social constructivism and social-constructivist biographical research from the beginning. In a sense we could not agree more, but we believe that a more explicit and open recognition *and discussion* of these indispensable components is needed in order to avoid misinterpretations and

misunderstandings of established practice and the current state of the art in biographical research.

The article by the editors and Josephine Schmiereck shows which conditions hinder, and which conditions are favorable to, the return to civilian life of former child soldiers and rebel fighters of the "Lord's Resistance Army" in the former war zone of northern Uganda. The study reveals, among other things, the very important role of the family of origin and kin group, or local community, for life courses and personal living conditions in sub-Saharan Africa (as in most other parts of the Global South). To borrow Elias's expression, their lifeworlds and subjective perspectives are generally characterized by a we-I balance that is clearly different from that which prevails in many wealthy or relatively well-off families and local social settings in the G7 countries (and frequently also in the upper educational and income groups in the other G20 countries).

The next three articles are based on a study of the "social construction of border zones" conducted within the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta, with a focus on reconstructing the experiences of migrants. These articles analyze how notions of belonging are generated and used as instruments and effects of power in social settings, and how changes of belonging are linked to different (and very often unplanned) migration experiences. The article by Gabriele Rosenthal, Eva Bahl and Arne Worm is based on a contrastive comparison of three migrants from different regions and social contexts (Syria, Mauritania and Cameroon) who have had profoundly different migration experiences. The article discusses the *processual structures* of illegalized migration, the way life courses and migration courses are interrelated, and how they are intertwined with changing social (and socio-political) settings during different phases of the migration and at different places along the way. In his article, Arne Worm reconstructs the biographical courses and present perspectives of Syrians who have emigrated from the conflict figuration in Syria since spring 2011 and who entered the European Union via the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. These cases of migration courses, which begin in an (extremely) violent and unstable context, show how the positions of the migrants in webs of interdependencies (before and during their migration) and the associated self-, we- and they-images are mutually interdependent, and how much they are determined by their particular familial and collective histories. These examples also show the different conditions in which uncertain perspectives are formed of both the present and the future, and how looking back at the past tends to be avoided (mean-

ing in this case the past before emigration or before the war). In her article, Eva Bahl discusses they-images and self-images of Moroccan youngsters who came to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta or Melilla as unaccompanied minors. While the they-images applied to these children and adolescents by the long-time residents are frequently shaped by racist, xenophobic or peniaphobic patterns of interpretation (and are often used to support a general denigration of Moroccans in the border zone), the self-presentations of the young people testify to a resilience and agency (or in other words autonomy of action, within their limited possibilities) that is surprising in view of the suffering they have experienced.

A remark with political intent: It is common in public discourses in the Global North to argue that refugees and migrants from regions of the world where peaceful changes of power (especially from government to political opposition) and the observance of human rights, at least in 'political life', are rare exceptions, are 'only' economic migrants. The latent economism of many social scientists tends to back up such a one-sided interpretation. If this were meant seriously, it would testify to a dubious underestimation of the advantages of the rule of law and democracy, and would be a projection of our own short-sighted views onto other people who have good reasons to see and experience these things differently. It would be an important achievement if the articles in this volume could help to correct this over-simplified and distorted picture of the problems of people living in the Global South.

The articles by Johannes Becker, Hendrik Hinrichsen and Nicole Witte examine figurations of different groupings of Palestinians in Israel and in the West Bank. With his analysis of a 'mixed' multi-generation family, Johannes Becker reconstructs an inner-Palestinian established-outsider figuration in East Jerusalem, where 'old-established' Jerusalem families are in the minority, and the majority is formed by people who arrived in the course of the twentieth century. This 'classic' established-outsider figuration is linked to social disparagement of the newcomers and their descendants—which exists even within families—and the fact that, at least initially, the latter had less social, economic and cultural capital. The Middle East conflict may contribute to prolonging the existence of this figuration, since, in view of the prevailing pejorative discourses, not only in Israel, on 'the Palestinians', the established try to maintain their social distance from the newcomers, whom they regard as less educated and more bound by tradition.

Hendrik Hinrichsen's article presents the family and life histories of descendants of Palestinians who fled or were expelled during the 1948 Arab-Is-

raeli War, and who live today in the West Bank. The author shows from the inside the many different effects of *overlapping and intertwined* forms of belonging and collective identification, in other words what happens when different we-images are combined. On the one hand, there is the belonging to a Palestinian family that fled to the West Bank in 1948, and, on the other hand, the belonging to very different socio-historical generational units, linked to participation in one of the two Intifadas.

The last article by Nicole Witte is devoted to female Palestinians who possess Israeli citizenship, and shows that there are considerable differences between their we- and self-presentations and those of Palestinians who live outside the borders of Israel. However, she finds that common to the members of this grouping is the way they implicitly or explicitly make reference to a Palestinian national collectivity. The author considers how belongings are (re)constructed and (re)produced in the course of biographical-narrative interviews, and why the explicit expression of a Palestinian belonging is so important for these interviewees. She reconstructs a type of Palestinian women in Israel, characterized by structural similarities in the way they locate themselves in the Palestinian collectivity, despite obvious differences in their life courses and in the way they speak about their biographies and belongings.

Biographies—Discourses—Figurations: Methodological considerations from the perspectives of social constructivism and figurational sociology

Artur Bogner and Gabriele Rosenthal

Introduction

Social-constructivist biographical research, the sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse analysis, and figurational sociology are fields of inquiry which have recently become established in different academic communities, mostly independently of each other, although they are relatively close in terms of various characteristics, and, at least partly, share important historical roots. In this article we want to show the possible benefits of bringing their key concepts together in one integrated theoretical and methodological approach, and of combining them in research practice.[1] It seems to us, as proponents of biographical research and figurational sociology, that the concept of discourse, as used for example by Michel Foucault or by the sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse analysis (see Keller 2004; 2005; 2006), may serve as an intermediary concept that can be used to elucidate and explain some of the most fundamental links between figurations of human beings and the biographies of the individuals who form these figurations. This idea is discussed in detail below. By 'intermediary' we mean that this concept can help us to recognize, describe, understand and explain the *mutual constitution* of societies and individuals. In biographical research, a synthesis of these three theoretical and research perspectives can open up possibilities for more rigorous investigations of the diverse ways human beings interrelate with other human beings, amongst others in the context of we-groups or organized groups, other social groupings, organizations or "institutions". Such a synthesis also makes it possible to study, for example, the role of "cultural" images, patterns, concepts and practices in the interrelations between human beings. In figurational sociology, linking these three

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1 This is a revised and translated version of a text originally written in German (published in two parts as Bogner and Rosenthal 2017a and 2017b).

research and theoretical perspectives could assist a more thorough understanding of the activities, lived experiences and sentiments of individuals in their particular historical, biographical and situational contexts, and help to take into account their "subjective" perspectives. By this we do not mean that social-constructivist biographical research, with its focus on case reconstructions, fails to show how individuals form social figurations. Rather, this has been the declared aim from the beginning of biographical research in sociology, which is bound up with the large-scale study by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki of peasants who emigrated from Poland to the US. With their analysis of the "*experiences and attitudes of an individual*", Thomas and Znaniecki claimed to be able to identify the "*laws of social becoming*" (1958 [1918–1922], 1831–1832). Figurational sociology also looks at the 'actors' and their personal histories and individual developmental processes. This can be seen, for instance, in the study of Mozart by Norbert Elias, in which he makes clear that the life course of this musician becomes more understandable, "if it is seen as a micro-process within the central transformation period of (the) macro-process" that Elias describes, in both the world of artists and wider society (Elias 2010b, 91; our amendment, A.B./G.R.). In both research traditions, societies and organizations cannot be conceived without individuals. Both are based on a conception of societies, or the social world, as a dynamic reality that is constantly generated and created anew, constantly reproduced and altered through the interplay of individuals, in other words on a processual (and strictly relational) conception of the existence of this field of "objects". But why do we want to bring these two traditions of research, and even a version of discourse analysis, together? It is our belief that if biographical research, which concentrates on individual and familial (hi)stories, were to be combined with figurational sociology, which has a stronger focus on *collective and long-term* processes, this would make it much easier to overcome the fruitless segregation of micro-, meso- and macro-perspectives which dominates theory and methodology in the social and cultural sciences (section 2). Furthermore we have found that research into collective *discourses* can assume a significant role in this context, and that a social-science analysis of discourses (as proposed for example by Keller 2005; 2006) can help biographical research to more clearly see the effect, or lack of effect, for example of conflicting or dominant discourses on individual or collective self-presentations and self-interpretations. Such an analysis also helps to investigate the interrelations between dominant discourses and power inequalities within and between social groupings and figurations –not

least figurations of 'established' and 'outsiders' in the sense proposed by Elias and John Scotson (section 3). We also believe that discourse analysis and the concepts used in it can benefit, and the meanings of these concepts can be made more transparent (and precise), when articulated using sociological terminology. In order to make these ideas clearer, and to show their empirical grounding, we will briefly present *two empirical studies* (section 4), followed by a résumé of our methodological conclusions (section 5).

Commonalities and differences between biographical research and figurational sociology

Biographical research

Despite various differences between authors, the biographical research that has been practiced in sociology in Germany since the 1970s is generally based on social constructivism as formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966).[2] From a methodological and practical point of view, it involves reconstructing the *genesis* of the "subjective" perspectives and experiences and everyday knowledge of one or various individuals, which are usually considered the requisite starting point of empirical enquiry and analysis. Revealing, and taking account of, the mutual constitution or interplay of individuals and society has always been a central concern of social-constructivist biographical research. Contrary to prevalent stereotypes, biographical research in sociology has never been concerned with the individual conceived in isolation, but has always been devoted to the empirical study of *individual and collective* processes in their entwinedness, their inescapable interconnectedness. Thus, "biography" is understood not as something purely individual or "subjective", but as a social construct that refers to collective discourses and collective processes. A biography, both in its lived course and as it is remembered and (re-)interpreted, is always an individual *and* collective product. As Bettina Dausien (2010, 113) puts it, biographies are both "a medium for the construction of identity and subjectivity, and […] the result of social construction processes" (our translation, A.B./G.R.). Besides attempting

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2 See for example Alheit and Dausien (2000), Dausien (1996); Fischer and Kohli (1987); Rosenthal (1995; 2004); Schütze (1992; 2007 a; b).

to do justice to these "interrelationships" (in the sense proposed by Georg Simmel and George H. Mead) by taking the biographies and life courses of individuals as a starting point, two other methodological requirements are bound up with a biographical approach in this research tradition. It is important, on the one hand, to understand and explain the meaning of experiences not in isolation, but in the overall context of the life history, and, on the other hand, to carry out a processual analysis, a reconstruction of the emergence, persistence and modification of social phenomena in the context of studying life courses, taking into account *the permanent intertwining of life courses and biographical (self-)interpretations*. And the reconstruction of biographical processes, in their indissoluble interconnection with collective processes, is not simply a matter of answering 'why' questions, like "Why did this person behave or act this way and not another way?" Questions of this type are generally avoided. Using a processual and transgenerational perspective—as proposed and discussed in particular by Elias (e.g. 2009b, 108: n.1, passim; 2007, 90–103)—means asking: What was the long or protracted individual and collective history that led to this biographical constellation of a person, to his or her current situation in relation to others, to this particular activity, decision, view, sentiment, experience or perception? For example, it is not adequate to simply ask why someone made a decision to join a particular political party. Instead, one needs to enquire into the collective *and* individual situation in which the person joined the party—including the long collective *and* individual courses of events that formed the "background" to, or were part of, the "set of circumstances" for this conduct. In stringent social-constructivist biographical research, an individual life course and self-interpretation are always reconstructed in their interconnectedness with the life courses and self-interpretations of other individuals, organized groups, we-groups, or "institutions", and in their entwinement with the discourses that prevailed during different phases of an individual and collective history. This also applies to the interconnectedness of generations that communicate with each other, or are linked in other ways—and this does not just apply to the interdependencies and interactions between different "generations" (both in the genealogical and in the socio-historical sense) within a certain family or household. In order to analyze a life course in which someone joins a party and becomes politically active, it is necessary to ask about the webs of interdependencies in which the biographer was, and still is, involved, the institutional, organizational and informal networks of relationships in which

she/he was socialized, and the historical constellations, including the discourses, she/he was influenced by.

In order to analyze life courses and life stories in this way, and to get away from static or mechanical 'why' accounts which point to only one direction of influence, and from explanations that are reduced to motives or intentions, Fritz Schütze (1977; 1983) introduced the method known as the biographical-narrative interview. Asking people to tell their whole life story provides opportunities to gain insights into their present perspectives and sets of circumstances, into the way they orientate themselves towards, or are influenced by, current discourses, and into the various ways their life courses have been shaped by discourses, relationships and biographical constellations in the past. In contrast to other interview methods, it is thus possible to uncover not only the interpretations of the interviewees in the *present* of the interview or the text production, but also the genesis of these interpretations and the *sequential* gestalt of the *lived* life history, and to reconstruct courses of action and conduct in the past and how they were experienced at the time. In order to avoid drawing hasty conclusions from the biographical self-presentation of interviewees when talking about their past, we try to reconstruct both their present *and* their past perspectives in the light of their "four-dimensional" contexts,[3] or of the relevant "historical" (individual and collective) processes, and to trace the processes of their production, entwinement, interplay and change. This is done in several distinct steps, in accordance with the *analytical method* developed by Gabriele Rosenthal—initially in the context of her research into the life courses of former members of the Hitler Youth movement (Rosenthal 1987, 143–244; see also 1995; 1993).

In biographical-narrative interviews, the interviewees may argue and describe, but most importantly they narrate and remember their own experiences, or at least this is what they are invited to do by the interviewer. Here, it is important to take into account that memory practices—to borrow from Maurice Halbwachs—are framed by the *collective* memories of different *social* groupings. The relevant frames that are pertinent here, usually because they are connected with these groupings and their collective self-interpretation may, depending on the interview's setting or context, be selected and understood or "defined" in various ways—and in ways which may change more than once during the course of a single conversation or inter-

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3 Following a suggestion by Elias (2009a; 2011) it would be even more fitting to talk here of *five-dimensional contexts*, with the dimension of time as the familiar "fourth" dimension, and the dimension of meaning (or symbols) as a "fifth" dimension.

view (Rosenthal 2016a). *Memory practices* are always interrelated with the experienced past that people remember and talk about, and the stocks of collective knowledge that have been established and internalized over various generations (ibid.). Depending on the historical and cultural context, memory practices are subject to collective rules which become consolidated and change over time. They will thus show traces of rules which were valid in the past or in other social or situational contexts, and at the same time traces of social rules which apply in current interactive memory practices or collective discourses.

The memory process cannot be considered independently of the present situation, nor independently of past experiences or the handed-down past. It is interrelated with the collective memory—or collective memories, to put it more correctly—of different societal groupings, organized groups or organizations. These memories are part of the cultural practices which (amongst others) determine which memories and constructions of the past are excluded or marginalized, and which become dominant in the discourse of each grouping or we-group (such as the family, the historical generation, or political, religious or ethnic we-groups), and in public and mass media discourses. We argue that the question whether this leads to conflicts between different worldviews (Mannheim 1980, 307–308) and the corresponding collective memories, or rather to the parallel co-existence of divergent and maybe incompatible collective memories that are mutually tolerated or ignored by various groupings, or to a kind of creolization of collective memories,[4] is an *empirical question*. It is important in every case to make a precise and detailed empirical reconstruction, showing which form of memory has dominated in which historical and social context and in which phases of the lengthier or shorter processes under investigation.

Any analysis thus requires us to reconstruct the dominant discourses in the present and in the past, and how they have changed. In addition to the empirical reconstruction of contemporary memory practices, a broad diachronic perspective is necessary in order to show empirically which *groupings*, in which figurations with other groupings and under which historical boundary conditions, assert which *versions of the collective history* with the aid of which *rules*, and how *counter-discourses* have nevertheless been able to

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4 With regard to culture and postcolonial studies, Hubert Knoblauch (2007, 24) discusses processes of creolization in the sense of a "subdivision into an unfathomable patchwork of cultures belonging to very different milieus, groupings and lifestyles, in which local and supralocal tradition become blurred" (our translation, A.B./G.R.).

develop. We plead here in favor of an empirical approach, i. e. an empirically exact reconstruction of the historical and social contexts in which certain cultural practices have become dominant while others have been marginalized, and how their interaction has changed.

Sociologists who undertake biographical research have recognized the importance of extending case studies across several generations (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1991; Hildenbrand 1999; Rosenthal 2012), because this can reveal how social phenomena such as cultural memory practices emerge and develop over a long period. The approach recommended here is aimed at reconstructing the intertwining and interplay between the individual's history of experiences and the short- and long-term transformations of the collective, social and cultural, circumstances of these experiences. Meticulous reconstructions based on thick descriptions make it possible to overcome the dualism of macro- and micro-perspectives. As suggested by Elias, the objects on the micro level are to be understood as *concrete parts* of (or a different organizational level of) larger objects which appear to be separate units on the macro level—and not (or not primarily) as *instances* of generalized laws or generalized features (e.g. Elias 2009a; 2007, 205–224 and passim; 2012a, 125–127). The dualist conception of individual and society can be overcome by adopting a processual and figurational perspective, where individuals and their memory practices are considered in the historical context of concrete groupings in their particular figurations with other groupings.

Figurational sociology

It should be clear that our formulation of a social-constructivist biographical approach (see also Rosenthal 2012; 2016a; Bogner and Rosenthal 2014; 2017c) has been inspired to a considerable extent by figurational sociology. However, conceptions of a "dialectical" relationship between society and individual that are compatible with, if not closely related to, Elias's figurational sociology have existed for a long time in different strands within the sociology of knowledge, as well as in the Chicago school of sociology (perhaps partly due to the early contact between Karl Mannheim and Louis Wirth[5]).

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5 See Smith (2001, 176–177). Louis Wirth, then at the Chicago Department of Sociology, later first president of the International Sociological Association, translated (with Edward Shils) Mannheim's first book, "Ideology and Utopia", and wrote the preface for the English and American edition of 1936, which also included a translation of Mann-

Before discussing the similarities and important differences between these two theoretical (and empirical) research traditions, first a few remarks on the central concepts and basic assumptions of figurational sociology.

By *figuration* Elias understands a dynamic web of interdependences in flux, a continuously changing network of *mutual* dependencies between people. People have relationships with each other and are dependent on each other, usually in respect of several different dimensions or aspects of the relationship at the same time. For example, pupils usually receive from their teachers not only information or knowledge, but also "attention" in the sense of recognition, appreciation, disapproval or challenges. Among other things, teachers often offer their students models of conduct, activity and experience—models which the latter may accept or reject, copy, modify, ignore or deviate from. An essential element of Elias's conception is that changing, and very often asymmetric power balances (i. e. power inequalities) are an integral part of all relationships between people. Meanwhile these power relations are constantly subject to modification, just like the relationships themselves. For example, teachers are also dependent on their students, at least to some extent. They will usually have a very difficult time if they do not receive a certain degree of cooperation and respect from their pupils. Elias uses the term "power balance" to refer to the proportionate ratio between these mutual dependencies. Their interplay results (potentially) in varying degrees of power inequality or equality. All these are *features of the whole figuration* (i. e. of the whole network of mutual dependencies) and not just of parts of it.

"At the core of changing figurations—indeed the very hub of the figuration process—is a fluctuating, tensile equilibrium, a balance of power moving to and fro […]. This kind of fluctuating balance of power is a structural characteristic of the flow of every figuration." (Elias 2012a, 126)

Because of this processuality, human figurations, as well as their inherent power balances and power inequalities, can be adequately conceived only as "dynamic", changeable facts that are *tied to certain periods of time* (and thus "historical" in this specific meaning of the word). To describe and explain their dynamic and historical nature satisfactorily, it is essential to adopt a

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heim's essay on the sociology of knowledge published in 1931. See the Wikipedia articles on "Louis Wirth" and "International Sociological Association" (details in the list of references). Elias was Mannheim's student in Heidelberg in the 1920s and became his assistant when Mannheim became Professor of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt. On the close relationship and affinities between Mannheim's and Elias's thought, see foremost Kilminster (2007, ch. 3).

long-term, sometimes extremely long, time perspective (Elias 2009b; 2009a; 2012a, 140–152, 135–140). Informative examples of this are Elias' studies of civilizational processes, the socio-historical roots of, and changes in, the collective habitus and nationalism of the Germans, or the genesis of "sport" in the modern sense (Elias 2012b; 2013; Elias and Dunning 1986). Elias applies the three terms *figuration*, *interdependence* and *power* not only to small units like a school class or a married couple, but also to big units like megacities and other large-scale organizations, and even, for instance, to the webs of mutual dependencies or "figurations" that may nowadays be formed by several megacities, or by several societies which are organized for example in the form of nation-states (Elias 2012a, 126; Elias and Scotson 1965).

The concept of figuration is a reference to the *gestalt-like* nature of the "interrelationships" between individuals on the one hand, and between them and social structures and collectivities on the other (Elias and Scotson 1965, 8–12; esp. 10). At the same time it emphasizes the dynamic, restless nature, and the generally non-intentional, altogether uncontrollable structuredness or unplanned directionality of social processes and formations. This is expressed in a condensed form in two passages from his first and most renowned book on the "process of civilization":

"[…] plans and actions, the emotional and rational impulses of individual people, constantly interweave in a friendly or hostile way. *This continuous interweaving of people's plans and actions, can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From this* […] *arises an order* sui generis*, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.* It is this order of interweaving human impulses and strivings, this social order, which determines the course of historical change […]." (Elias 2012b, 404; original emphasis)

"But this intertwining of the actions and plans of many people, which, moreover, goes on continuously from generation to generation, is itself not planned. It cannot be understood in terms of the plans and purposeful intentions of individuals, nor in terms which, though not directly purposive, are modeled on teleological modes of thinking. […] And only an awareness of the relative autonomy of the intertwining of individual plans and actions […] permits a better understanding of the very fact of individuality itself. The coexistence of people, […] the bonds they place on each other […] provide the medium in which it can develop." (Elias 2012b, 591)

These two quotations from Elias' magnum opus of 1939 contain several central motifs of *figurational sociology* or *process sociology*. Human beings exist and live with each other in configurations or constellations of mutual, and often asymmetric, dependencies. They exist only as parts of such "figura-

tions", of *gestalt-like* and dynamic webs of interdependencies that are characterized by relatively close links between *the parts and the whole* (Elias 2010a, 13–23). In other words, the relationship between human individuals and the "social" figurations which they form can be described as one of *mutual constitution*. The one cannot exist without the other (see for instance Elias and Scotson 1965, 10; Elias 2009a). As Elias put it in the 1930s, in terms which reveal his closeness to George Herbert Mead's theory of the social genesis of the self:

> "Without the assimilation of preformed social models […] the child remains […] little more than an animal. […] the individuality of the adult can only be understood in terms of the trajectory of his or her relationships, only in connection with the structure of the society in which he or she has grown up. However certain it may be that each person is a totality unto himself […] it is no less certain that the whole structure of his self-control, both conscious and unconscious, is a product of interweaving formed in a continuous interplay of relationships with other people, and that the individual gestalt of the adult is a society-specific gestalt." (Elias 2010a, 29; the English translation has been corrected by us, A.B./G.R.)

Only in figurations with other people is individualization in the narrow sense possible, including both the typically human acquisition and use of language, and the acquisition of other kinds of collective knowledge and "cultural" competence (see Elias 2010a, 58–59, 29; 2009a). Therefore individuals and societies belong to the same "social" level of reality and spring *simultaneously from the same origin*. Thus, for Elias *"society not only produces the similar and typical, but also the individuality."* (Elias 2010a, 58; original emphasis)

For biographical research, this means that individuality must always be understood as "social" or collective at the same time; it always has collective roots and is a part of webs of interpersonal relationships and of long-term, transgenerational processes—even when a particular, "individual" form has developed that is different from all others, such as a particular person or a particular city. The webs of interdependencies which Elias calls "figurations" must be regarded as *long-term, trans- and intergenerational and (by the same token) collective processes*, that are, to borrow Elias's term, "unplanned"—and ultimately "beginningless". This must be underlined here because in his studies Elias lays much greater emphasis on this long-term ("historical" or "diachronic") perspective, and on the corresponding qualities of the field of en-

quiry, than is the case in the social-constructivist sociology of knowledge.[6] This means that from the perspective of a plurality of individuals, and when considered over a longer period of time, these processes themselves (at least "as a whole") are the *unplanned consequences* of the intertwining of the activities and impulses of many people and many generations. At the same time, however, these unplanned, or at least not completely planned, "consequences" also form the "circumstances", the preconditions or boundary conditions, of all human activities. Elias argues that other sociologists have not grasped the full importance of this dialectic of non-intended results and unrecognized or unknown conditions of human activity, if they only speak of unintentional or "paradoxical" consequences. They do not thoroughly recognize that this kind of phenomenon is omnipresent due to the ordinary involvement of *many* people and *several*, often many, generations, and that in the case of social formations or processes it requires a kind of Copernican turn from actions and actors to the big, long-term, "unplanned", generally or largely unintended, processes in which every activity and every experience is embedded.

This is true regardless of whether the activities are knowingly or consciously directed or oriented towards other people. It is a specific reformulation of Marx's observation that people make their own history, but under pre-existing conditions, not conditions they have created themselves. These conditions are "made" by individuals, but not created, since they result from the desired *and* undesired interweaving of the activities of *many* individuals in specific historical constellations. The long-term unplanned entanglement of the activities and impulses of many people, including the interactions and interrelationships between different generations, is a process that usually develops a powerful endogenous dynamic or momentum of its own, and which very often cannot be treated (methodologically) in the same way as events that are planned and controlled *by a single actor*. Elias thus sets up a theory of social processes (or more precisely *collective* processes) in opposition to the hitherto dominant theoretical and methodological conceptions of sociolo-

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6 And in sociology generally since the Second World War. Due to their common emphasis on the need for long-term diachronic ("historical") studies, especially in combination with a *microscopic analysis of power*, there is a degree of similarity between Elias's and Foucault's works in methodological (not only thematic) terms, which is striking for social theorists, especially when one is a sociologist and the other a philosopher. On the noticeable thematic convergences between Elias's work and Foucault's (and Weber's) writings, see also the highly instructive commentaries by Breuer (2006a; 2006b; 1988*)*; Van Krieken (1990); Landweer (1997); Lemke (2001) and Smith (2001, ch. 5).

gy as a theory of intentional action. Not least, his formulations are directed against the idea that the realm of sociology can be adequately defined as the actions of individuals that are (consciously) oriented towards other people. This basic rule of sociological methodology, which was inherited from economic theory, is not superfluous, but it is not sufficient, because collective processes (and *spontaneous* forms of order, or structures) develop from the interweaving of many people. These are processes which nobody intended and which are relatively independent of individuals and the ideas or plans bound up with their activities. While biographical research is focused on individuals, it often reveals the enormous (though varying) extent to which they are dependent on others by showing how the activities and experiences of one person are influenced by their entanglement in familial and transgenerational dependencies—dependencies which often stretch back into the past beyond their lifetime.

The processual and long-term character of these phenomena was concretized by Elias, and before him by Mannheim, by referring amongst others to the *involvement of several generations*, especially with regard to the transfer, genesis and transformation of stocks of collective knowledge (Elias 2009a; Mannheim 1952a [1928]). This is an aspect which has played a peripheral role to date in figurational sociology. Linkages and interactions between generations mostly tend to be treated as a theoretical background assumption and are not usually made the focus of concrete studies in their own right. Therefore this remains a desideratum for future research.

Such a "dialectical" conception of the relations between individuals and society as a *structured plurality* of individuals may sound relatively familiar to social scientists; but this cannot be said of the *methodological* conclusion drawn by Elias in the 1930s, in *The Society of Individuals* (later published as Part I of the book with the same title). He argued that the balance between the determination of individuals by collective phenomena, on the one hand, and the determination of collective phenomena by individuals, on the other hand, is *variable*, and that describing and explaining this balance is a matter for *empirical research* and not—as sociologists usually assume—a "theoretical" or "methodological" question that can, or must, be answered before any empirical research activity is embarked upon.

"Individual scope for decision is always limited, but it is *also very variable* in nature and extent, *depending on the instruments of power which a person controls*. A glance at the nature of human integration is enough to make *this variability of individual bonds* comprehensible. What binds and limits individuals is, seen from the other

side, the exact opposite of this confinement: their individual activity, their ability to take decisions in very diverse and individual ways. The individual activity of some is the social limitation of others. And it depends only on the power of the interdependent functions concerned, the degree of reciprocal dependence, who is more able to limit whom by his activity." (Elias 2010a, 54; our emphases, A.B./G.R.; see also Elias 2006, 33–35)

It is a simple and observable fact that a person's freedom of action depends on other people's freedom of action, and is thus limited by the latter in a variable way (and vice versa). Both therefore vary *empirically* (Elias 2010a, 51–54). The logical conclusion to this has to be that it is impossible without empirical research to answer questions in respect of "free will" or "autonomy" or the determination by social structures. It shows that questions which are almost always formulated in the context of an "epistemological" or "philosophical" discourse should far more often be made the subject of *empirical* research in the social and cultural sciences (see Elias 2006, 32–36; Elias 2002 [1969], 56–62; 2010a, 51–55).

The arguments presented above from the point of view of figurational sociology with regard to the relationship between figurations and individuals can also be applied to collective and individual self-descriptions. Just as in the case of *individuals* and social *figurations*, this relationship can be described as one of mutual constitution: the self-descriptions of individuals are inseparably bound up with and dependent on collective self-descriptions (or "discourses") *and vice versa*. Collective self-descriptions are produced and received, or understood, by no one other than individuals, who in turn are always parts of bigger collectivities and figurations *and their intrinsic collective discourses*. Collective self-descriptions exist only as components of individual self-descriptions, but at the same time they lend them their means, materials, models and methods. Individual self-descriptions are therefore also self-descriptions of the groupings, we-groups or collectivities (or the respective figurations of various groupings) to which the individuals belong. Their collective stocks of knowledge, conceptions and imaginary worlds are realized and documented in the self-descriptions of individuals. Only in these do they become real or readable.

Discourses as an intermediary element?

Before proceeding to discuss the mutual constitution of biographies, discourses, individuals and figurations, let us first take a look at the concept of discourse as used by Foucault, a concept which has been over-emphasized and used in contradictory ways in the reception of his work. In the social and cultural sciences, Foucault was one of the most important and inspiring scholars in the second half of the 20th century. Nevertheless, it is our opinion that his work and his originality have been overestimated to some extent. This is partly because Foucault rediscovered in his own way a number of important motifs and ideas which were not new in sociology and social philosophy (at least in the German-speaking countries), but which had been marginalized in the decades following the Second World War. Moreover, the perception of Foucault's work was filtered to a notable degree by a reception that was influenced and distorted by fashionable keywords. Not a few of Foucault's intentions and impulses, including the clear tendencies in his (late) work, were either reversed or marginalized. This applies, for instance, to his striving—which became evident after *L'ordre du discours* (Foucault 1971; Engl. Foucault 1972), but was tangible already in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1969; Engl. Foucault 1972)—to get away from a form of linguistic structuralism which presented itself as radical, both politically and philosophically, and his later emphasis on "power". This was a concept of power which set itself apart from the early modern concept of sovereignty (or "rule"), and had more in common with the dynamic and voluntaristic connotations of the term 'struggle' than with the normative, deterministic and static connotations of the terms 'structure' and 'language' (Sarasin 2010, 118–121). It is well known that this *decentralized and dynamized* concept of power, which was closely related to the concept of struggle, gained increasing importance in his work from circa 1970 onwards—at the cost of the central position of the concept of "discourse" (Sarasin 2010, 124; Keller 2008, 81–89; Ruoff 2009, 99–100). His readers frequently failed to appreciate this important change in Foucault's terminology and approach and method, and interpreted Foucault's concept of discourse as a rediscovery of the independent variable, of the deepest truth of "cultural science", once again liberated from the irrelevancies of classical sociology and economic history. This shift was often treated as a mere exchange of synonymous words (from "structure" to "discourse" and from there to a concept of power that was identical to "knowledge"), instead of as a significant change in his strategy of research

and his terminological tools. Recent secondary literature refutes this widespread view of Foucault's complex and often difficult work, and of his concept of discourse. Foucault, who used to be considered as a leading structuralist, said in later years: "One can agree that structuralism formed the most systematic effort to evacuate the concept of the event […] from history. In that sense, I don't see who could be more of an anti-structuralist than myself" (Foucault 1980, 114). At the latest in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977), Foucault set up another model in opposition to the structuralist paradigm of language:

"Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (*langue*) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war *rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning*. History […] is intelligible—but this in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics." (Foucault 1980, 114; our emphasis, A.B./G.R.)

This understanding of a "historicity" which is not determined by big 'centralist' structures finds expression in his late work in the *decentralized* concept of power and the *microscopic* analysis of power. What has been said about distortions in Foucault's popular reception in respect of the relationship between discourse and power, also applies to the relationship between so-called knowledge-power complexes and the "autonomy" of individuals. In particular it applies to the techniques or strategies of *self-guidance*, which came into the focus of his unfinished "history of sexuality". It can therefore be described as an example of the irony of history that Foucault's reception has contributed much to the recent linguistic "turn" in the social and cultural sciences. For Foucault himself, and especially the developmental tendencies in his late work, it would be more accurate to speak of a *sociological* or a *historical-sociological-empirical* turn (see Keller 2008, 15, 37).

The corresponding transformation of his problem definition was already implied in the earlier change in Foucault's concept of discourse, which began to include what is traditionally seen as the Outside of a discourse (including the so-called "non-discursive practices"), and which became increasingly *decentralized and fluid*. The later Foucault referred to this Outside or Beyond using more rather sociological concepts—concepts which are attuned to the analysis of power relations, such as the concept *dispositive* (see for example Bührmann and Schneider 2008, 52–62; Sarasin 2010, 114–124). Roughly speaking, at this point of our discussion we refer to the undecided, oscillating concept of discourse from Foucault's middle period (Sarasin 2010, 124),