

Collective Research in Autobiography as a Method of the Science of the Subject

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Abstract: "Collective Research in Autobiography" is a qualitative method of working on autobiographical text materials (interviews or written episodes and stories) in a research group. It was developed in the early 1980s from the starting point of basic positions of Critical Psychology concerning the theory of the subject (ZECH 1983, 1988). Today, it synthesizes perspectives taken from the theory of the subject and systems theory. With Collective Research in Autobiography, the widespread separation into researcher and researched subject is dispensed with, as the person concerned will him/herself learn the theories and methods and use them analytically for the personal situation. The research procedure is characterized by the following:

- The subjects researched are protagonists of an autobiographical event in the plot.
- They are authors of a narrated autobiographical story.
- They are contemporary witnesses of a social situation.
- Finally, they are subjects of research in the scientific process of interpretation and theorization.

In these four roles, the subjects are permanently present as persons affected and experts at the same time. The cognitive interest of Collective Research in Autobiography is not only in self-enlightenment and broadening of the individual's ability to act, but furthermore in the reconstruction of general types concerning ways of acting and explaining in social situations that can be paraphrased. The research setting is intended as a multi-leveled group process, in which texts of different orders—from case studies to theoretical texts—will be generated.

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1. Methodological Starting Points of Collective Research in Autobiography

1.1 Critical theory of the subject and method

"Collective Research in Autobiography" is a group-related qualitative research method for working on autobiographical text materials (interviews or written episodes and stories), that was developed in the early 1980s by ZECH (cf. 1983, 1988). Texts of the cultural-historical school of Soviet psychology and critical psychology provided the theoretical background of the autobiographical research. It is the individual process of having become a particular subject or forms of the subject's *individual capacity to act* under different concrete social conditions that form the general subject of research. Today as in the past it is examined how individuals actively and independently develop into the social conditions of life surrounding them, how they develop their personality and capacity to act during these processes of change; but also how they realize existing ideological offers of adjustment and in doing so abandon possibilities of their development. So it is the *relation between the objective situational conditions of acting and the subjective explanation for acting in its effects on the individual development of personality* that is analyzed. [1]

Until the beginning of the 1980s, however, critical psychology had scarcely worked out an elaborate method and methodology for the analysis. Only the Hamburg women's studies researchers around Frigga HAUG had presented their method of memory work simultaneously with the first version of Collective Research in Autobiography (cf. ZECH 1983), and their method was also claiming to be a research method based on critical psychology (cf. HAUG 1983). The same year saw the publication of "Grundlegung der Psychologie" (On the Basis of Psychology) by Klaus HOLZKAMP (cf. 1983). The claim of having developed Collective Research in Autobiography as a research method of the science of the subject within the paradigm of critical psychology now made the revision and further development of the method inevitable (cf. ZECH 1988). Proceeding methodically, the researchers try to dispense with the differentiation between researchers and researched subjects: the persons affected are themselves

learning the theories and methods and are using them for their situation within a metasubjective frame of arrangements under methodical control. In addition to working out generalized types of development in specific situations, one of the aims of Collective Research in Autobiography is to contribute to the individuals' ability of mastering new and up to now unrealized possibilities for themselves within the contradictory social network of the ways and difficulties of development. In our context, researching the capacity to act does not only mean establishing the status quo of the capacity; it always includes asking for its potential expansions in the sense of the 'Zone of the following development' (VYGOTSKI). [2]

1.2 Four methodological research steps

The constitution of social individuality is not understood as an imprinting of any kind, but as an active process of the subjects acquiring social possibilities in a form accessible to the subject. In doing so, they are forming their personality and developing their capacity to act. According to the insight of the subjective functionality of all human expressions of life, autobiographical stories were considered *constructions* from the very beginning—a view that did not gain general acceptance in biographical research until the end of the 1990s. The remaining question was *for the way in which* society conveys itself within these subjective constructions. To classify this process of conveyance, Collective Research in Autobiography generally proceeds in four working steps:

1. Production and interpretation of theme-related autobiographical material,
2. Analysis of the *situational conditions* in which the related actions and stories take place (as a reconstruction of 'biographical situations', in which social possibilities of acting are caused to change direction),
3. Reconstruction of *subjective explanations* used by the individuals to convey their idea of the conditions as well as of the actions they carried out and described (as a 'reconstruction of subjective constructions of meaning'),
4. Abstraction of the results of autobiographical research in individual case theories and generalization on comparison of the individual cases. [3]

2. The Importance of the Group as Research Instrument

The four methodical steps outlined above are carried out collectively, as it is the fundamental principle of Collective Research in Autobiography to qualify and use the group (the 'collective') as an instrument of research. The group is also assigned different roles and functions at different times as the individual is also present in varying roles and functions in the research process as a group process: as the *protagonist* of his or her life story (as actor and person affected), as the *author* of his or her biography, as a contemporary *witness* of historical contexts of acting and as *researcher*. [4]

2.1 The group as extended subject of cognition

In the science of the subject, theory formation has a dual reference to the subject. On the one hand, it develops individual theories (theories with a concrete empirical reference to the object) based on general basic concepts (of a general theory of the subject as outlined above); these basic concepts are obtained through categorial analysis. On the other hand, it makes theories emerge through analysis of a concrete problem and therefore exclusively from the point of view of the subject. In the end, no one but the concrete subject is able to make competent statements on the concrete subject. Yet at the same time, the subject cannot make these statements as he or she is captivated by the specific interpretations—i.e. constructions—of his or her unique biography and selective perception of the world. To transcend this state of captivation by the subject's individual constructions, arrangements of reflection are required; in Collective Research in Autobiography, these arrangements are provided by the theoretically defamiliarized perspective on the subject's written autobiography. This theoretical point of view on the subject's personal life is part of the metasubjective perspective of the respective examination as a researcher. In this context, reflection in a sense of the systems theory means examining the personal system from the point of view of the environment as well as an examination of a second order, i. e. switching from an examination of What to an examination of How. The group offers the possibility of transcending the paradox of the expert on a person's life being captivated by his or her personal construction. [5]

2.2 The group as a place of uncertainty and stabilization

The other aspect of the scientific clearing up of the object is the self-enlightenment of the participating subjects. As the researchers/subjects are furthermore part of the social conditions of life they are researching, and as the scientific insight about persons being 'socially conveyed' is inseparable from furthering the making of decisions on the personal life process, each action-orientated research process will in a certain sense also trigger uncertainty, will become a psychological 'therapy' for the persons involved (cf. HOLZKAMP 1980, p.6). The quasi-therapeutic triggering of uncertainty is an implicit part of the methodical procedure of self-enlightenment and the group plays a stabilizing role as a condition for the aspired personal change. [6]

2.3 The group as a place for qualification and learning

Collective Research in Autobiography is furthermore conceived as a method of learning and qualification. Learning is the precondition of the research done and of expanding the participants' individual capacity to act. At the same time, research is the precondition of learning because individual processes of learning in order to expand capacities are only possible through cognitively overcoming the personal state of having become a particular subject. The research group plays four different roles in this context: the group is aiding in a) the theoretical qualification of the participating subject researchers and b) the researchers' methodical qualification to be applied to themselves and other subjects during the

process. The group is also aiding in c) respective self-enlightenment and d) the joint overcoming of the participants' respective status quo at expanding his or her individual capacity to act. [7]

2.4 The research process as a group process

The research method qualifies the group as a collective. Doing research as a collective transcends the individual acting as a researcher towards acting as a group. The relations of a 'scientific community' are created immediately, as it were, and not through the public discourse of individual subjects doing research and afterwards publishing their results. The joint creation of a product, the common interest in (self-) enlightenment enforces common orientation towards an aim, the negotiation of commitments and reflection on product-related dependencies. Consequently, the research process as a group process also includes phenomena of what is called group dynamics; these are not the dynamics of ad-hoc-groups of a non-committal nature, however, but carry an existential relevance. The possibilities of expanding the individual capacity to act are therefore embedded in the necessities of expanding the collective possibilities of acting. [8]

2.5 The group as mirror and object of reflection

The scientific research object (of science of the subject) is not just researched by the research group from an objectivizing distance, but is simultaneously reflected by the relationships within the group. The group relationships reproduce the respective context-dependent contradictions and ambivalences through group-specific gestures of defense, ideological acts of including and excluding realities and perspectives on the object. Consequently, the group must also become the object of reflection (supervision) in order to control those aspects of group events that prevent (self-) enlightenment. [9]

3. The "Politicalization of the Subjects in a German-German Comparison" Project

3.1 The history of the East-West research group or theme

In autumn 1991, an interdisciplinary group of scientists from Leipzig and Hannover came together for the first time. The group had emerged from the contact between Stefan BUSSE and Rainer ZECH immediately after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The beginning was dominated by a mutual curiosity inspired by euphoria. Experiences of scientific work were shared, research projects were presented. The researchers related how their lives had been part of the different social contexts. This meeting led to a joint research project, taking the theme of East and West as the object. After a number of methodological and methodical discussions, it was decided to apply Collective Research in Autobiography to an aspect of research in political socialization since the method was the scientific continuation of a spontaneous project: the mutual relating of autobiographical stories and history (cf. BUSSE, ZECH 1994). The issue then was to analyze how

the persons affected had filtered and adjusted themselves into their respective social systems or offered resistance and which consequences their concrete conduct had had on their personality. [10]

3.2 Common theoretical and socialization backgrounds

The reciprocal scientific understanding took its course with relatively few problems as the researchers had used—without knowing each other—the same theoretical concepts for orientation (cf. ALBERG 1990 for the East German part of the group). In addition, the respective socialization in the 'leftist' university environment provided a number of common aspects, despite all differences of the social systems, so that a spontaneous understanding was facilitated. The fact that the German-German research group is still existing today demonstrates that existing differences were successfully overcome and that the mutual understanding endures. This is not typical of the research groups formed after the Fall of the Berlin Wall; for many of them, conflicts and lack of understanding have soon led to their disbanding. [11]

3.3 The intersubjective performance of the German-German unification

The meeting between social scientists from East and West had become possible because of the decay of real socialism in East Germany due to inner contradictions. The German-German unification achieved within the research group was performed as a parallel to the Unification taking place in the realm of sociopolitics. Analyzing the participants' biographies through the science of the subject allowed the participants to understand each other and the respective societies. Research in the theme of the different political socialization of East and West Germany was at the same time a parallel elaboration of the conditions of mutual understanding. In *Collective Research in Autobiography*, comprehending oneself and comprehending society have always been the two complementary sides of one process. The reason for the success of the process in the research group may be that both sides were at each other's disposal and cooperating in questioning and explaining. As far as society as a whole is concerned, the differences are still—or again—considerable; inequality of the starting conditions did not lead to horizontal relations in society but reproduced new vertical relations (cf. AHBE 1994 and 1999). [12]

3.4 Sensitivities and learning processes

The dynamic of the German-German research group did not pass without frictions and occasional drama, though. The Eastern participants ("Ossis") showed a tendency towards defensive attitudes and were easily offended by Western participants ("Wessis") expressing a distanced irony towards society and their own histories. On the part of the Eastern participants, there was a lot more of 'putting their heart' into their relation to society and to their related histories. From an objective point of view, they found themselves in a situation in which they had to explain their past and completed social life and individual participation. The Western participants are living in a changed continuity, but in a

continuity not fundamentally called into question. Occasional self-accusations were the other side of Eastern attitudes of defense—as a kind of identification with the aggressor, so to speak. Western participants were offended when their efforts to integrate the new brothers and sisters did not meet with the 'gratitude' they merited. Here the inequality of the communicative starting conditions shows in a concealed manner. Had they not also been made an object of research, these sensitivities on both sides could easily have led to the failure of the group. In this way, they became the starting point of learning processes for an intensified reciprocal understanding, for acceptance and respect for the differences of a German history separated during forty years, expressed in the participants' biographies and autobiographies. [13]

There will be no further description of other preconditions regarding the theory of the subject and biography and of empirical results of the project at this point, as our interest here is first of all in the methodological frame and the methodical procedure of Collective Research in Autobiography (for results concerning content, cf. ZECH 1995 and BUSSE, EHSES & ZECH 1999). [14]

4. Interlinking of Research and Group Process as Method

4.1 Interlinking of group interaction and text production

The methodological premises set above were not just axiomatic points of departure that were continuously translated into methodical acting within the frame of the politicalization process, however. On the one hand, they also imply a 'surplus' of set methodical ideals, while on the other hand, the realized methodical proceeding also requires further methodological reflection. Some of these points will be taken up later, but we will come to the methodological procedure first. [15]

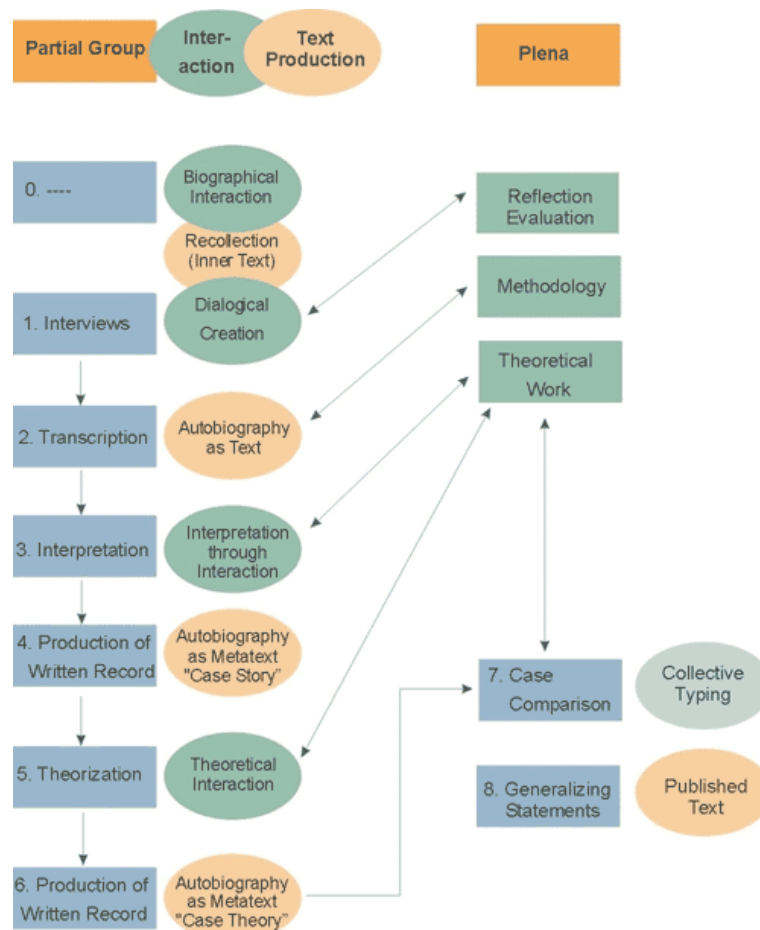
The sequence of steps to be outlined now is an interlinking of a process of obtaining data in several stages, from the analysis of data up to theorization and publication of the material with various settings of group activities. The following description is itself a result of the process and reflects the process logic, but not the actual progress of the process. [16]

First, there is the distinction between work and function of the partial groups and the plenum to be made:

- *Function of the Partial Groups*: data production, data analysis and evaluation, theorization of the case material
- *Function of the Plenum (entire group)*: discussion of theory and methods, generalizing theorization of the cases, instance of evaluation and reflection in regard to the methodical steps and (self-) experience while working in partial groups [17]

On the other hand, working in the partial groups is to be understood as an interlinking of *group interaction* and *text production*. Each group interaction is

based on a text and produces a new text, which in turn creates the operative point of departure for a new group interaction (for an illustration of the process, see figure 1) [18]



In methodological respect, the aim of all interpretation processes was to create a distance between the real person and his or her real life on the one hand and the autobiography as text on the other hand. A methodically controlled self-distance of the persons affected was imperative to allow the removal of the differentiation between researchers and researched persons. The theoretically defamiliarized view on the personal autobiography recorded in writing was facilitated by the fact that the group's methodically controlled speech arrangement was set to dealing with persons in the third person-mode, i. e. speaking of the 'protagonist' and the 'author' of the interpreted text. In this way, it was never the interviewed person who was the subject of interpretation but always an author's text about the autobiographical actions of a protagonist! The person therefore interacted as 'subject of interpretation' in the roles of contemporary witness and researcher. Consequently, the subject was permanently present during the entire research process: as protagonist, as author, as contemporary witness and as researcher. [19]

In the following, a collective process of several stages is presented that—departing from the biographical description—is leading step by step to a case condensation via resolution of previous constructions and further synthesizations. [20]

4.2 Steps of the procedure

0. Biographical events as unwritten text

This stage zero is the logical presupposition for the autobiographical text to become possible. The biographical events are available as a recollection in the first place, but not as a completed text. They are available to the subject—so the results of modern cognitive psychology suggest (cf. SCHACTER 1999)—as different engrams, (partial) scenes, episodes, as scripts with a local and temporal index. Through these, the subject can use recollection to access the requirements and explanations for acting that generated biographical events (cf. ROSENTHAL 1995). These recollections nevertheless await an occasion for recollection (provided in this case by our asking for autobiographical narration) that leads to the active construction of the autobiographical narration. [21]

Step 1: Production of the autobiographical text material

For the production of the autobiographical material, ten narrative interviews were conducted. The narrative impulse, the questions *When did the political sphere enter your biography, When and how did you realize that you are living in political circumstances?*, were the respective points of departure from which the narrator developed his or her narration. The typically sparing occurrence or even lack of interventions of the narrative interview was interrupted in some interviews not only by inquiries but also by ('unallowed') comments and confrontations. As interviewers and interviewed persons were involved in a common working group, the situation was quite similar to a natural narrative situation, so that we can and have to consider this a *dialogical generation of the autobiographical text*. [22]

Step 2: Transcription of the interview material by the respective authors

The transcription of the biographical interviews was carried out by the authors of the autobiographical narration themselves. The text recorded in writing became the operative basis for the next group interaction. [23]

Step 3: Interpretation of the material by the partial group

The autobiographical interview text was interpreted in groups of four including the protagonists. The make-up of the groups was to make use of the cultural differences (East/West and men/women) for their interpretation. [24]

The analysis of the text served the purpose of reconstructing the text's implicit dramaturgy. After the interpreters' associative approach to the text, the text was primarily analyzed with regard to the scenic structure of the outline, i.e. introduction/overture, principal and minor stories, etc. With the help of motto-like headings, text elements were subsumed under narrative foci. Instead of pre-formed categories, the following questions were used to provide the perspective of interpretation:

- Which political/cultural possibilities of acting does the narrator develop and describe ('implicit analysis of conditions')?
- In what way does this find expression in the 'architecture' of the narrator's text?
- How does the narrator explain and account for his or her way of acting ('implicit analysis of explanation')?
- Which overall pattern does he or she develop to ensure personal capacity to act? [25]

Step 4: Production of a written summary of the interpretation

The point of departure for this step is provided by the tape-recordings of the group interpretation, which is the last interpretation the group has agreed on. The text is word-for-word condensed into an *interpretation text*. The author of this new text is in turn the author of the interviews; the text on hand at this point is a metatext relating the implicit story of the interview once again, as it were, and thus describing how the author has constructed his or her autobiographical narrative according to the questions listed above. [26]

In doing so, the author of the respective evaluated texts was bound by the recordings of the partial group, but the author also had the freedom of a personal interpretation as he or she did not record the process but a condensing description of the interpretation the group had agreed on. The recording of the *interactive negotiation of the interpretation* would certainly have been another important source for the interpretation of the interactive process of construction. Through the 'phenomena of transmission and reflection', the dynamic of the directed and narrated autobiographical scenery is repeated and reflected in the dynamic and the communicative arrangement of the interpretation group (especially in the context of the politically charged theme of East and West and through the respective differentiations of gender perspectives). We have not used this source systematically; it did nevertheless play a role in the next stage of theorization. [27]

The result of this stage is a *new synthetic text*, a written *case story*—as the story of *this particular case*—that forms the basis for interpretation of the next theoretical interaction. [28]

Step 5: Theorization of the interpretation

Groups of four were formed anew (according to the schemes of East and West or male and female) for the further generalization of the case story in a *case theory*—a theory of *this particular case*. The aim was to trace the structural logic and construction of the case. In this process, the research questions from the theoretical plenum discussions were explicitly taken into the case, and at the same time, the material was used to generate the following research categories:

- a. on the construction of the political possibilities of acting by the protagonists/authors (these were considered in relation to the idea, won through an analysis of the conditions, of the 'objective' possibilities of acting, e. g. in the GDR and/or FRG during the 1970s/1980s; these possibilities were the result of theoretical work in the plenum),
- b. on the explanations for acting that were typical of a case,
- c. on the subjective 'gains and costs' of patterns of acting and reasons for them (analysis of the subjective functionality of the protagonists' capacity to act),
- d. on the autobiographical mode of narration as a continuation and overcoming of the biographical patterns of acting. [29]

The *synthesized interpretation text* was again resolved, as it were, into an *interactive text* through the theorizing group discussions. The fact that participants were spontaneously relying on the original interview text as a theorization aid especially in this phase of theorization is an indication of the relevance of the group discussions; discussions that are processes of coming to terms with interpretation variants (processes more or less removed from the first production of written records, as outlined above). During this phase, another critical examination of the interpretation group's (step 5) following the author's ideological concepts (were they taken in by the author?) was possible; but we were also able to examine—a process the other way round—in how far the group had tried to resist the interpretation perspective, the author's personal perspective. The phase of theorization has therefore an important function of reflection and balancing for the group and the author that goes far beyond theorization. [30]

Step 6: Production of written records of theorization

The tape-recordings of the partial theory group formed the basis for another step of text production. Once again, the author of the interview text played the role of the recording researcher who had the task of turning the discussion into a consistent *case theory*—as a theory of the specific case—by means of the 'last variant' of the interactively generated theorization. This is an active process of construction as well in which an *interactive text* becomes synthesized into a *theoretical text*. [31]

Step 7: Generalization as case comparison

A further step of structural generalization was realized through *case comparison* and *case contrasting* in the plenum, using the results of the partial groups. The aim of working out typical aspects of cases—as a theoretical transition from 'this particular case' to 'a case like this'—was a dual perspective of generalization:

- a. With regard to the *analysis of the conditions*, the process was dealing with the typical socially pre-formed situations of acting that defined certain tasks, offered certain alternatives for acting, set certain contradictory situations of acting and suggested certain ideological interpretation offers for the actor's

point of view on him- or herself and the world. Consequently, the reconstruction of certain social logics of discourse that were offering the inclusion and exclusion of reality to the subject were the issue here. [32]

- b. Regarding the *analysis of explanations*, biographically generated patterns were analyzed: the typical biographically generated patterns of action regulation and routines of coping when dealing with socially defined or politically motivated situations of acting in which power, dependence on and dealing with authority, the relation between individual interests, group-specific interests and social interests, between ideology and social assignment, political actions and political structures (political parties etc.) were playing a role. [33]
- c. Eventually, the two were synthesized in order to facilitate an understanding of the *individual biographical pattern of acting as a typical case in defined social situations of acting* ('as a case of ...'). The results of the analysis of the conditions were more explicitly related to the explanation- and pattern-related case theories. The meaning of the case comparison was thus to establish the difference between the typical and the ephemeral and to define the respective cases as variants of a general pattern. [34]

We referred to the obvious characteristics of East/West and man/woman as key criterion of differentiation and sounded out common aspects and differences to be able to make hypothetical statements on the biographical patterns of politicalization at this point. Assuming that there are only finite variants of the capacity to act under certain social conditions, it is possible to establish types and basic variants of subjective forms and patterns of regulation (cf. BUSSE, EHSES & ZECH 1999). [35]

At the same time, this stage of collective typing was operating with the synthesized texts (of theorization) and resolved them interactively once again; this was the precondition of a further text production in the context of publication. [36]

Step 8: Publication

The publication of research results may seem a triviality or matter of course at the end of any research process. Publication suggests, however, that results or texts as a specific form of data and specific forms of data generalization merely need to be brought before the public. What is overlooked in this concept is that another serious and methodologically relevant step of construction and synthesization is carried out, for at least two reasons: [37]

- a. Publications are always related to an occasion and a statement of the problem, they are staged events within the frame of expectations and routines of publication, e. g. of a certain journal or a conference theme. These inevitably set an interpretation focus which will lead to the material being not reinvented but nevertheless pointed or accentuated. This may even re-center the cognitive interest and cast new perspectives on the material. (It was our participation in the conference "Die Gruppe als Erkenntnisinstrument der

qualitativen Forschung" [The Group as Cognitive Instrument in Qualitative Research] at the University of Bremen in October 1999 that, due to the terseness enforced by the statement of the problem, led to the point of view on our research process outlined in this paper.) [38]

- b. The relation of cognitive process and presentation of cognitive results is usually reversed at publication. On the one hand, this is followed by a reversal of end and means regarding empirical material and theoretical statements: The empirical materials are no longer laboriously weeded out to generate generalized theoretical statements but now primarily have the function of supplying evidence for, substantiating and empirically supporting a theoretical elaborate. In spite of all self-imposed faithfulness to the data, this inevitably leads to accentuations that refer the material to a specific mount. Choices have to be made from the possible abundance of data, which has to be concentrated to make the theoretical statements plausible in a reader-related text. In these data reductions, quotations serving as examples are frequently used, or—as we did in other contexts (cf. BUSSE, EHSES & ZECH 1999)—the production of further synthesized texts is used, in which a case is related or theoretically presented again (we reproduced ten pages of case theories for use in publication). In any case, this process constitutes another stage of construction. [39]

5. Methodological Reflections

In the course of this presentation, we have already explicitly outlined methodological problems we considered essential. In conclusion, some aspects that took effect because of the arrangement of our research design will be raised again here as basic problems. [40]

5.1 The presence of the subject: 'Disturbing variable' or expert?

According to its conception of itself, qualitative research is characterized exactly by qualifying the classic problem of objectivity. The researcher's subjectivity and the uncontrolled subjectivity of the researched are not to be excluded from the research process through control, they are to be used as sources of reflection and cognition. Still, the non-presence (or exclusion?) of the subject 'unqualified' for the research process appears to be the usual case in qualitative research as well. At the most, efforts are undertaken to partially reduce the differential between researchers and researched through the 'communicative validation' in which the researched subject participates. But what are the consequences of the permanent presence of the researched subject for the research process? A first consequence has already become visible: The permanent presence of the subject makes the communicative validation as a constant instance not only easily feasible and necessary; the question is rather in which function the researched subject is respectively acting and being addressed during the research process. The roles outlined above constitute different validating ways of addressing the subject; ways that correspond to practicing a dialogical competence in dealing with these roles. The classic problem of controlling the

factor of subjectivity therefore becomes a *qualification problem* for qualitative research since the subject is not exclusively addressed as person affected and expert on his or her merely subjective point of view, but as *expert in varying respects*. The problem of the 'Education to be a Good Test Subject' ('Erziehung zur guten Versuchsperson', LEWIN) in classic psychology occurs here as a problem of communication and qualification of the group member and the entire group. [41]

Consequently, methodical regulations were necessary to meet this complex requirement. As the basis for interpretation *nothing but the transcribed text and the statements of the participants as contemporary witnesses and/or researchers* were admitted; but the *spontaneous remarks of protagonists affected/authors* were also to be controlled and reflected methodically. [42]

These were either:

- a. *Explanation-related remarks* (justifications for acting). These were included on strong vote of the author, not to correct the interview text, however, but as competing interpretations: remarks that could also have been brought forward by another member of the interpretation group as not only the correcting interpretation of the author may have critically conflicted with the interpretation of the group but the text already produced may also have critically conflicted with the 'justifying explanation' of the author. These critical objections referred to the perspective of the protagonist ('At the time, I acted this way because...') as well as to the perspective of the author ('I reacted like this during the interview because...'). In principle, these remarks are always producing new data material of which the 'reliability' has to be the subject of an interactive negotiation in the group in turn. [43]

Or they were:

- b. Condition-related remarks: In this respect, the author could now and then provide knowledge of the circumstances making an action/omission/explanation more comprehensible. The 'text authority' of the group had to be maintained and reliability had to be critically examined here as well: was the comment to be actually considered important and relevant for a better understanding of a text passage, e. g., or was it dispensable and merely an expression of the protagonist's/author's unsatisfied urge to narrate and justify his actions. These decisions also became the subject of the group's negotiation process. [44]

Yet at the end of the interpretation an important methodological principle set in: *The author has the final say!* for the following reasons:

- a. The author is not only an expert on his or her story. Through the interpretation process jointly undertaken in the group, through the methodically explicit *external dialogue* between the roles as protagonist, author, communicating contemporary witness and interpreting researcher, the *inner dialogue*

between those roles of the participating subjects is also qualified. This means that the subject *is* not only an expert on his or her story (in a state of "Urzentrierung" [Original Centering]), he or she is also *becoming* an expert on a personal reflection and on working on his or her history (through the mode of "Rezentrierung" [Re-centering] carried out through the group process of "Dezentrierung" [De-centering]—cf. RAEITHEL 1984 for these three modes of acquiring world and self). [45]

- b. Since the expansion of the protagonists' capacity to act is only possible through a change of the self-description within the frame of these settings, *the interpretation produced cannot go beyond the author's capacity to re-interpret*; i.e. the 'Zone of the following development' should be discovered as a 'Zone of the first possible development' or should not be transcended. After all, the included subjects are expected to cope with some irritation, instances of insecurity and demystification due to the group's power of interpretation and the fact that the text produced cannot be deceived. The interpretation process is thus not only becoming a process of negotiation with regard to content but also with regard to a possible expansion of the capacity to act and changes of the subject or through the subject. After all, assessing history is not only committed to an abstract revealing truth but committed to the change and the capacity to change of subjects. [46]

5.2 Objective expert story and subjective possibilities of acting

The problem of objectivity also arose in another regard—i.e. with regard to the social contexts of acting and the situations of acting socially conveyed through them, arising in the authors' stories and constructions respectively. At first, we had the illusion that we could somehow take the real conditions of East or West as an '*objective standard measure*' for the subjective constructions in order to reconstruct what it had actually been like compared to the authors' stories. But: Firstly, the concrete historical conditions—like all talking about history—are always 'superindividual' constructions; secondly, they are themselves providing the material out of which the individual constructions are made (conveyance of ideology). This led to a role conflict now and then between the 'author' as oral historian and the 'researcher' as history expert (who had informed him- or herself on the GDR of the 1970s in scientific literature, e. g.). How can this contradiction be used as a source of cognition? In this context, the concept of the 'biographical situation' (LEU 1999) ought to be sounded out more closely in its methodological relevance. After all, a concrete subject did not grow up in the GDR of the 1970s 'as such' but the GDR conveyed itself through biographical situations to one subject *in this way* while to a second subject, it conveyed itself *in a different way*. This also provides an explanation for the fact that individual subjects who had seemingly identical objective possibilities of acting were actually acting in different biographical environments. All we can expect from an analysis of the conditions is that possibilities of acting in a defined scope of acting are outlined; a scope in which subjects may act in this or in that way. Nothing but the criterion of objectivity that objective variants of acting are finite in principle and that certain variants cannot occur, as it were, could possibly apply here. [47]

5.3 The group process as a process of construction Or 'The Gradual Production of the Autobiography in a Collective ...'

Essential statements on this process have been made. The transformation of an 'inner text' (recollection) into a synthetic autobiographical case theory constitutes a process in which meanings are produced but also destroyed. It is important to consider that a research process is not simply working on an 'exterritorial' research subject but is also encompassed by the research subject constantly present during the process. No less important, it should be more carefully reflected how the group as mediator between individual and social levels of acting also reflects and perpetuates a subject like 'patterns of politicalization' in the group process. As far as our project is concerned, e.g., the question has to be asked in how far specific qualities of Eastern/Western German politicalization and present-day problems of the discourse between East and West had a more or less unnoticed effect on the group process—or have been the subject of reflection. To ask for the extent to which problems between East and West took effect during the group process (cf. 3.4) is not only to ask for the internal group dynamics as such but to ask in how far the group discourse has been determined by the integration of overlapping discourse. From interactively producing a biographical interview up to publication, we were therefore constantly dealing with a construction process in several stages, in which texts are synthesized and resolved interactively, in which the respective purposes and intentions of the researchers were involved in constituting the research subject. Up to now, this factor has only been acknowledged by the newer perspectives of a narrative psychology with regard to the subject; it has scarcely been acknowledged with regard to the part of research. [48]

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