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Biography, Risk and Uncertainty—Is there Common Ground for Biographical Research and Risk Research?

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Abstract: This contribution introduces different perspectives of research which combine the concepts biography, risk and uncertainty. It starts with outlining the assumption that biographical research and risk research could gain from an exchange of concepts and research strategies. In a first step I will argue that in risk research the concept of the subject is under developed and that this deficit could be overcome by using biographical concepts. In a second step I distinguish between biographical research-strategies which approach social reality differently. Finally, by the example of the contributions of this special issue, I will show how these different biographical approaches influence the way risk and uncertainty are approached.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This special issue goes back to an "experiment" to bring biographical research and risk research together. At the 2007 Glasgow conference of the European Sociological Association (ESA), and the 2008 conference of the International Sociological Association (ISA), in Barcelona, shared sessions of biographical research networks (RN3 and RC38) and risk research networks (RN22 and TG04) discussed papers which explored both fields to convergent possibilities. Thus, the papers presented opened up biographical studies to a risk perspective and risk research to biographical dimensions. While the papers differed in scope and approach, the aim of this issue is to give an overview of the various approaches undertaken and what they contribute to understanding the biographical dimensions of risk and uncertainty. [1]

My motivation for convening these sessions, and bringing the produced ideas together in this special issue, is my long term involvement in biographical and life course research, as well as my interest in risk research, and the feeling that both sides could gain from an exchange of concepts and ideas. But, before I begin, a few points should be clarified, as there is no singular "biographical approach" as

such, but rather a number of approaches (compare for overviews: ROBERTS, 2001; MILLER, 2005 or the edited volumes: DAUSIEN, HANSES, INOWLOCKI & RIEMANN, 2008; KÖTTIG, CHAITIN, LINSTROTH & ROSENTHAL, 2009). We can, at least tentatively, distinguish one stream of research which refers to both narrowly and broadly defined biographical issues, and which has facilitated the development of a biographical methodology explaining individual attitudes and behaviour. While this is common knowledge for biographical researchers, it is less obvious for those who are not experts in the field. As a result, the potential for biographical research is not yet fully acknowledged in risk research, which primarily refers to standardised methods or cross-sectional approaches, thereby having a tendency to neglect the time dimension on the individual level (ZINN, 2006). [2]

However, in some niche areas, such as research on health and illness, a biographical perspective is more widely accepted. Some of these examples include: attempts to understand how people cope with illness (FAIRCLOTH, BOYLSTEIN, RITTMAN, YOUNG & GUBRIUM, 2004; CARRICABURU & PIERRET, 1995) or uncertain futures. For example, specific studies have focused on healthy women with a family history of breast/ovarian cancer (KENEN, ARDERN-JONES & EELES, 2003) or families with a child diagnosed with a chronic illness (COHEN, 1993). There is also research which shows how class specific life conditions structure the understanding of health risks in old age (POUND, GOMPERTZ & EBRAHIM, 1998). [3]

Mainstream risk research, which concentrates on technological and environmental risks, looks at how people's risk perceptions deviate from objective risks owing to their grounding in people's values or belief systems. Such research is less interested in how individual experiences and socialisation processes influence perceptions and responses to risk. As such, mental models (e.g. ATMAN, BOSTROM, FISCHHOFF & GRANGER MORGAN, 1994) and perceptions (SLOVIC, 2000) tend to dominate. Sometimes everyday interactions are considered (HORLICK-JONES, 2005). These include a few attempts to consider a biographical dimension, for example the work of TULLOCH and LUPTON (2003). However, this does not lead to a fully developed biographical approach (compare the contribution of HENWOOD, PIDGEON, PARKHILL & SIMMONS, 2010; PIDGEON, HENWOOD, PARKHILL, VENABLES & SIMMONS, 2008; or ZINN & TAYLOR-GOOBY, 2006). Rather, it only acknowledges the biographical dimension within narrative responses, if they occur. [4]

Biographical research, by contrast, is interested in the process of identity building and change, or so called "biographical work" (e.g. GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2007; VILLE, 2005; BOEIJE, DUIJNSTEE, GRYPDONCK & POOL, 2002; INOWLOCKI & LUTZ, 2000), "biographical structuring" (FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, 2000) or "biographical socialization" (e.g. HOERNING, 2000; HOERNING & ALHEIT, 1995). [5]

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a strong emphasis on coherence in identity work and the risks for this coherence (FISCHER, 1999). Early work on identity

also showed that ambiguities are an important part of identity and its flexible management in changing social contexts, i.e. identities that are too rigid appear pathological (KRAPPMANN, 1971). Today's debates have shifted slightly to accommodate the impact of (new) social uncertainties affecting the individual (BECK, 1992; BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002; WOHLRAB-SAHR, 1993; WHITE & WYN, 2004; LECCARDI, 2005; FACCHINI & RAMPAZI, 2009; PELIZÄUS-HOFFMEISTER, 2007). Such work acknowledges the increasing need for individuals to integrate uncertainty into one's identity. However, there is much that is still contested, including: the degree of openness needed, the amount of uncertainty to be integrated as well as the effect of experienced uncertainty on individual well-being. [6]

Different forms of "certainty constructions", everyday theories and worldviews can be observed to guide individuals in their everyday life, and structure their biographical planning. Although these demonstrate a general need to transform an in principle, uncertain and contingent future into patterns of expectations which reduce complexity into something more manageable, the degree of uncertainty involved in these constructions differs, as well as the ways with which unexpected events are handled (WOHLRAB-SAHR, 1993; ZINN & ESSER, 2003; ZINN, 2004). [7]

The extent to which recent social changes, some of which are seen to be connected to what has been described as "risk society" or "late modernity" (BECK, 1992; GIDDENS, 1990; BECK, GIDDENS & LASH, 1994), impacts upon individuals' strategies or ability to deal with risk and uncertainty has become a pressing question. The extent to which these new uncertainties have a negative impact on individuals' well-being, or convey a calculative response which reflects the price people willingly pay for the freedom to shape their life according to their own desires, is still contested. [8]

Within the risk framework, it has become more common to analyse, not only responses to new technological and environmental risks, such as nuclear power, international terrorism, or genetic engineering (BECK, 1992) but also "new *social* risks" (TAYLOR-GOOBY, 2004), which reflect a growing awareness of the time dimension. In social policy research, a life course approach (BOVENBERG, 2008) was recently proposed, and even the connection between risk, life course and social policy has been discussed. However, such an approach has not yet been fully developed into a risk perspective (OECD, 2007). [9]

The biographical discourse on "new risks" and "new social risks" merge discourses which interpret "risk" as "danger" and "risk" as a "technology to deal with danger" (or social technology) into an overall approach to deal with risk and uncertainty in all kinds of social decision-making situations on the macro, meso and micro levels. In doing so, both the argument of new (social) risks and discourses about "individualisation" are connected. The hypothesis that present day societies are characterised by "risky freedoms" and the "patch work" of biographical decision making (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002) has become a central issue. This perspective connects individual management of risk and

uncertainty as a life-planning project, as the individual has to cope with a variety of different risks such as technological risks (such as nuclear power), health issues (fatal illness) or social problems (unemployment). By interpreting all kinds of responses to risk against the background of biographical risk management, researchers are able to put technological or environmental concerns back into their social and individual contexts. [10]

In the next section I will argue that current risk research lacks a proper understanding of the subject. Common models of the subject, in different approaches to risk, lack dynamism as well as an understanding of the relevance of risk and uncertainty in everyday life. I will continue with a tentative introduction to biographical approaches, to highlight how they systematically differ. Finally, I will provide a number of examples from this special issue which demonstrate various approaches to risk and biography. [11]

2. The "Subject" in Risk Research

In risk research, questions regarding subjectivity are embedded in disputes about the epistemological status of risk. To date, the opposition of real risks and their subjective perception has been at the core of risk management and governance. This has corresponded with opposing methodological approaches, i.e. technological and psychological approaches. But more recently, these oppositions have been mediated by a socio-constructivist perspective which incorporates scientific/rational and layperson's understandings of risk (RENN, 2008; ZINN & TAYLOR-GOOBY, 2006; ZINN, 2006). [12]

The belief that risks are objective, subjective as well as socially constructed might be seen as common ground in risk research (RENN, 2008; KRIMSKY & GOLDING, 1992) but the crucial question is how the different aspects of this triangle are evaluated. For example, there is a visible shift away from ideal types of "hard" rationality to more "soft" ideas of rationality, which are usually attributed to the subject and encompass not only reasoning and cognition but emotion or affect, ethics, aesthetics, values and personal experiences (ZINN, 2008; JAEGER, RENN, ROSA & WEBLER, 2001; SLOVIC, 1999, 2010; GIGERENZER, 2007). And yet, we can hardly assume that we are at the end of this journey of re-evaluating the modern orthodoxy of rationality, which harkens back to the modernisation processes described by Max WEBER, as increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation which indicates: "... that principally ... [o]ne need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service" (1948, p.139) [13]

The rational, autonomous (male) modern subject is the common ground against which real observable activities are measured. And yet, the ideal model is increasingly being questioned by social practice and has led to controversies about scientifically gained rational expert knowledge and subjectively biased lay-knowledge. [14]

For example, the classic work of TVERSKY and KAHNEMAN (1974, 1981) has provided us with the finding that individuals' decisions systematically deviate from the orthodox model of rational decision-making. Instead, people use heuristics and make biased decisions which regularly lead to suboptimal outcomes. These are interpreted as human limits to dealing efficiently with decision-making situations. SLOVIC (2000) and his colleagues developed the so-called psychometric paradigm which measures risk perception with the help of standardised questionnaires. In this research, the model of the subject remains in a "deficit perspective" of public risk perception[1] even though research showed that experts' responses are, under specific circumstances, as biased or imperfect as that of the lay person. [15]

In the 1990s, the "mental models" approach was seen as a promising alternative (PIDGEON, HOOD, JONES, TURNER & GIBSON, 1992), insofar as it engaged in more complex examinations of how individuals construct social reality, and how risks have to be communicated in order to facilitate better (more rational) decisions. The core idea is that individual misinterpretation of real risks must be understood in order to develop more efficient models of risk communication, capable of directing individual behaviour towards a rational decision (FISCHHOFF, 1998). This approach still opposes scientific and subjective constructions of risk. It, however, acknowledges a greater complexity of the subject, and yet, like other approaches, it lacks a temporal dimension which would facilitate a better understanding of why and how people develop specific worldviews, attitudes or behaviours. [16]

The Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) tries to overcome static approaches to risk by combining the insights of risk perception research and risk communication research (PIDGEON, KASPERSON & SLOVIC, 2003). In this approach, the analysis begins with an (alleged) risk which is communicated and amplified or attenuated by sources of information (personal experience, direct/indirect communication), information channels (individual senses, informal networks, professional information brokers), social stations (opinion leaders, cultural and social groups, government agencies etc.), individual stations (intuitive heuristics, evaluation and interpretation, cognition in social context) as well as institutional and individual behaviour (attitudes, political action, social protest etc.) (PIDGEON et al., 2003, p.14) Risk communication would then "ripple out" through the social realm. However, the specifics of these processes are only partly understood. The explanatory power does not go beyond the theoretical concepts which are combined in this approach; rather, it focuses on specific risks and whether and how they become a public social issue. The lack of a historical dimension extending beyond a specific risk, and thereby informing both individual and group responses to risk, is one of the major limitations of the prediction capabilities of public risk communication. [17]

1 The assumption that public perception of risk systematically deviates from real risks as technically determined. E.g. the relatively high concerns about nuclear power while the risks of driving, drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes is systematically underestimated.

While WYNNE (1996) focuses on the local experience of risk communication and the transmission of experiences from older to new generations, a biographical approach would emphasise different individual responses to risk in specific historical social contexts. If the individualisation thesis (BECK, 1992; BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002) is at least partly correct the explanatory power of socio-structural factors for individual responses to risk or risk culture (DOUGLAS, 1992, 1990; DOUGLAS & WILDAVSKY, 1982) should decrease. As a result, responses to risk might be better understood as experience-based, rather than class-based. The biographical approach would allow reconstructing the complex links between individualised and socio-culturally as well as socio-structurally mediated experiences in everyday life. [18]

WYNNE's work, in particular, has supported a shift in risk research towards a greater recognition of local knowledge and experience based "tacit" rationality, which is "typical" for the risk perception of the layperson. He was able to show that lay knowledge is not, in principle, different from expert knowledge, though it stems from different sources. According to this view, lay knowledge is not irrational, but is grounded in everyday experiences. When laypeople judge about expert knowledge they include in their judgement the reliability of the source of information. Not having access to the sources of information of experts as such, it is even more important to evaluate the general competence and trustworthiness of experts and possible conflicts of interest. [19]

As a result, the common reductionist approaches in decision-making and psychology, as outlined above, have started to consider the "soft" aspects of decision-making which are involved in such judgements. Whilst common sociological approaches, which highlight factors such as values and power, are largely ignored by this approach, there is a greater acknowledgement of such aspects as trust, intuition or emotions and how they can contribute to good decision making (e.g. GIGERENZER, 2007; SLOVIC, 2010; ZINN, 2008). [20]

For example, GIGERENZER's work in the context of bounded rationality, has moved beyond strategies to tackle innumeracy (2002) to consider the advantages of non-rational strategies, such as emotions, for good decision-making (2007). However, coming from a science background, he is interested in discovering general laws, such as the "recognition heuristic", and arguing that under specific circumstances it works even better than "rational" strategies. He emphasises that adaptive strategies are not only the result of evolution but are also developed in one's life time, and relate to social and individual adaptation strategies based on learning processes of social groups, families or individuals. [21]

In light of this development, the model of the subject has to be revisited. While GIGERENZER has emphasised the usefulness of general heuristics in some situations, BONSS et al. outline the usefulness of different everyday theories to deal with risk and uncertainty in the life course (compare ZINN, 2004). In this approach, everyday theories are experience-based, meaning that they are fitted to life circumstances but might also be changed to fit other conditions and

possibilities. This opens up the possibility that new experiences might be integrated to modify worldviews. [22]

There is much discussion concerning the concept of the "subject," as brought into being by its contexts and its ability to have a kind of independent core which still has an autonomous quality. But instead of engaging in philosophical debates, it can be assumed that individual experiences during the course of one's life significantly impact one's experience and responses to risk. As argued in biographical research, these biographical identities are always open to be reshaped and changed. However, there is also considerable evidence for high stability of (biographical) identities and approaches to managing risks (e.g. ZINN, 2001). [23]

In research on health and illness, biographical approaches are common. Such work centres on the concept of "biographical disruption," which goes back to BURY (1982). He argues that people are not usually self-aware of their bodies, simply assuming that it functions properly. When illness occurs this ontological certainty is eroded and the continuity of identity is disrupted. Even though it is well known that illness can work in this way, there is also evidence that women, for example, are much more aware of their body (LUPTON, 1999) and there is good reason to assume that the hypothesis of a normal functioning of the body is a typical male worldview while women have always been (made) more aware of their body and its limits. There is also evidence that one's life experience, together with the experience of relatives or friends, contributes to individual's health concerns (e.g. a history of breast cancer in the family) and affects the self-awareness, the expectations and the knowledge as to the limits of one's body (e.g. KENEN et al., 2003)[2]. [24]

It is the biographical dimension which brings together life experiences and expectations in such a way that potentially helps us to understand how and why some people perceive and respond to risk in a specific way. And yet, this is not always necessarily the case. Sometimes situational explanations might be stronger. Not everything has an obvious biographical dimension. Yet, this approach might help us understand that decisions are not just a matter of weighing up present day options or values, but rather are deeply rooted in complex identity structures *and* social contexts, which evolve over time. [25]

There are significant differences between biographical approaches which will be discussed in the next section. [26]

2 Compare also for a discussion of the concept WILLIAMS (2000).

3. Biographical Research

Biographical research encompasses a number of different approaches and research strategies with blurred and overlapping boundaries (e.g. RIEMANN, 2003; DAUSIEN et al., 2008; KÖTTIG et al., 2009). Instead of attempting to give an exhaustive overview of the different schools and approaches (compare MILLER, 2005; ROBERTS, 2001), I will distinguish three major approaches of biographical research, reserving my main focus for the last two. These are:

1. approaches using a broad range of material such as letters, publications, autobiographical writing;
2. research which uses as a central resource of information, i.e. the narrative (biographical) interview (SCHÜTZE, 1976, 1983, compare RIEMANN, 2003; ROSENTHAL, 2004) or similar in-depth interviewing techniques following an holistic approach; and
3. approaches using semi-structured interview strategies, often used to focus the interview responses towards a specific research topic (e.g. problem centred interview, WITZEL, 2000) and situational logics. [27]

Other research, which I do not strictly refer to as "biographical research", considers biographical issues, but does not develop a biographical argument. This is often the case in studies which use standardised research instruments aiming to identify general perceptions, attitudes or action outcomes rather than the biographical development of action patterns or identity structures. [28]

Most biographical research follows a qualitative research strategy. In particular, such research uses narrative methods to produce comprehensive case study material or to develop typologies of action modes or identity types, in order to assess how they have developed during the course of one's life. This kind of research refers to biographical decision-making, coping with past events and reflections of one's own life course. [29]

In the following section, I distinguish between biographical approaches which differ with regards to their fundamental assumptions about the interviewing method and the main object of research. [30]

The first approach emphasises the reconstruction of the single case and the development of "personality" in the life course or in relation to ongoing biographical work. The present self-representation is analysed according to the central difference of experienced life history and the narrated life story. This approach is often interested in the things "hidden" or not mentioned in an interview, but which exist under the surface of self-presentation. [31]

The second approach emphasises problem specific action modes or attitudes, and is more concerned with the systematic comparison of different narrative patterns as opposed to general personality structures. Additionally, it is doubted whether controlled access to past experiences by means of today's biographical

narrations is possible. For this reason, the current self-presentations are the object of research rather than the reconstruction of the accumulation of life-long experiences. This approach is not so much concerned with what goes unsaid and the things that people like to hide, but with the semantics used to describe their (biographical) experiences, decision-making and expectations. [32]

3.1 Biographical identity: Biographical work, biographical structuring

Biographical research, by focusing on biographical identity, biographical work or biographical structuring (FISCHER-ROSENTHAL, 2000, pp.114ff.), assumes that the link between structure and individuals can only be understood sufficiently by analysing the development of the individual personality in the life course. Thus, an excessive reliance on single cases, and discovering issues not mentioned in the interview, is often seen as important for a sufficient case analysis. [33]

This approach is strongly linked to phenomenology and A. SCHÜTZ's work. The core idea is that during the life course individuals collate biographical experiences into a coherent description of their life course. These experiences are present in the knowledge we use in everyday life, biographical decision-making, as well as in the story we present in an interview-situation. Our self-representations or biographical stories are linked to these experiences. They are not totally free from our past. This link to the past gives us the possibility to do research on past life history and the development of the today's self from the present perspective. More specifically, this research tries to assess the difference between experienced life history (our past experiences) and narrated life story (how we interpret our life from the current point of view) in order to show how a current biography or self-description is determined by past experiences. [34]

Against this conceptual background, the empirical research strategy seeks to present this case-based structure as the central focus of analysis. It is assumed that the link between social context and the individual is best analysed by single cases and individual experiences. This approach is strongly bound to the excessive analysis of the holistic form and content of single cases. Thus, it tries to do justice to the individual's personal experience. While some researchers continue to be bound by excessive analysis of ungeneralisable single cases, others are much more open to generalisations (ROSENTHAL, 2004) but as an entry point, still focus on detailed analysis of the single case. [35]

The most common interview methodology in this approach is the narrative interview, introduced in the German discourse by SCHÜTZE (1976, 1983).[3] The core structure of the interview rests on a division between a first step of free narration and a second step of further questioning. In the first step the interviewee is "asked, by means of an initial opening question, to give a full extempore narration of events and experiences from their own lives. The ensuing story, or 'main narrative,' is not interrupted by further questions but is encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention".

3 For a useful and short description of this method, see ROSENTHAL (2004, pp.50ff.). For a more in-depth overview, compare this with ROBERTS (2001).

The idea of this procedure is to prevent uncontrollable effects on the interviewee's process of remembering and self-presentation. Thus, the interviewee has space to emphasise what is important and to structure the narration on his/her own terms. [36]

The second part of the interview, "the period of questioning", involves narrative questions, and more elaborate narrations on topics and biographical events already mentioned. In addition, the interviewer is encouraged to ask about issues that have not been formally addressed in the interview, yet which are considered important or relevant for the research question (ROSENTHAL, 1993, p.60). [37]

The analysis of the interview data, the so-called "biographical case reconstruction" of an interview consists of the following steps:

- Analysis of the (objective) biographical data
- Text and thematic field analysis (structure of self-presentation; reconstruction of the life story; narrated life).
- Reconstruction of the life history (lived life as experienced).
- Microanalysis of individual text segments.
- Contrasting comparison of life history (experienced life) and life story (narrated life).
- Development of types and contrastive comparison of several cases. (ROSENTHAL, 2004, pp.54ff.).[4] [38]

3.2 Focused research on biographical action logics

The kind of research I call "biographical action research" likewise evaluates single cases using the biographical identity approach. But biographical action research is more concerned with action modes in specific social fields, and the way individuals respond to certain problems, than with the reconstruction of the whole identity. Additionally, this approach is quite critical about the possibility of gaining access to past experiences in the interview context. The research focuses on actions taken in situations which could be understood in terms of "situational logics". Thus, the focus is on generally observable or articulated action logics, rather than on the development of the underlying personality structure during the life course. This approach is also less concerned with what remains hidden, but sees the interviewee as a free individual, capable of expressing their own life experiences. [39]

Biographical action research starts with observable, meaningful actions. Referring to "grounded theory" (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1990) involves the systematic comparison of meaningful actions or attitudes. The significant question of this kind of research is how different action logics or interpretation patterns come together or are linked to specific contexts, rather than to the personality. This does not mean that a person's behaviour in a specific social context is entirely

4 For a short but helpful description of this approach see ROSENTHAL (2004).

determined by the social context, nor that it is determined by past experiences, but rather that there are a limited number of meaningful actions and innovations observable in specific social contexts. The central aim of research is not to derive a person's action from their personality, but to identify how people behave in different contexts and against the background of their interpretations of the context. [40]

The interviewing technique—for example, in the "problem centred interview" (WITZEL, 2000)—is more structured than the narrative biographical interview. The idea of an interview situation with a minimum of uncontrolled influence by the interviewer is replaced by the idea of a trustful interview situation where the interviewee tries to explain their own perspective and the interviewer tries to understand. One important assumption is that the normal situations in which people present themselves are situations of communication involving multiple actors, and not monologue. But this method maintains some techniques used in qualitative interviews—such as open questioning—which allows space for personal narratives or reflection, and which has been shown to strengthen the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. [41]

There is no clear distinction between the first narrative step of the interview and the second step involving follow-up questions; rather it is a kind of systematised talk with further questions covering different issues in the field of research interest. A pre-formulated set of questions that guide the interview and include the significant issues is important for the systematic evaluation of the interviews (compare for a short introduction: WITZEL, 2000). [42]

Since the aim of action research is the comparison of a high number of different action modes used by different individuals regarding specific problem-situations, many researchers use computer-assisted strategies of data analysis (compare KELLE, 2004). [43]

In practice, both approaches often converge. However, there are at least two crucial differences: Research in the biographical identity perspective starts with an open question about the life story, while the "biographical action" tradition starts with an area-specific question to generate narrations. They also differ significantly in the strategy of data analysis. While the former approach analyses the identity structure in a holistic approach, the latter refers to specific action and interpretation patterns which might be typical for specific social contexts or experiences. [44]

4. Different Approaches to Risk, Uncertainty and Biography

The contributions to this special issue reflect the variety of ways in which the concepts "risk", "uncertainty" and "biography" are combined and referred to in research. [45]

The first three contributions (APITZSCH, 2010; SCHÄFER, 2010; HENWOOD et al., 2010) though very different, share a common interest in using biography in

prospect meaning that they use knowledge about the interviewees' past only as a general explanatory resource for present attitudes or future orientations towards risks and uncertainties: in the labour market or towards living in close proximity to a nuclear power station. Sometimes the past is referred to as a generalised socio-historical context, sometimes it is interpreted as individualised experiences. They follow essentially what I describe as a biographical action (orientation) perspective. [46]

The next three contributions (REITER, 2010; BURCHARDT, 2010; ZINN, 2010) approach risk and uncertainty as part of biographical structuring. These approaches explain the present with reference to the biographical development of individuals during the life-course; within social contexts such as a transitional society, the culture of military occupation or just individualised life experience. These approaches are closer to the biographical-identity-work approach. However, they share a greater focus on how individuals cope with risk and uncertainty, rather than on general identity structures. Compared with the first three contributions, these studies demonstrate a shift away from considering biographical aspects to be relevant to perception of risks (e.g. unemployment, nuclear power), to biographical risks and uncertainties in general. In doing so, risk and uncertainties are interpreted as being part of a more comprehensive problem of transforming a contingent and, in principle, unmanageable future, into a complex but manageable one. The individual management of "external risks" is interpreted through the lenses of individual biographical action patterns or biographical identities. [47]

Finally, the ethnographic study of SAFONOVA and SÁNTHA (2010) describes how the cultural heritage of social groups influences people's ways of dealing with risk and uncertainty. The comparison of two different groups shows how significantly their responses differ, as a result of coming from different environments. The analysis helps to understand social adaptation processes on the basis of available socio-cultural resources which go back hundreds of years. This study is of interest as it shows how differently these groups deal with risk (when they go hunting) and biography (as a concept to deal with one's past). It also highlights how important the ability to remember *and* to forget is for individuals in dealing with risk and uncertainty in everyday life. [48]

APITZSCH (2010) conducted semi-structured interviews to find out about the link between individual action and labour market structure. Utilising the example of the German television and film industry, she examines how institutional contexts and the lack of institutionalised certainty structures -such as an open-ended employment relationship- informed the career strategies of employees. The biographical dimension in her work refers mainly to individual labour market strategies in the film industry, and institutional contexts which frame these occupational conditions. Therefore, it focuses on how institutional contexts shape occupational experiences and occupational orientations. The study does not engage in an analysis of the emergence of "biographical identities" in general, therefore it may be opened up to a broader biographical perspective. For example, additional questions could be asked, relating to how risks and

uncertainties in other life domains might influence individuals' perceptions and responses to risk in the occupational labour market of the film industry. APITZSCH study refers to "biographical action logics". Regarding risk and uncertainty, she follows a complex approach considering contextual conditions as well as individual strategies. In particular, she addresses the pressure put on the employees by uncertain job arrangements without comprehensive institutional protection. The success of individual strategies, such as engaging in informal networks, is uncertain. They can produce positive or even undesirable effects for career development and work place security. [49]

SCHAEFER (2010) undertook a participatory research approach which includes group discussions. The research focuses on the spatial dimension of everyday risk perception. The biographical dimension is restricted to imagined future lives which are informed by the perceptions of risks and uncertainties of young people's situations growing up in Rural Eastern Germany. Her study challenges objectivist concepts of risk connected to space, such as living in rural areas with high labour market risks. Using a grounded theory approach, SCHAEFER analyses data from group discussions to develop an overview of the different ways young people perceive and respond to risk in uncertain labour markets. Perceived disadvantages are linked to different strategies to overcome labour market risks, and are specifically connected to a stereotypical distinction of the labour market situation in East and West Germany. The young adults reflect on the contradictory experiences which partly support but also contradict the stereotypes. However, the analyses are on the level of everyday perceptions of risk and uncertainty, even when they refer to past experiences. The time dimension is mainly introduced as general social change which affects generations differently. A biographical dimension is only developed prospectively, as an imagined future. Thus, the individual development of biographical experience does not reflect specific patterns of biographical identity. [50]

Starting from a classical psychological approach to risk perception, HENWOOD et al. (2010) argue for a narrative and thematically focused approach, that can be used to analyse the perceived risks of living close to a nuclear power station, and which includes biographical issues. They use narrative and partly open ended questions, similar to the problem centred interview as proposed by WITZEL (2000). They explicitly see the so-called "narrative interview" as developed by SCHÜTZE (1976, 1983, compare also: ROSENTHAL, 2004), which ask informants to tell the story of their life, as too general for the purpose of their study. However, the narrative approach enables them to remain open to the interviewees own perspective. Having said this, the approach does not develop a fully biographical argument, which would interpret people's risk perception of nuclear power as part of their more general approach to dealing with biographical risk and uncertainty. For example, instead of examining how people experience their life in general, they focus on "experiences of living close to the nuclear power station" and thereby frame the interview and the interviewees' awareness in relation to the nuclear power station. In opening up this analysis, it would be interesting to see whether HENWOOD et al. obtained different responses by using a broader framework to understand why the interviewees came to be living

close to a nuclear power station. The biographical dilemma or decision-making situations in which different risks might have been evaluated or negotiated, in relation to past as well as present experiences, is thereby not addressed. [51]

These biographical risks and uncertainties are considered by BURCHARDT (2010), REITER (2010) and ZINN (2010). The important difference of these contributions is the point of origin, as the biographical challenge is how to transform a future that is, in principle, uncertain into something manageable. Examples of this include: the strategies used by people diagnosed with AIDS, or how soldiers and ex-soldiers respond to risk and biographical uncertainty, or the ways in which individuals respond to a biographical problem against the background of transformative society. These analyses all explain individual perceptions of and responses to risk against the backdrop of biographical risk management. [52]

BURCHARDT (2010) and REITER (2010), in their research, use problem-centred interviews instead of the more complex biographical narrative interview in order to engage in complex biographical analysis. They explicitly develop arguments of biographical socialisation, or how specific biographical certainty constructions are linked to past experiences, and how individuals respond to or solve biographical problems. In this sense, these are fully developed biographical approaches using the time dimension for detailed analyses and explanations. [53]

As such, REITER is using an example to illustrate his "general model for analysing biographical uncertainty" in which past, present and future are systematically linked and risks are embedded in individual patterns which deal with biographical risk. BURCHARDT presents a number of more detailed case studies, which develop arguments that explore how coping with AIDS can be understood as dealing with biographical problems with the result that, even though the interviewees are ill, the present situation is often described as being subjectively more satisfying then before. [54]

ZINN (2010) uses biographical, narrative, in-depth interviews to generate fully developed biographical data for his explorative study of British ex-serviceman. The study demonstrates the ways in which earlier biographical experiences shape the decision to become a soldier, whilst also shaping the soldiers' occupational experiences. He argues that soldiers experience their occupational culture individually, and therefore develop different responses to the problems they face during service. The biographical dimension of individual cases is used to develop examples for types of biographical action patterns, in order to examine how they have developed. Thematic comparative analysis in the tradition of GLASER and STRAUSS' (1967) grounded theory approach, is also used to emphasise systematic differences across the case studies. Therefore, ZINN develops a biographical argument to understand how the soldiers' dealt with risk and uncertainty during the course of their life. [55]

The approaches of BURCHARDT, REITER and ZINN all develop a fully biographical argument from their data, showing how specific biographical

experiences lead to today's self-representations and future orientations. The contribution of SAFONOVA and SÁNTHA (2010) illustrates how sub-cultural historical experiences also have long lasting impact on individual strategies to deal with risk and uncertainty. The ethnographic contribution of SAFONOVA and SÁNTHA is not, however, influenced by the classical work of DOUGLAS on risk, and more specifically her grid-group typology (DOUGLAS & WILDAVSKY, 1982). Instead, they describe how different forms of dealing with risk and uncertainty have developed in relation to two ethnic groups, the Buryat and Evenki people in Southern Siberia. SAFONOVA and SÁNTHA argue that the way in which the Evenki and Buryat deal with risk and uncertainty today goes back to the conditions of living experienced by their ancestors. It is interesting to see how risk taking and risk seeking activities (Evenki) and hierarchical organisation (Buryat) is linked to the environment these groups have lived in for centuries. The change of the environment of the Buryats from cattle breeding to hunting, due to forced relocation by the Russians, has led to new adaptation strategies. However, Buryats show patterns which differ from typical hunter-gatherer communities such as the Evenki people. The study impressively shows how continuity and change are combined in present day strategies to deal with risk and uncertainty. [56]

5. A Biographical Approach for Risk Research?

Most of the contributions to this issue deliver convincing arguments against homogeneous approaches which neglect individual variation in responses to risk. As such, they are interested in approaches which do not equate risk perceptions and risk strategies to underlying personality traits, but rather they see these in terms of their development as different responses to the various experiences the individual accumulates during his/her life course. This leads to a number of different approaches that consider how people perceive and respond to risk, all of which acknowledge that responses are deeply rooted in both individual and institutional productions of risk and uncertainty. The ethnographic study in Siberia, for example, showed that there is resistance and adaptive processes regarding social change. The cultural resources available to a community help us to better understand their responses to new challenges. This was also made clear in the example of REITER (2010), and transformative societies in Eastern Europe, which also underlines the importance of the family as a resource of biographical knowledge in situations of societal change or destabilisation. [57]

However, there is a tension between the logic of situations and biographical experiences. Future research might show the extent to which psychological or technical approaches are sufficient to understand people's responses to risk and uncertainty. These approaches, however, as discussed, lack a complex model of the subject which could improve our understanding of how individuals make sense of risk as part of their life course. The lack of predictive power in many risk studies could be attributed to the lack of understanding of how perception and responses to risk are embedded in complex and often contradictory interpretation patterns of biographical identities. [58]

In sum, it is important to simultaneously consider different dimensions of perceiving and responding to risk. It is also important to take into account the fact that biographical research supports institutional approaches which acknowledge the different needs, ways and strategies people adopt to deal with risk and uncertainty. Thus, biographical approaches might help to prevent overly general applications of risk communication and management that neglect individual differences. [59]

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