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4. ZUR DISKUSSION

Liebe Sektionsmitglieder,

mit dem folgenden Tagungsbeitrag, der auf der letzten Jahrestagung (4./5. Dezember 2009) in Frankfurt am Main von Laura Odasso gehalten wurde, laden wir Sie/Euch herzlich zu einer Diskussion ein.

Sample, distance and analytical choices. Uncertain fields for PhD students¹

The topic of my presentation is the uncertain fields which PhD students have to face during their research, especially using biographies.

First of all, I would like to introduce myself: I am an Italian PhD student working in two academic settings. I am based both in Italy and in France: in Italy, at the Department of Cultures, Institutions and Languages of the Mediterranean area and East Europe of the *Ca' Foscari* University of Venice, whereas in France I am based at Department of sociology, more precisely at the Laboratory Cultures and Societies in Europe of the University of Strasbourg.

My PhD research project is about the potentialities and difficulties hidden in intermarriage, or as I like to say, in a context of family *mixité*. In particular, I address the influences of and influences on the social institutional context both in the Veneto region in Italy and in the Alsace region in France. At the moment, nine months after the beginning of my study, I have collected about twenty-five life stories of Italian-Jordanian and Italian-Moroccan couples in Italy and I am now ready to collect stories in France.

At this stage some doubts and questions have emerged on the methodological level. For this reason, I would like to take the opportunity of this conference to share these questions with you since they are not so easily solved and hide knotty problems. Thanking you in advance for this possibility of comparison and open discussion, I would like to mention the key words of my speech: sample, the relationship with the sample, misunderstanding, distance, building contact and the selection of relevant pieces of data for the analysis. I will deal with them one after the other.

While my academic training has not been specifically in sociology, in order to carry on my research I have decided to improve my competences in this field; and to use a qualitative method for this pur-

¹ Oral presentation on the annual conference of the Sektion Biographieforschung of the German Sociological Association which took place on December 4 and 5, 2009, at the University of Applied Sciences in Frankfurt/Main.

pose, in particular the life story, in the spirit outlined by D. Bertaux in *Récits de vie* (1997)², and also following the example of some interesting Italian works, like the ones of F. Ferrarotti and N. Revelli³.

In my opinion, this is the best way to discover the relationship between the “real life” that people effectively live and the life that is accessible through observation and analysis; furthermore, focusing on lives will bring to the researcher some objective elements of knowledge about the social structure. In some situations, biography is a stimulant challenge, because only the dialogic relation between narrator and listener creates it. So it is necessary to work on this relation.

It is reasonable to assume that the biographical method provides researchers and “researched” with one of the best keys to read reality, as it helps them to think about themselves and their own lives and provides them with tools to conduct personal analysis.

First of all, the method of collecting life stories is a way to be effectively in contact with the subjects-actors of the research. Sometimes, academic research runs the risk to be too far removed from the context and to give a distorted interpretation of the ‘civil society’. This problem was recently pointed out in a seminar about “Gender and Migration”, held in Venice at the end of October, in the framework of the *Gemma* project of the European Commission⁴. There, academics had the possibility to confront the conclusions of their studies with the experiences of projects built up and carried out by civil society. In this framework, biography emerged as the most adequate instrument to perceive and understand changes and transformations of the society. As H. S. Becker⁵ (1970) says, biography is a piece of mosaic based on the study of the communities and institutions, a necessary piece to test the implicit assumptions that become routine in research about human beings.

Secondly, direct contact with “the sample” is the only way to establish an exchange between people and researchers and, at a second stage, between researchers and policy makers. As R. Atkinson⁶ (1998) points out, the concept of life story identifies an important professional opportunity to acquire self-consciousness and awareness of the context for the narrator. But it could also become a professional tool for those people that operate “on the front line” every day – in a social context, directly in contact with people, in those situations normally observed and studied by the researchers. These three actors – people, professionals and researchers – may have different advantages in using life stories. Focusing on the role of the researcher: After having gone through the experience of fieldwork and analysis a researcher may give useful suggestions to improve local policies, because she or he

2 Bertaux, D. (1997), *Les récits de vie. Perspective ethnosociologique*. Paris, Nathan (coll. 128) ; Italian version : translated by Bichi, R. (1998), *Racconti divita. La prospettiva etnosociologica*, Milan, Franco Angeli; Spanish version: translated by Gonzalez, G. (2005), *Los Relatos de vida, Perspectiva etnosociologica*, Barcelona, Ediciones Bellaterra; Japanese version: translated by Kobayashi, T. (2003), Tokyo, Minervashobo. To more information: <http://cems.ehess.fr/document.php?id=147>

3 Ferrarotti, F. (1978) “Appunti sul metodo biografico”, in *La critica sociologica*, 47; (1974), *Vite di baraccati*, Napoli, Liguori; (1981), *Storia e storie di vita*, Bari-Roma, La Terza. Etc.

To more information: <http://www.francoferrarotti.it/>

Revelli, N. (1977), *Il mondo dei vinti. Testimonianze di vita contadina*, Torino, Einaudi; (1985), *L'anello forte. La donna: storie di vita contadina*, Torino, Einaudi. Etc.

To more information: <http://www.nutorevelli.org/>

4 <http://www.gemmaproject.eu/>

5 Becker, H. S. (2002), “The life history and the scientific mosaic”, in D. Weinberg (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods*, Malden, MA : Blackwell, pp. 79 -87; (1970) “The life history and the scientific mosaic”, in *Sociological Work: Method and Substance*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.

6 Atkinson, R. (1998), *The Life Story Interview*, Thousand Oaks, California, Sage.

would represent the connection between decision makers and people, between policies and practices. (The idea of the aforementioned *Gemma* project is to create a real exchange between research and policies.)

It therefore becomes essential for my research to pay particular attention to the local dimension of policies, in order to highlight the relation of normal common people to both history (with a small “h”) and History (with capital “H”), as the two dimensions are interconnected⁷. For I believe in the relevance of the different theoretical dimensions of the research, but also in the direct experience in the context studied. A researcher could have this great chance to be inside these two dimensions (theory/experience) and work on the two historical fields (history/History), as I have mentioned before: in my case, observing the society outside and inside through the relation created with my couples, my sample.

It is a rather complex endeavour to learn how to develop and improve the dimension of contact and relation with the sample.

Being at the same time protagonists and objects is, for the sample, quite difficult; and it is difficult as well to explain to them how to play, as actors, in this research carried out on them. This is the great force of the biographical method: involving “the sample” in the research dimension and giving it the position of protagonist. The couples chosen in my sample, through their *récits*, generate questions and they open the field of the “possible” or “conceivable”. When they are speaking about themselves, they speak about their own reality, they think about it and they try to find answers to their life issues and their reality, thus allowing access to such a reality and its different dimensions. They also use their “history” - their stories - to read the History and, in some way, they operate both as “objects” and “subjects”.

This is a marvellous stage for a young researcher, but it is also a source of doubt. For a newcomer to this approach, it becomes a sort of training that can be described as a difficult job, a personal moment of training in the field that has the goal of creating an atmosphere of confidence. This moment takes time; it requires effort, pauses, reflections, mistakes, turning points and so on. It’s a big challenge, but it also represents personal growth.

In France the supervision of my project is carried out by one of the best professors in the field, C. Delcroix (Université de Strasbourg), and biography research in sociology is an advanced culture, but in Italy, in the Department of Cultures, Institutions and Languages of the Mediterranean area and East Europe of the *Ca’ Foscari* University of Venice there is only one professor who uses and believes in this method. Thus it generates some misunderstanding with reference to my own bi-national academic contexts. As I said, the project is conducted in cooperation with two Universities, Strasbourg and Venice. In Italy linguists are not keen to use this approach, preferring written documents to the oral ones. Consequently, it is sometimes hard to explain and argue in the Italian context from where I come that this method entails an added value for my work.

⁷ I decided to use the term “history” - with a small “h” – referring to the life stories of people and to the events that are mentioned in their biography, instead of using the term “History” - with a capital “H” - referring to the events and the developments that occur in particular blocks of time, the so called official history.

So I ask myself and you: how can I deal with the conceptual side of the matter and the fieldwork? How to properly plan time, to use it in relation with my research and the following moments of elaboration? It is quite difficult to explain to academics who are not used to this method, and who do not know the evolution of sociological research on biography, why we could and have to use this tool. Since this tool has been used in many research projects in the past few years, in the cooperation of, for instance, sociology and psychology, sociology and history, demography and gerontology, why should we continue to separate disciplines, instead of having faith in a more practical and multidisciplinary approach?

Is the classical quantitative method “better”, which means “more scientific” than a biographical approach?

A survey takes apparently less time. Is it more reliable than life stories?

I do not think so. But from the training in sociology and using preferably a qualitative method, I have understood that it is also possible to use quantitative sources and statistics to describe the context of the research. Triangulation may help.

Following H. Blumer’s criticism of the famous research *The Polish Peasant in Europe and in America* (1939)⁸ for turning the collected material into a mere illustrative element of a predefined position, I want to make critical use of biographies, as opposed to using them as mere illustration. Biographies play a central role in my research. This will be conducted by reading, documenting and responding to the interactive relationship between researcher and the human group analysed, in order to create a situation of “equality”, in tune with Ferrarotti’s biographical approach.

On this issue of equality, I had to learn more in order to improve my approach. In the context of my fieldwork in Italy, I did not have any problem in getting to know people and socialising with them. In some cases there is a strenuous and “funny” pre-phase of contact with people, in which the future development of the relation is already foretold. A first contact either by telephone or face-to-face is fundamental to create the bases of confidence with the person-sample. I have noticed that during the first phase people whom I had contacted could perfectly feel whether or not I had some doubts, worried about something or was not sure about my role of researcher – and this was fundamental for the management of the second phase. However, while the initial phase could be managed, the second phase is not so easy; this includes the meeting itself, the moment of the narration and the next steps: listening to the recording and transcribing and analysing it.

Some examples from fieldwork in Italy might be helpful. From the perspective of their migration history, the Italian-Jordanian couples I interviewed are a very interesting type of mixed couples. Furthermore, they are under-studied, even if they now represent a significant group in Venice from the economic standpoint. The Jordanian males were originally students in the Faculty of Architecture. They are all currently working in one of the most important economic sectors in Venice, namely tourism and catering. This means that they are quite well “integrated”⁹ in the social texture of the city.

8 Blumer H. (1939), “An appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki’s “The Polish Peasant in Europe and in America”, New York, Social Science Research Council.

See also Thomas W.I. and Znaniecki F. (1919), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and in America*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

9 Using the term in the most general manner possible.

They do not have a strong sense of community, but they know each other. Their stories are extremely appealing, because they represent a mixture of Eastern and Western ideas about family, economic difficulties, connections with their native land. The urban dimension of Venice and Mestre - Venice mainland - and the city structure make it possible to walk around and make it easy to meet people; this supports the socialisation process.

While these elements could seem irrelevant for the purpose of this paper, they are nevertheless important to understand the dimension of "distance" and "equality". In fact, my relation with this Italian-Jordanian sample is extremely good, because it was possible to move deeply inside this net of relationships and try to reach this degree of equality.

On the other hand, I feel in a strange position to be sometimes so much of an insider and part of the group, and sometimes immediately outside. This stands as an obstacle with regard to reaching an objective position with the sample, so that in some occasions it becomes difficult to capture what is actually behind what people want to tell.

For example, meeting Khaled, spending a lot of time together with him and his son, seeing each other frequently is a remarkable example of what I have just said. In a couple of months we created a sort of friendship, but he did not tell me a crucial point in his history. It was only when I met his wife that I found out what it was: he was an alcoholic, and now he is trying to overcome this problem.

This moment was quite bizarre; it makes me wonder about the validity of life stories that I have collected; and about how it is possible to learn and understand the position that I have to take in each specific relation with my interviewees. As C. Delcroix (1995) suggests, it is important to collect and to make cross-comparisons of several life stories in order to "validate" their content¹⁰. In some situations it was not possible, as in the case of divorced couples in which the husband, the sons, and the new wife could all be interviewed, but not the first wife.

The more the analysis "advances" into a person's life the clearer her or his life story becomes, but at the same time it is difficult to be objective in front of the recording and the pieces of stories at hand. This is quite a problem, because I feel like I am part of the story and the story is part of me: the tendency to believe in what people narrate increases, while looking for validation decreases. I notice a double tendency to search for friendship and for distance at the very same time; in fact, in the dynamics of my relation with my sample it is not so clear what is the right distance that I have to maintain; where is the line that I cannot cross? Even though I am tempted to go on and on, following people's lives, connected to the idea of K. Plummer (1983)¹¹: when I am inside of a life story I have difficulties to stop searching, meeting, looking for new information.

But how is it possible to know when to stop?

How is it possible to decide that the case studies cannot provide new information for the research?

10 Delcroix, C. (1995), "Des récits croisés aux histoires de familles", *Current Sociology/La sociologie contemporaine*, n. spécial "The Biographical Method", vol. 43, London, Sage, pp. 61-67.

11 Plummer, K. (1983), *Documents of Life. An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*, London, George Allen and Unwin.

The key point in biography is not to reconstruct what is true or not in the stories, but to analyse the subjective point of view in relation with the society that characterizes the interview. Society and people are strongly linked, and the goal is to underline the ways in which people interviewed act and influence the society and vice versa, the ways in which society structures people and their biographies, how it modifies the rules and the perspective that they have on it. This is particularly true according to the concept of biography as developed by P. Alheit (1996)¹²; he expresses the room for manoeuvre that a person has to act on, to change and to develop his or her narration, although strongly marked by the social structures. In this approach the coexistence of contingent elements and social structures is recognized, the individual and collective dimension of the events. I try to pay attention and to integrate these levels in my research; I manage to conduct my fieldwork without forgetting that people and society are interconnected. I would like to emphasize and illustrate the active character of people and their room for manoeuvre.

Another issue is how to decide which are the most important sections of a biography. From my experiences in interviewing couples I understand the meaning of what Bodgan and Taylor say: not all people have the same capacity and disposition to tell and reconstruct their lives in a significant and detailed manner. Even good interviewers cannot create a miracle with a person who has not enough capacity of verbalization.¹³

Many interviewees are not used to talk about themselves, so they are not able to recreate their specific course of life. In these cases it is helpful to aid and guide them through the process of reflecting on themselves and their lives. Vice versa, others open up without any kind of filter in speaking about their lives.

Another element to deal with is time. People may have difficulties to find free time for reflecting about themselves and their lives and, consequently, to find time for me and my interviewing.

How is it possible then to deal with these different pieces of life stories?

How is it possible to underline the differences that lie behind the transcribed speech and are influenced by different variables?

I have collected several long life stories, but while all elements could prove useful to better understand the dimension of people's life, how is it possible to reorient the *récits* in the useful direction without forcing the interlocutor?

The interviewer should not intervene too much in the moment of the *récit*, for fear of invading the space of narration that the person is building on herself or himself.

For instance, Hamid, a Moroccan man, narrated a lot about the trip that made him come to Italy, spending half an hour telling about his friends, their relation with him and so on. In this case taking into account the importance of these experiences helps me to appreciate the value of friendship in his life and the strong relations with Moroccan friends' vis-à-vis Italian ones. A lot of people tend to tell a

12 Alheit, P. and Bergamini, S. (1996), *Storie di vita. Metodologia di ricerca per le scienze sociali*, Milano, Guerini.

13 Bodgan, R. and Taylor, S.J. (1975), *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Science*, New York, Wiley.

large amount of information that does not seem directly linked with the core subject of the research. May the link be indirect?

One goal of this research is to underline historical, legislative and bilingual dimensions as a potentiality in mixed couples that cannot always find a support in the institutional social context in which they live. How can I deal with them, if other pieces of information emerge from the biographies that I have collected?

The critical question that arises is whether to follow a deductive or inductive approach, in other words, should the methodology stem from the academic's own research design, or should the stories themselves induce and dictate the methodology and the line of reasoning? May I have to choose the abductive approach¹⁴?

Moreover, should the same weight be given to the life stories of those who completely open up within interviews as opposed to those who present me the "best" but selected parts of their lives, omitting, usually, some dark points? Is comparing life stories enough in this case?

While some might view the doubts and questions raised throughout this paper as banal, they are, nevertheless, not so easy to address and deal with. It is also very plausible that the ways to deal with such issues are neither easy to teach nor to learn because perhaps each case and context present different challenges.

I would be happy to listen to your advice and views in order to learn from the direct experiences of others.

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¹⁴ Burawoy M., (2003), "L'étude de cas élargie. Une approche réflexive, historique et comparée de l'enquête de terrain", in. Cefai D., *L'enquête de terrain*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte/M.A.U.S.S., pp. 425 -464.