Migration and Questions of Belonging.
Migrants in Germany and Florida[1]

Gabriele Rosenthal in collaboration with Michaela Köttig

Abstract: This essay describes the theoretical and methodological approach behind the empirical case reconstructions that are discussed in the following articles. The essay also introduces a social constructivist and biographical theoretical concept of the creation and transformation of the constructions of collective belonging before going on to develop the methodological implications. On the basis of empirical findings, this essay will discuss the enormous impact that the interaction between family stories and life stories with the historical and cultural framework has on the construction and reinterpretation of collective belongings.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The question of collective belonging to an ethnic, national, or religious we-group —as defined by Norbert ELIAS (1991)—is always an issue in situations that result in emigration or flight from one's home country. Collective belonging plays a particularly important role in the new way of life with which these persons are confronted in their receiving countries. In some cases, this is the first time these individuals have come to terms with the question of collective belonging after having made the decision to leave their country of origin or when they are confronted with chosen or attributed forms of collective identity within the context of shifting power balances. Migrants are not only confronted with this question when dealing with legal issues, such as applying for a residency permit, citizenship, or the resulting problems stemming from illegal residency, but additional questions also arise in social settings that have to do with members of the receiving society, with other migrants, or with people who continue to live in their country of origin. According to Alfred SCHÜTZ and Thomas LUCKMANN (1980), the advertence to the problem of "collective belonging" in cases of discrimination, persecution, fleeing one's country, or emigration is by no means voluntary, but is determined by a "socially imposed thematic relevance." These are social situations that compel attentive advertence: "The actions of the fellow-men (indeed, the courses of acts as well as their results) place themes before the individual to which he must turn himself" (ibid, p.190). [1]

---

1   Mark WILLARD translated this article and we would like to heartedly thank him for his excellent work.

Exactly how the question of collective belonging and, in particular, of ethnic or national belonging arises and to which transformative processes these constructions are subject is the main theme of the following five essays ([KÖTTIG](#), [BRANDHORST](#), [BALLENTHIEN & BÜCHING](#), [GRÜN](#), [KÜVER](#)) all of which are based on research studies that we have supervised.[2] The authors pursue these questions by means of biographical case reconstructions that take into consideration the context of the entire life history while at the same time drawing on the family history. In all of these projects, it is expressly not assumed a priori that either a stable belonging to we-groups or a general effective or relevant ethnic belonging exists. Rather, based on concrete individual cases, it is necessary to reconstruct in which life-historical and social constellations belonging becomes important for individuals or certain groups of people, on which constellations they place this importance, to what extent the constructions handed down by the community or family are effective, or to what extent these are tossed out and new constructions are developed. [2]

The authors have turned to members of quite disparate migrant groupings— migrants from different countries of origin and social milieus as well as migrants of varying social and legal status living in Germany and South Florida. In her essay, Michaela KÖTTIG, who conducted interviews both in South Florida and Germany, concentrates on people who migrated from Cuba to Florida or Germany.[3] This comparison of migrants from the same country of origin, who today not only live in two different social contexts but also left their country for entirely different reasons, presents us with the possibility of examining how different reasons for migration, different legal and living conditions, and different societal contexts influence the sense of collective belonging as well as its transformations. Whereas the Cubans in the United States usually left or had to leave Cuba for political reasons and to this day generally see themselves as exiles, Cuban migrants in Germany emigrated for entirely different reasons. Either they came as contract laborers to the German Democratic Republic as a part of the exchange program that existed between the two countries and later found a way to remain in Germany after reunification, or they migrated to Germany after marrying a German citizen—usually the case after the mid-1990s. A further important difference between Cuban migrants living in the United States and Germany is that Cubans living in Germany can regularly travel to Cuba, whereas travel for "US-Cubans" is much more limited and even then is seldom carried out for political reasons. KÖTTIG's contrastive comparison of these two groupings shows that despite these considerable differences and their highly disparate biographies, they are still very similar in terms of their clear positioning as Cubans and their constructions of belonging regarding Cuba, which they

---

2   These projects are the product of two student research projects directed by the authors at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences at the Georg August University of Göttingen, Germany. They were a part of our joint TransCoop project "Biography and Ethnicity: Development and Changes in Sense of Socio-cultural Belonging in Migrant Populations in the US and Germany," conducted together with Julia CHAITIN and John LINSTROTH and their PhD students from the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nova Southeastern University, Florida.

3   In addition to migrants from Cuba (n = 10), we also interviewed migrants from Haiti (n = 12) and Guatemala (n = 7) in South Florida.

believe is mediated by Cuban culture.[4] However, the differences between these two groupings can be found in their sense and attitude of belonging towards their country of immigration. Cubans in the United States define themselves as US-Cubans and identify with the United States. The grouping of migrants in Germany —who, as opposed to those Cubans living in the United States, cannot so easily obtain citizenship or residency permits—were not able to develop a comparable construction. Rosa Maria BRANDHORST's case of a migrant from Cuba, who first came to Germany on a tourist visa at a friend's invitation and whose residency permit depends on his fatherhood and his marrying a German woman, illustrates the biographical costs that the right of residency can entail. In the case of this migrant, however, the greatest problems are connected to belonging within the familial context, as will be explained below. [3]

The contributions by Jana BALLENTHIEN/Corinne BÜCHING, Sonja GRÜN, and Jan KÜVER concentrate on migrants in Germany with greatly varying legal statuses. The migrants interviewed by Corinne BÜCHING and Jana BALLENTHIEN are ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who were able to obtain German citizenship when they emigrated to Germany. Thus, these migrants could be considered quite privileged when compared with other migrant groupings.[5] However, the interviews carried out with members of this grouping clearly show that, in everyday life in Germany, even these migrants are afraid of being denied their ethnic and social status as Germans. The attribution "Russian," which they often encounter in Germany, opens old wounds relating to attribution by others and the discrimination they faced in the Soviet Union, which often described them as "fascists" or "collaborators with Nazi Germany." [4]

Sonja GRÜN focuses on the situation of refugees who fled to Germany during the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (April 1922–December 1995) and suffered from a particularly precarious status after their arrival. Their residency permits were only valid until the end of the war and afterwards were only extended for short periods of time. For some groups of persons, who were deemed to be at particular risk, their stay of deportation was in some cases extended until April 1997, as was the case with the biographer and her family who are introduced at length in GRÜN's essay.[6] This family was able to obtain German citizenship after six years in Germany. However, they live with the constant fear of being forced to leave Germany and return the same areas where they suffered extremely traumatic experiences—a fear that is shared by other families of refugees from former Yugoslavia (see ROSENTHAL, 2004a). Similar to the families of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, GRÜN's case study illustrates the marked effect of the family history during World War II on later generations' constructions of belonging. [5]

---

4   Twelve migrants in Germany have so far been interviewed.

5   This essay is related to a larger project financed by the German Research Foundation in which so far eighty-six ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union were interviewed (see FEFLER & RADENBACH, in press; ROSENTHAL & STEPHAN, in press).

6   In 1994 there were approximately 350,000 refugees from the Yugoslavian civil war in Germany. The number of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina was approximately 345,000 in late 1996 and sank approximately to 245,000 in late 1997. In 2001 there were still 19,277 Bosnian refugees in Germany (BUNDESZENTRALE FÜR POLITISCHE BILDUNG, 2009).

Jan KÜVER's essay concerning an immigrant from Sierra Leone in Germany[7] illustrates the necessity of a socio-historical timeframe that encompasses several generations of the same family in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of transmitted constructions of multiethnic and multinational belonging, experienced attributions by others, and discriminations. The life and the changing constructions of belonging of this migrant from Sierra Leone, described in KÜVER's essay, are codetermined by collective memory and slavery, the concrete effects of colonialism on the family history, the family members' various religious and ethnic belongings, Sierra Leone's 1991–2002 civil war, and the resulting multiple migrations. The biographer comes from a family which—to use Pierre BOURDIEU's (1983) term—is equipped with a large measure of social and cultural capital, but due to his mother's ethnic belonging in Sierra Leone he found himself a member of a group of outsiders. After his first eight years in Germany, he moved to Sierra Leone with his parents. After living for some time in Sierra Leone, he returned to Germany where he has lived for approximately twelve years (on a student visa). These familial and biographical constellations have led this man to clearly ambivalent senses and ambiguous constructions of belonging. [6]

In this work, we will address in further detail these contributions and their empirical findings relating to the constructions of belonging by means of a contrastive comparison of the cases. However, we must first address the issue of ethnicity and the constructions of collective belonging in general as well as the resulting questions pertaining to the analysis of familial and biographical interviews. Furthermore, we will introduce specific problems or research dilemmas that can arise within this context and that can also be transferred to other research contexts: the tendency of the researcher to hastily construct groupings while designing the study and the dilemma of ethnicization during the interviews with individuals. [7]

2. Ethnicity and Constructions of Collective Belonging

As GLAZER and MOYNIHAN determined in 1975 after their study of ethnic differentiation in the United States, ethnicized conflicts as well as processes of ethnicization can be observed within various social contexts. In light of ongoing processes of social boundary formation, the authors postulated that we should recognize and empirically examine "ethnicity" as a social phenomenon. This phenomenon has not lost its explanatory value when it comes to understanding social conflicts or the constitution of groups of outsiders (ELIAS & SCOTSON, 1965). It remains or has again become highly relevant in many regions—one need only think of post-communist countries in Eastern Europe and Asia, for example. [8]

However, this social phenomenon has to be understood as an *explanandum*, not only as an *explanans*. In terms of a social-constructivist—in the tradition of BERGER and LUCKMANN—and a biographical-theoretical analysis of "ethnicity" or the self-chosen or attributed belonging to an ethnic we-group, we assume that

---

7 Thirteen migrants from sub-Saharan countries were interviewed over the course of the student research projects.

there is a lifelong process of construction and redefinition of ethnic belonging that interrelates with other constructions of belonging. We claim to reconstruct this process as the subject's history interacts with changing social constellations. It is important to identify the biographical constellations—which of course also includes social constellations—in which the question of belonging to an ethnic we-group is at issue. In other words, it is important to determine at what point in time belonging to a we-group gains or loses in relevance. In doing so, it is of fundamental importance to empirically show in detail how the interaction between self-attribution and attribution by others functions, the dialectic between the *perseverance* of established, transmitted, and internalized social constructions and their *transformation* over the course of the individual's history as they relate to social transformation. Constructions of belonging are not arbitrary choices made by the individual. They are neither unchangeable or completely dependent on "socio-structural" conditions nor are they simply adopted from others. Despite the persistence of internalized and objectified constructions that individuals perceive as social facts—as *faits sociaux* as defined by Èmile DURKHEIM—they are always spelled out in similar or shifting social situations and negotiated interactively. With this concept of an interplay between persistence and transformation as well as between various individuals and we-groups (or groupings), we can subscribe to the suggestions put forth by Ted R. GURR and Anne PITSCH, who among others have argued for a synthesis of divergent approaches to "bridge the gap" between "constructivism" and "primordialism" in the study of ethnicity (GURR & PITSCH, 2003, p.230):

> "We suggest the following general formulation to link the primordial, instrumental, and constructive perspectives: Ethnonational identities are likely to be persistent because they are rooted in shared culture and experiences, but their specific content, expression, and importance for a group vary in response to changes in the group's social and political environment and the strategies chosen by group leaders for responding to threats and opportunities in the environment." [9]

This concept is compatible with a social-constructivist approach that includes the assumption that social constructions of ethnic belonging are not random, freely elective, and smoothly accommodating as the circumstances require. It is the process that is important, a process that implies the interplay of (as well as conflict and frictions between) newly created conceptions of collective identification and the respective constructions that are handed down by previous generations. [10]

The concept of ethnicity not only as a social but also as a persistent construction —often quite tenacious over multiple generations—can be found not only in recent studies. It is a concept that leads us back to Max WEBER's (1978, p.389) classical definition of an ethnic group:

> "We shall call ‘ethnic groups' those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important

for group formation; furthermore it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists." [11]

Similarly, the influential work of Fredrik BARTH (1969) should be mentioned here for its importance from an anti-substantialist point of view. Reinhart KÖßLER and Tilman SCHIEL (1995, p.2) concisely sum up this perspective: "It does not view ethnicity merely as a fact given a priori: ethnicity is not substantial, nor is it at all essential, but it is first created in a corresponding process of development of consciousness" (our translation). Nevertheless—and this must be emphasized in view of the widespread radically constructivist views predominant at present—BARTH stresses the persistence of this phenomenon "whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (BARTH, 1969, p.10). [12]

The constitution of ethnicity as a process that is in constant interaction with other processes assumes a relational determination of ethnicity in which we-definitions are constituted by the exclusion of others through acts of boundary-definition and boundary-maintenance between groups as well as the corresponding social processes of classification (see for example BARTH, 1969; ELWERT, 1989; DITTRICH & LENZ, 1995; KÖßLER & SCHIEL, 1995). The formation of ethnic groups implies a process of identifying one's own group that is identical to—or closely intertwined with—a process of classification and social exclusion of outsiders (see for example DITTRICH & LENZ, 1995). Regarding the different groupings targeted by our research**,** it is important to stress that the genesis of ethnic groups and the construction of the respective concepts of belonging are often closely connected with social and, in particular, violent conflictual processes (BOGNER, 1998, 2004; BOGNER & ROSENTHAL, in press; SCOTT, 1990; SPICER, 1971). On the other hand, the "close coupling with current socio-political processes and interests makes ethnicity undoubtedly available for literally any possible purpose, particularly in situations of intensified crisis and deep insecurity" (KÖßLER & SCHIEL, 1995, p.10). [13]

When individuals are discriminated against, oppressed, and persecuted on the basis of their self-defined or attributed belonging, their sense of belonging to a we-group is likely to gain in importance (see GURR & PITSCH, 2003). Wolf Dietrich BUKOW (1992) and BUKOW and LLARYORA (1988) have described and empirically investigated this externally initiated process of ethnicization as an attribution of "ethnic specifications" by others. Both the process, in which ethnic belonging increases in importance, and the search for support within an ethnic we-group can be seen as answers to experiences of discrimination. Here the question is, in which biographical constellations this response is chosen as an answer to discrimination and which groupings of migrants or other groupings of outsiders make an intensified attempt to be accepted into the established or the native population's groupings in order to lose their outsider status. The prerequisite for such a successful attempt is that these migrants have at their disposal the applicable characteristics for a national belonging. For example, skin color can lead to discrimination in the United States as well as in Germany, but this characteristic does not prevent the individual from being attributed a national

belonging in the United States. Thus, one can observe how young, black Haitian migrants in the United States attempt to mold themselves to the habits of African Americans who have lived in the United States for generations in order to avoid being recognized as Haitians. In this regard, Alex STEPICK differentiates various grades of "cover-up" and the ambivalence regarding the individual's family history. He argues that "many Haitian children and youth commit a form of cultural suicide, that is, become cover-ups, because of their perception of intense prejudice against Haitians" (STEPICK, 1998, p.60). In Germany however, skin color remains an identifying feature or means of attribution for "not being a German." Thus, the findings discussed by Jan KÜVER in his case study concerning a migrant from Sierra Leone are not surprising. This man, who like previous generations of his own family has lived a virtually transnational life, continues to suffer from discrimination in Germany. After several years in Germany, this has led him to increasingly define himself in terms of his African origins and he has become active in Sierra Leonean networks in Germany. Sonja GRÜN's case study of a migrant from Bosnia also illustrates how maintaining a supra-ethnic Yugoslavian construction of belonging, that was developed before her migration, helps her to come to terms with her feelings of not belonging in Germany. Yet how does this model play out with ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who, at least from a legal standpoint, are considered Germans? For these individuals, who usually immigrated with their families, it is generally the second generation that struggles with the perceived attribution by others according to which they are not "real Germans," while at the same time trying to prove their "Germanness" (FEFLER & RADENBACH, in press). This process is more difficult in families of non-German migrants from the former Soviet Union or those who have only one German parent, as is the case with the biographer introduced by Jana BALLENTHIEN and Corinne BÜCHING. Moreover, it is clear to this biographer that she was treated as an outsider by her husband's family because she has a Russian mother. Using this example, the authors furthermore illustrate how ambivalences regarding ethnic belonging can be influenced by other belongings, such as the belonging to a religious community. Among the younger generation of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, two very disparate groupings can be found. One of these groupings increasingly retreats into "ethnic counterworlds" and provocatively defines itself as "Russian" (ROSENTHAL & STEPHAN, in press). The members of the other grouping—as is true of the case study presented by BALLENTHIEN and BÜCHING—strongly separate themselves from their Soviet-Russian background while making a great effort to present themselves as Germans. This separation and the attempt to belong to the established can lead to considerable powerlessness in cases in which these individuals experience further exclusion and stigmatization. Norbert ELIAS and John SCOTSON examined these mechanisms of exclusion based on the example of a community in Great Britain and the differential in power between an old established group and a newer group of residents. The authors pointed out the "differentials of cohesion and integration as an aspect of power differentials" and "as a resource of power inequalities" (1994, p.XXII). Similar to ELIAS and SCOTSON, Georg ELWERT (1989) highlights the function of "internal integration" of groups of outsiders as a source of power "to oppose economic or social insecurities the strengthened integration in a community based on

patronage or nationality appears as an instrument" (ibid, p.460). Often outsiders generally display weak internal integration and a lacking "we-feeling," and this precisely is often the decisive cause of their weak position. [14]

The correlation between exclusion and increased self-imposed disassociation cannot however be adopted as a general rule. This relationship instead poses the empirical question as to whether the social situation of exclusion or repression based on national or ethnic belonging does indeed lead to increased self-imposed disassociation based on this belonging or, in cases in which this is repudiated, whether or not a group-feeling or we-feeling can be defined in terms of ethnic categories. Ursula APITZSCH (1995) discusses the different meanings of ethnicity, which on the one hand, can be the "product of the confrontation with the receiving society" or are instead the "result of a learning process in solidarity," but on the other hand may also "appear as a form of regression" (ibid, p.166). This is an appropriate point to mention the case of the migrant from Cuba introduced in Rosa Maria BRANDHORST's case study. This biography has been determined by a deeply-rooted and repeatedly reinforced feeling of rejection since childhood. It is this recurring experience of ostracism that leads to an intense desire to belong to a nuclear family. However, this feeling also leads this man to define himself as a Cuban in thoroughly stereotypical terms—"Cubans are like this ..." [15]

The function of an ethnic or generally collective construction of belonging must be reconstructed in concrete individual case studies that examine the particular grouping of migrants, the particular social situation, and the individual biographies. Which grouping attains the power to define the situation, whether or not the self-definition and the attribution by others is accepted by the "others," and, most importantly, which concrete biographical consequences result from the attribution can all be quite different depending on the social and historical situation. This makes a biographical approach that reconstructs the interrelations of family history and life story with social transformation processes, possible changes in the individual's own power of definition, and the effectiveness of social discourses at various points of time in the family and life histories so apposite. Above all, the biographical approach takes into account the active biographical work dealing with ascribed belongings imposed by others or, as Peter ALHEIT and Bettina DAUSIEN (2000, p.277) have postulated, "the basic ability to use in one's own manner external impulses for self-development." This raises the question as to what extent the social phenomenon of transnationality[8]—a topic which is the subject of so much intense discussion at present—is experienced from the migrant's subjective experience in the same manner put forth by a number of observers (see LEVITT, DeWIND & VERTOVEC, 2003). Thus, we can always establish some form of transnational life praxis at the level of a migrant's biographical data, yet in his or her self-perception he or she will feel they belong to a national or ethnic we-group. [16]

---

8   The concept of transnationality was notably introduced to sociological discussions in the 1990s by Nina GLICK-SCHILLER, Linda BASCH, and Cristina BLANC SZANTON: "Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state" (1995, p.48).

These programmatic considerations allow us to formulate the following questions to help in the analysis of life histories (see ROSENTHAL, 1997; BOGNER & ROSENTHAL, in press):

1. In which biographical and societal constellations does belonging to a collective become a theme of importance for an individual or for specific groupings?
2. What are the specific biographical functions of self-classification or the classification of others into "groupist" categories?
3. What is the impact of the process of migration on the sense of belonging to a collective or social category?
4. If and how do immigrants or refugees reinterpret and reconstruct their sense of belonging after migration?
5. How do these processes of reinterpretation interrelate to migrants' legal status after migration as well as with the social conditions and discourses in the countries of immigration?
6. In which established-outsiders configurations (particularly relevant in cases of larger we-groups) and with what asymmetrical balances of power did they live before and after migration? [17]

Furthermore, when analyzing the interviews it is important to pay heed to the extent to which establishing contact with the interviewees, the framing of the conversation, and the concrete interaction between interviewer and interviewee influence the interviewee's self-presentation and his or her positioning within or with regard to a we-group. At this point we would like to address these questions in greater detail. [18]

3. Research Dilemma: Ethnicization or De-ethnicization of the Interviewees by the Researchers?

Research into the question of social constructions of belonging—whether to ethnicities, classes, races, or genders—entails a dilemma. On the one hand, it is the dilemma with which we are faced when we group and categorize our interviewees according to belongings or, as Pierre BOURDIEU (1992, p.153) formulated, when we exert symbolic power, "the power to create things with words." On the other hand, if we attempt to avoid such classifications, we risk overlooking or neglecting the processes of stigmatization, discrimination, or exclusion that our interviewees have suffered—in particular those which took place "behind their back" and which they do not themselves broach during our conversations. Furthermore, it also creates the danger of overlooking, how privileged some of our interviewees are in comparison to others. [19]

When one chooses the design of an investigation and selects the sample along lines of various populations of migrants and—as we have done—with the intent of achieving an as contrasting a comparison as possible by interviewing particular groupings of migrants in Florida and Germany, these actions entail the tendency to assume, that a certain social affiliation and corresponding ethnic group exists

(see WIMMER, 2002, p.6). This bias in the study of ethnicity towards assuming the existence of discrete groups is a problem that Rogers BRUBAKER convincingly describes in his book *Ethnicity without Groups*. BRUBAKER refers to this problem as "groupism," which he defines as

> "the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life [...] to treat ethnic groups, nations, and races as substantial entities to which interests and agency can be attributed […] to reify such groups, speaking of Serbs, Croats, Muslim [...] and Native Americans in the United States as if they were internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups ..." (2004, p.8). [20]

By analyzing complete biographies and by researching the points of time, the contexts and the question how and by whom, in which social and institutional settings social affiliation to an ethnic group as a category was suggested or indirectly assumed, we have the opportunity to counteract this tendency without insinuating a global or "cosmopolitan" identity or sense of belonging among our interviewees. Furthermore, a contrastive comparison of several cases (see ROSENTHAL, 2004b; 2005) is always grouped hypothetically according to varying characteristics or constitutive factors, as they appear in the analyses of the individual cases. We thus assumed for some time, that the differences in the constructions of belonging were much more easily explained by the legal and social differences in the countries of immigration and the accompanying highly disparate attributions of otherness based on certain characteristics (such as skin color, language, or habits) rather than on the basis of belonging to a particular ethnic or national grouping. [21]

This assumption was based mainly on the interviews with Haitian and Cuban migrants in the United States as well as ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union. The migrants from Haiti complained again and again about their unfavorable legal status in terms of their difficulties in obtaining US citizenship and their respective disadvantages from which they suffered compared to Cuban migrants (see KÖTTIG, in this issue; LINSTROTH, HALL, PROSPER & HILLER, in this issue). It is most likely for these reasons, that they find it more difficult to identify with the United States than US Cubans. On the other hand, they come from a country of origin that supports the "'transnational reincorporation' of migrants into their state-centered projects" (GUARNIZO & SMITH, 1998, p.7) and thus, for many of them a transnational life praxis is more or less self-evident. For the families of Germans from the Soviet Union, we could clearly show the effectiveness of the legal requirement of proving they are German that, from a legal standpoint, was necessary for them to emigrate (ROSENTHAL & STEPHAN, in press).[9] [22]

However, with the analysis of the case studies we have since been forced to reject the simplicity of these assumptions concerning the efficacy of the legal and social situation for constructions of belonging. Much more effective are the

---

9   According to § 6 of the German Immigration Law for "Re-settlers," persons applying for entry into the Federal Republic of Germany have to prove their German national identity by means of original documents, by knowledge of German traditions, and by the ability to speak German.

asymmetrical power balances in the figuration of the migrant's own grouping and other we-groups before migration. The legal situation is very important in determining if and when the question of ethnic belonging becomes relevant and how the individual presents him or herself in the interview according to the necessary legal requirements. Most importantly, the legal situation determines the horizon of future perspectives for the familial and biographical drafts. However, the constructions of belonging are most dependent on whether the family already belonged to the outsiders within their society of origin before migrating (whether ethnic, religious, or according to their position in the social hierarchy in terms of classes, social stations, or clans) and to what extent they belonged to the outsiders after migrating. [23]

In order to grasp the complexity of the various components that can lead to certain senses of belonging as well as their transformation, it is important not to overlook the fact, that the self-presentation and positioning of the interviewee imposed by contact and interaction with the interviewer also co-determine the interview. As interviewers, we not only have the tendency to see people in terms of certain ascribed belongings, but the interviewees themselves also have ideas about how we classify them (regardless of whether or not these classifications apply). Processes of attribution cannot be avoided, but sensitive perception and critical reflection of the interactively created self-definitions and definitions by others are necessary, both when conducting the interview and when analyzing the data produced by our conversation. This can also only be determined using the analysis of the individual interactions and with the knowledge, that classifications—or avoiding classifications, which in no way ensures that systems of classification will be avoided—can affect the interaction process in the course of the interview. [24]

In the beginning of our interviews, it soon became obvious that the researchers' preset framings[10] of the interview are of extreme relevance. The comparison of the interviews carried out in Germany and the United States demonstrates a significant disparity resulting from the administrative conditions of research in the two countries, which resulted in very different framings of the interviews. In Germany, we established contact with individuals and carried out interview sessions according to our own methodologies: We told our conversational partners, that we wanted to know more about the living conditions and family histories of people who have immigrated to Germany, and stated our interest in their entire life and family histories. In a preliminary conversation, we explained these details while stressing the aspect of the country of origin and told them, that we would be interviewing immigrants from various countries living under very different conditions. We then began the interviews with a general request and asked them to tell us their family and life histories (initial narrative question). The subject of ethnic affiliation was not mentioned but only implicitly introduced with regards to their relationship to their former country of residence. We chose this procedure in order to establish if, when, and in which manner the respondent touched upon ethnic and other collective affiliation(s) during the interview, such

---

10 Here we refer to Erving GOFFMAN's (1974) concepts of *frame* and *framing* (ROSENTHAL, 2005, pp.44).

as during which life phases such affiliations became an issue and what kind of meaning the respondent attributed to them. [25]

Due to the strict instruction of the ethics commission in South Florida, we were required to discuss an extensive contract with the respondents, which they were required to sign, prior to the interview. In these contracts[11] we had to address the significance of ethnic affiliation and its importance to our research interests in great detail. The text of the contract begins as follows:

> "The purpose of this research study is to learn about your life experiences since we are studying people who came from Cuba, Haiti, or Guatemala and now live legally in the United States. We wish to learn how you see your ethnicity, culture, nationality, and identity. Specifically, we are interested in learning about your life experiences in your homeland and here in the United States in order to hear from you about when and how your nationality, ethnicity and culture are important to you." [26]

Despite all of our efforts to avoid doing so during our actual conversations with the interviewees, the consequence of this contract was that we were attributing ethnic characteristics both to the discourse and the respondents in as far as the contract attributed them with a specific ethnic belonging. Some respondents adopted these attributes, particularly when they corresponded to their own point of view. Others contradicted, rejected, or amended these attributes as a result of their specific origins or their trans-cultural and transnational biographical history. Some felt uneasy about these attributions, as they had apparently not as yet classified themselves as such. In any case, the issue of ethnic affiliation became a topic of discussion irrespective of the respondent's own self-definition. As was demonstrated in the interviews, it was difficult to reverse this situation by putting forth an initial narrative question which asked the interviewees to tell their complete life story. For example, one of our interviews confirmed how, despite our consistent attempts to reframe the conversation, the thematic framing introduced in the earlier preliminary conversation determined the entire interview. In our interview with the interviewee, we refer to as Barika, a woman living in Florida, we referred to her as migrant from Haiti. During the conversation, she consistently rejected this attribution and provided a host of explanations to the contrary. As the daughter of a father who was a diplomat from Kenya and a mother who grew up in Haiti, she lived in various countries following her childhood in Haiti. Before she migrated to Miami, where she lives today, she had again lived in Haiti for about ten years. In spite of her cultural bonds to Haiti, she did not define herself as a Haitian and therefore believed that she would not fit into our sample. Let us look at Barika's rejection of ethnicization more closely. In the beginning of the interview, Barika told us, "You can't consider Haitian ethnicity because *I* myself I am not 100 percent Haitian."[12] This was followed by an

---

11 The text was carefully formulated by Julia CHAITIN and John LINSTROTH. As we were required to explain our research question concerning ethnicity, it was impossible to avoid an indirect ethnicization of the interviewee.

12 Words in italic type are stressed. Further characters for transcripts (2) = Pause in full seconds; , = brief pause, (.....) = incomprehensible space between brackets, ((laughs)) = transcriber's comments which can also include descriptions of moods or nonverbal utterances.

explanation from Barika's mother, who was also present during the interview, who told how Barika's father was from Kenya. Barika then began to explain the numerous stations of her life story while paying particular attention to the many moves the family was forced to undertake as a result of her father's career. At the end of the interview, she again returned to the problems of her belonging:

> B: I hope what I have discussed with you has helped I don't know if I'd be the *perfect candidate* because I am not of Haitian descent I don't consider myself typically Haitian so ...
>
> I: Who is typically?
>
> B: Who is typically *Haitian*?
>
> I: ((laughs)) Right, I mean this was ironic? Who is typical? Everybody is ( )
>
> B: *Nobody* is typically Haitian because even Haitians (1) come from such a *diverse, ethnicity* you find *Indian* you find *Spanish* you find *English* you find *French* you find *African* you know, people ask me a lot of times where are you from? And I always tell them you know what? I am a citizen of the world because I don't know where I am from my father is from one continent my mother is from *another* continent I was born at one continent and I have lived on *several* continents so I *never* (1) when you ask me where I am from I am a ( ) born in New York but I am a citizen of the world (2) and that's how I consider myself, I do have strong ties to *Haiti* (1) more so than *Kenya* but ... [27]

The reconstruction of this life history showed, that her repeated rejection of ethnic belonging is by no means only due to the framing of the interview, which was to a great extent predetermined by the written contract. Instead, this rejection has been determined by Barika's biographical experiences and her way of dealing with them. The entire interview with Barika is marked by the questions that she finds unsettling: "Where do I belong? Where is my home?" She continues as follows:

> "... but in *reality* I don't belong anywhere. I don't have a home … I think the closest I have come to home is Haiti maybe that's why I will say because I lived there for ten years that's the first time yeah yeah." [28]

Barika suffers from a strong feeling of instability. To this day she suffers from the feeling that she herself could not decide where she lives. For example, when we asked her, "Could you tell us a little bit more about your childhood before your parents separated?" she answered as follows:

> "My *childhood* my childhood like I said I traveled a lot I mean it was very hard, it was very hard because (1) um I never stayed in *one* place, at *one* time I was never *grounded* I was never I've never really had *stability*, I had stability maybe in the last ten years because I stayed *put* in one place." [29]

The analysis of this interview made it very clear, that this case represents the biography of someone who has suffered greatly from her transnational life praxis, which was imposed by her parents over the course of a long period during her life

—a praxis she has not managed to overcome to this today. After completing our biographical case reconstructions, we feel confident in assuming that by virtue of a consistent guiding of the interview according to the method of narrative interviewing (ROSENTHAL, 2003; 2004b), it sooner or later becomes possible to determine the extent to which the interviewee's handling of the ethnicization described above is determined by his or her own biographical experiences. The case studies detailed in the following essays also illustrate the relevance of biographies and, in particular, family histories in the self-constructions and constructions by others regarding ethnic and collective belongings expressed during the interviews. The manner in which the interviewees interpret the interviewers' framing of the interviews and the research context as well as how they deal with this knowledge is determined by their life histories. However, this is required to produce meticulous case reconstructions that span an extensive temporal perspective which can grasp the interaction between the present rules for self-positioning and attribution by others, biographical experiences, and—not to forget—the collective knowledge that is handed down within the family as well as within the relevant communities and milieus. As mentioned above, the following articles illustrate the enormous effectiveness of the familial and life histories in the construction and reinterpretation of collective belongings. Thus, it is necessary not only to look at the parts of the biography dealing with migration or even the biography as a whole. Instead, one must reconstruct the individual family history and experiences as they interrelate to the transformation of the historical-cultural framework as well as a diachronic perspective spanning several generations that can examine the shifting power balances between various we-groups and social groupings. [30]

References

Alheit, Peter & Dausien, Bettina (2000). Die biographische Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Überlegungen zur Biographizität des Sozialen. In Erika Hoerning (Ed.), *Biographische Sozialisation* (pp.257-284). Stuttgart: Lucius & Lucius.

Apitzsch, Ursula (1995). Interkulturelle Arbeit: Migranten, Einwanderungsgesellschaft,interkulturelle Pädagogik. In Heinz-Hermann Krüger (Ed.), *Einführung in die Arbeitsfelder der Erziehungswissenschaft* (pp.251-267). Opladen: Leske & Budrich.

Ballenthien, Jana & Büching, Corinne (2009). Insecure belongings: A family of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union in Germany. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 21, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903218.

Barth, Fredrik (1969). Introduction. In Fredrik Barth (Ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference* (pp.9-38*)*. Bergen: Universitets Forlaget.

Bogner, Artur (1998). Gewaltkonflikte und der Wandel sozialer Fremdheit in Nordghana. In Herfried Münkler, Karin Meßlinger & Bernd Ladwig (Eds.), *Die Herausforderung durch das Fremde* (pp.201-303). Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Bogner, Artur (2004). Ethnizität und die soziale Organisation physischer Gewalt: Ein Modell des Tribalismus in postimperialen Kontexten. In Julia Eckert (Ed.), *Anthropologie der Konflikte* (pp.58-87). Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Bogner, Artur & Rosenthal, Gabriele (in press). Introduction: Ethnicity, biography and options of belonging. In Gabriele Rosenthal & Artur Bogner (Eds.), *Ethnicity, belonging and biography. Ethnographical and biographical perspectives*. Münster: LIT Verlag.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1983). *Die verborgenen Mechanismen der Macht*. Hamburg: VSA.

Bourdieu, Pierre (Ed.) (1992). *Rede und Antwort*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Brandhorst, Rosa María (2009). Ethnicity and transnational relations of Cuban immigrants in Germany. An insight into a case reconstruction. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 27, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903277.

Brubaker, Rogers (2004). *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bukow, Wolf-Dietrich (1992). Ethnisierung und nationale Identität. In Institut für Migrations und Rassismusforschung e.V. (Eds.), *Migration und Rassismus in Europa* (pp.133-146). Hamburg: Argument-Verlag.

Bukow, Wolf-Dietrich & Llaryora, Roberto (1988). *Mitbürger aus der Fremde*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (2009). *Flucht und Asyl seit 1990*, http://www.bpb.de/popup/popup_druckversion.html?guid=EX7ED8 [Date of access: June 9, 2009].

Dittrich, Eckard & Lenz, Astrid (1995). Die Fabrikation von Ethnizität. In Reinhart Kößler & Tilmann Schiel (Eds.), *Nationalstaat und Ethnizität* (pp.23-44). Frankfurt a.M.: IKO.

Elias, Norbert (1991). *The society of individuals*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, Norbert & Scotson, John L. (1965/1994). *The established and the outsiders. A sociological enquiry into community problems*. London: Sage.

Elwert, Georg (1989). Nationalismus und Ethnizität. Über die Bildung von Wir-Gruppen. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, *41*, 440-464.

Fefler, Irina & Radenbach, Niklas (in press). The interrelation between social mobility and the sense of collective belonging. A generation of social climbers in the Soviet Union. In Gabriele Rosenthal & Artur Bogner (Eds.), *Ethnicity, Belonging belonging and biography. Ethnographical and biographical perspectives* (pp. 161-179). Münster: LIT Verlag.

Glazer, Nathan & Moynihan, Daniel (Eds.) (1975). Introduction. In Nathan Glazer & Daniel Moyninhan (Eds.), *Ethnicity. Theory and experience* (pp.1-28). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Glick Schiller, Nina; Basch, Linda & Blanc Szanton, Cristina (1995). From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *68*(1), 48-63.

Goffman, Erving (1974). *Frame analysis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Grün, Sonja (2009). Construction of ethnic belonging in the context of former Yugoslavia—the case of a migrant from Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 22, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903226.

Guarnizo, Luis & Smith, Peter (1998). The locations of transnationalism. In Peter Smith & Luis Guarnizo (Eds.), *Transnationalism from below. Comparative urban and community research* (Vol. 6, pp.2-34). Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Gurr, Ted Robert & Pitsch, Anne (2003). Ethnopolitical conflict and separatist violence. In Wilhelm Heitmeyer & John Hagan (Eds.), *The international handbook of violence research* (pp.227-245). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Kößler, Reinhart & Schiel, Tilman (1995). Nationalstaaten und Grundlagen ethnischer Identität. In Reinhart Kößler & Tilman Schiel (Eds.), *Nationalstaat und Ethnizität*. (pp.1-22). Frankfurt a.M.: IKO.

Köttig, Michaela (2009). Constructions of collective belongings through art by migrants from Cuba in Germany and South Florida. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 31, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903319.

Kuever, Jan (2009). Cultural and corporate belonging in the course of transnational biographies: A case study of a Sierra Leonean immigrant in Germany. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 23, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903234.

Levitt, Peggy; DeWind, Josh & Vertovec, Steven (2003). International perspectives on transnational migration: An introduction. *IMR International Migration Review*, *37*(3), 565- 575.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (1997). National identity or multicultural autobiography: Theoretical concepts of biographical constitution grounded in case reconstructions. In Amia Lieblich & Ruthellen Josselson (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives* (Vol. 5, pp.21-29). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Linstroth, J.P.; Hall, Alison; Prosper, Mamyrah & Hiller, Patrick T. (2009). Conflicting ambivalence of Haitian identity-making in South Florida. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *10*(3), Art. 11, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0903118.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2003). The healing effects of storytelling. On the conditions of curative story-telling in the context of research and counseling. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *9*(6), 915-933.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2004a). Ethnisierung der Biographie und Traumatisierung. In Markus Ottersbach & Erol Yildiz (Eds.), *Migration in der metropolitanen Gesellschaft: Zwischen Ethnisierung und globaler Neuorientierung* (pp. 217-227). Münster: Lit-Verlag.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2004b). Biographical research. In Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber Gubrium & David Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp.48-64). London: Sage.

Rosenthal, Gabriele (2005). *Interpretative* Sozialforschung. Eine Einführung. Weinheim: Juventa.

Rosenthal, Gabriele & Stephan, Viola (in press). Shifting balances of power and changing constructions of ethnic belonging: Three-generation families in Germany with ethnic German members from the former Soviet Union. In Gabriele Rosenthal & Artur Bogner (Eds.), *Ethnicity, belonging and biography. Ethnographical and biographical perspectives* (pp.347-370). Münster: LIT Verlag.

Schütz, Alfred & Luckmann, Thomas (1980). *The structures of the life world. Vol. 1*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Scott, Georg M., Jr. (1990). A resynthesis of the primordial and circumstantial approaches to ethnic group solidarity: Towards an explanatory model. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *13*(2), 147-171.

Spicer, Edward H. (1971). Persistent cultural systems. *Science*, *174*(4011), 795-800.

Stepick, Alex (1998). *Pride against prejudice. Haitians in the United States*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Weber, Max (1978). *Economy and society* (ed. by Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Vol. 2). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wimmer, Andreas (2002). Multikulturalität oder Ethnisierung? *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, *31*(1), 4-26.

Authors

Gabriele ROSENTHAL is Professor for Qualitative Methods at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen, Germany. She is currently the president of the Research Committee: "Biography and Society" (RC 38) within the International Sociological Association (ISA). Previous positions included a professorship for general sociology at the University of Cologne and a professorship for social therapy at the University of Kassel. Since 1989 she has taught qualitative methods and biographical research as a guest lecturer at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel. Her major research focus is on the intergenerational impact of the collective and familial history on biographical structures and actional patterns of individuals and family systems. Her current research deals with migration, ethnicity and ethnopolitical conflicts. She teaches qualitative methods, biographical research, family sociology, and general sociology and is the author and editor of numerous books including *The Holocaust in Three Generations* (1998) and *Interpretative Sozialforschung* (2005). Her recent articles have been in the field of migration and of methods (video-analysis or biographical research in interrelation to collective history).

Contact:

Gabriele Rosenthal

Georg-August-University of Göttingen
Center of Methods in Social Sciences
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 3, 37073 Göttingen
Germany

Tel.: +49 551 39 12413
Fax: +49 551 39 12286

E-mail: g.rosenthal@gmx.de
URL: http://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/28238.html

Dr. *Michaela KÖTTIG*, born 1965, is currently a research assistant at the Center of Methods in Social Sciences at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen. She studied at the University of Kassel and was employed at the University of Cologne. Her research concerns female right-wing extremism in Germany. She also focuses on political socialization, family sociology, and family history as well as the influence of these factors on peer interactions. Furthermore, she is interested in young people's transition from school to work and the construction of belongings in transnational families. Here, she focuses on the constellations of families with very different political opinions and patterns of actions. In her research, she employs biographical, intergenerational, and ethnographical methods and has written about the productive transfer of interpretative research methods to different fields of social work. As of 2003, she has been secretary of the Research Committee on Biography and Society (RC 38) at the International Sociological Association (ISA). In October, she will begin a professorship at the University of Applied Sciences at Frankfurt/Main for interviewing techniques, communication, and conflict management.

Contact:

Michaela Köttig

Georg-August-University of Göttingen
Center of Methods in Social Sciences
Platz der Göttinger Sieben 3, 37073 Göttingen
Germany

Tel.: +49 551 39 14206
Fax: +49 551 39 12286

E-mail: Michaela.koettig@gmx.de
URL: http://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/28239.html

Citation