

Training for Advanced Research in the Narrative Study of Lives Within the Context of Political and Educational Transformation: A Case Study in South Africa

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Key words:

advanced qualitative research; the narrative study of lives; postgraduate programme; metatheoretical framework; relational methodology; biographical context; institutional context; societal context; South Africa

Abstract: It is widely accepted that the humanities and social sciences in South Africa have stagnated since the end of the anti-apartheid struggle in this country. This article argues that a programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives* provides a platform for establishing and strengthening a significant component of the training of social and human scientists. Its essence is epistemologically related to indigenous knowledge, cultural transmission and community engagement, and it can therefore contribute towards a democratisation of knowledge. The programme is situated in a participatory learning environment and the supervisors aim for students to assimilate new knowledge at a deep level, engage critically with it and apply it in ways that demonstrate their solid grasp of content and research processes. In addition to this focus on *thesis-as-product*, supervision is also concerned with the *person-as-product*.

The programme aims at building students' capacity to master and apply metatheory, substantive theory as well as qualitative research methodology. The epistemology of *The Narrative Study of Lives programme* is largely based on the phenomenological/interpretivist tradition and it largely operates within an idealist theory of knowledge. The program does emphasise, however, the need to straddle the often-irresolvable antagonisms of subject and object, micro and macro, objectivist and constructivist, and structure and agency. For this reason students are sensitised to distinguish between the biographical, institutional/organisational and the societal contexts within which narratives should be analysed.

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1. The Context

One reason for introducing an advanced postgraduate programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives* at the University of the Free State (UFS) Department of Sociology in the beginning of 2012 was to take heed of the call for action to prevent a state of intellectual stagnation in the humanities and social sciences within South African universities. The South African Minister for Higher Education and Training, Dr. Blade NZIMANDE, commissioned a "Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences" (DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING, 2011) to point out the way forward for a robust post-apartheid Higher Education system. The Minister argued that the apartheid regime and its predecessors made no great effort to educate black South Africans, especially Africans. After democratisation in 1994 great emphasis was placed on critical areas of skills shortages such as engineering, physical sciences, technology and business studies such as accounting. The humanities and social sciences were, however, neglected and some would even argue that they became weaker. For this reason the Charter recommends specific interventions that will address the situation (such as forming an Academy/Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, establishing "virtual schools" to facilitate international cooperation creating continent-wide programmes similar to the Socrates and Erasmus Programme in the European Union). [1]

At this point it is necessary to refer briefly to some historical reasons for the neglect of the social sciences in general and sociology in particular in South Africa. During the political struggle in the 1970s and 1980s the liberal Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA)—established in June 1970 in Mozambique, initially to provide closer contact for social scientists in the Southern African region—gradually developed a clearly defined oppositional/confrontational identity. The majority of its members were attached to English-speaking South African university campuses and operated from one or another radical, Marxist, critical and even qualitative point of departure. The more conservatively inclined and mainly Afrikaans-speaking sociologists often adhered to structural-functional and quantitative research and theoretical paradigms (see UYS, 2004, pp.3-4) and belonged to the conservative South African Sociological Association (better known by its Afrikaans acronym SASOV—Suid-Afrikaanse Sosiologie Vereniging) that became the home for many pro-apartheid, government-supporting ideologues. On the other hand, the collective challenging spirit at ASSA conferences during the 1970s and 1980s became a trademark. This spirit was in line with the "prophetic paradigm" referred to by Robert FRIEDRICH (1970) when he speaks about the underlying principle of conflict as one way in which sociology can be practised. In stark contrast to this paradigm of challenge and conflict at ASSA conferences, the reigning image of the subject matter for sociologists participating in SASOV conferences largely reflected the "priestly paradigm" referred to by FRIEDRICH. [2]

One of the past Presidents of SASA (the newly established South African Sociological Association, which came about as a result of the unification of ASSA and SASOV) and a former Vice-President of the International Sociological

Association, Ari SITAS, is known to lament the waning of sociology in South Africa after democracy began in 1994. He ascribes the stagnation of sociology during the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s to fatigue resulting from the fierce anti-apartheid struggle of the period prior to 1994. The state of sociology practice in South Africa was further compromised by the fact that many of the promising young sociologists joined the ranks of the new post-apartheid government after 1994. The result was that during the last decade of the previous millennium and the first decade of the current one the institutionalisation of a strong intellectual engagement with the state gradually slowed down—and with this slide came a lower level of critical engagement in general. [3]

Another factor contributing to the changes regarding the institutional context within which sociology was practised in South Africa in the period following democracy in 1994 was the establishment of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the introduction of Curriculum 2005 in schools (the so-called outcome-based education) intended to equip students with the necessary skills to operate efficiently within the work environment. The establishment of National Standards Bodies and Standards Generating Bodies led to a devaluing of the contributions of more general and less professionalised disciplines (amongst others sociology). Universities started to offer specific programmes based on elements regarded as relevant to the SAQA programme. In some cases the academic department became regarded as less important as the organisational basis for a discipline. This brought an emphasis on modules, credits, notional hours, "hard" outcomes and different kinds of assessment (sometimes moving away from critical reasoning and argument constructing processes associated with extensive reading and essay writing, towards rote learning and factual information). Most of this was the result of a move to improve throughput but it had a negative effect on deep learning. [4]

A second important report that emphasised the weakening place of the humanities and social sciences in South Africa was released in August 2011: the "Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, Prospects and Strategies, commissioned by the ACADEMY OF SCIENCE OF SOUTH AFRICA (2011). Key findings indicate a crisis in the humanities due to intellectual stagnation. Not only does the weight of scholarship often lack international status and standing, but there is also a radical inequality in knowledge production in South Africa with the total output of scholarly contributions on the part of black scholars falling below that of their white counterparts. [5]

Narrative/biographical studies in general provide a natural platform for establishing and strengthening a significant component of social and human science practice. The very essence of life story research (especially in as far as narrative inquiry, life history and oral history are concerned) is epistemologically related to a large part of indigenous knowledge, cultural transmission and community engagement. Without simply accepting life story data as "unmediated representations of social realities", as ATKINSON and DELAMONT (2009, p.316) caution against doing, the researcher engages in a reflexive process to

demonstrate how narrative realities encountered through life story research coincide with historical truths. In the words of Ken PLUMMER (2001, p.2) the use of documents of life such as narrative/biographical studies implies

"... getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways, and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring". [6]

More specifically, many aspects of the fabric of South African society provide fertile ground for nourishing and expanding narrative studies. In her introduction to a comprehensive coverage of life story research Barbara HARRISON (2009, pp.xxiii-xxix) argues that a number of factors provide precursors for research dealing with and based on narratives in general. Most of these factors are particularly relevant in the South African context of the post-democracy phase (in other words after 1994—the date of the first democratic election). These include an increasing awareness of the role that oral history plays in contributing towards a democratisation of knowledge: How do we remember the past? How did we experience the past? How is the past still part of our lives in the present? It is of concern that traditional historical sources did not adequately incorporate the voices of the majority of South Africa's people. The racial divide of apartheid brought about that the voices of the majority of South Africans were not heard because they found themselves on the economic and cultural margins. Because of their political exclusion they were hidden from historical accounts and their views seldom played a role in the reconstruction and representation of reality. By expanding everyday discourses on issues that reflect everyday life to as wide a spectrum as possible, narrative studies can contribute to greater inclusivity, more opportunities for political and cultural participation and self expression. [7]

For this reason we encourage our students to research issues topical of a society such as the South African, undergoing political and social transformation. Some of the research topics of students in our programme cover issues on the lived experience of HIV-positive men on anti-retroviral treatment, biographic studies of identity among specific socio-economic groups, the voices of upwardly mobile youths from previously disadvantaged groups, and life experiences of first generation students at university. We believe that individual voices are not sufficiently heard and particularly those words that express the feelings, thoughts and daily experiences of victims of oppression will give substance and resonance to human suffering that continues to plague our times. By allowing more "ordinary people" to narrate their experiences we can contribute to the move to expand the relevance of the larger picture. Our programme on *The Narrative Study of Lives* hopes to add finer detail to the broad brushstrokes of contemporary history. A further stimulus for expanding narrative studies is to lay open the deep roots of institutionalised racism, oppression and imperialism in South African society—not only the remnants of the apartheid regime but also those underlying a new wave of domination, corruption and self-enrichment. [8]

From the above it is clear that one of the primary aims of the programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives* has been to explore ways to listen to the voices of ordinary people. The programme also attempts to sensitise students to description and understanding of aspects of their own social reality, its unique context and the need to participate in social transformation and reconstruction. In addition to this, we also take the need for international benchmarking into consideration. One of the ways to increase the quality of training of qualitative sociologists was to draw on internationally recognised experts. The programme benefits from the involvement of world-renowned methodologists as well as high quality postdoctoral fellows. Esteemed researchers within the [European Sociological Association's Research Network 20 on Qualitative Methods](#) are involved as examiners for the theses of students as well as Honorary Professors. [9]

2. Structure, Processes and Aims of the Programme

Most—not all—of the students who entered the programme were under-prepared, which is quite common in South Africa's newly democratised higher education context (CROSS & CARPENTIER, 2009). They came out of large undergraduate classes where ways of teaching and assessment do not always support the development of critical thinking and writing skills. In their first year of postgraduate study—at the honours level—students embark on their first independent research assignments, but even teaching at this level has not been intensive enough to close the gaps, nor specifically designed to do so. As a result many students entering our Master's programme have very poor foundational knowledge and understanding of key disciplinary, epistemological and methodological tenets. Nor have all their years at university instilled in them the recognition that additional reading is mandatory as opposed to optional, a phenomenon experienced in other higher education contexts as research shows (PECORARI, SHAW, IRVINE, MALMSTRÖM & MEŽEK, 2012). It is not surprising, then, that the department has had little success in recruiting postgraduate students from its undergraduate ranks and has graduated few Master's students in the past few years. The Master's programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives* aims to address this situation. [10]

Structured Master's programmes, where students must complete and be formally assessed on a series of modules plus a mini-dissertation, have become popular offerings in academia. But there is some evidence that, incorrectly designed and delivered, this approach can tend towards surface or superficial learning and does not always yield high quality graduates (CHENG, 2011; KNIGHT, 1997). Whereas such an approach is a successful way to increase throughput, we felt that it runs the risk of perpetuating a negative cycle whereby Master's graduates become, in turn, under-prepared for doctoral studies. Their preparedness for the working world may even be compromised. Graduates and postgraduates in South Africa must compete for an ever-dwindling pool of employment opportunities: the better their training in critical thinking, in research, and in effective management of their projects, the better their chances are of finding good positions that offer prospects for personal and professional growth. In our view Master's studies should produce graduates who are well prepared for both paths: doctoral studies

and the workplace. As South Africa's Council on Higher Education points out, a key aim of tertiary education in the country is transformation, "in the sense of developing the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well as [meeting] the requirements of social development and economic and employment growth" (CHE, 2003, pp.3-4). [11]

It was with these myriad factors in mind that the programme was designed to provide a space for each student to conduct in-depth research towards a Master's-by-thesis, and at the same time, be part of a group where they can be "contained"—in the sense of supported—in close interaction with one another as well as the programme director and supervisors. To this end, a series of theme-based seminars covering key aspects of research were designed, delivered regularly (usually weekly), and student attendance of them made compulsory. Table 1 outlines the seminar themes.

| | |
|----------|---|
| 1 | Situating our paradigm |
| 1.1 | Reference points in the philosophy of science (positivism, social constructivism, social realism) |
| 1.2 | Qualitative methodology research design |
| 2 | Methodological considerations |
| 2.1 | Phenomenological contributions to interpretive sociology |
| 2.2 | Hermeneutics |
| 2.3 | Methodological relationalism |
| 2.4 | Ritual interaction chains |
| 2.5 | A critical humanistic social science |
| 3 | The field of narratives |
| 3.1 | Mapping out the field Narrative methods |
| 3.2 | What is narrative? What is narrative analysis? |
| 4 | Lives in the life-world |
| 4.1 | Society as subjective and objective reality |
| 4.2 | Lives, biographies, identification, collective belonging |
| 5 | Constructing narratives |
| 5.1 | The interview |
| 5.2 | Focus groups |
| 6 | Analysing narratives |
| 6.1 | Analysing qualitative data |

| | |
|----------|---|
| 6.2 | Memory |
| 7 | Guarding the quality of narrative research |
| 7.1 | The quality of qualitative research |
| 7.2 | Triangulation |
| 7.3 | Mixed methods |
| 8 | Research ethics |
| 8.1 | Ethics |
| 8.2 | Politics of (re)presentation |

Table 1: Themes in the programme of *The Narrative Study of Lives* [12]

Attending the weekly research seminars gave students a participatory environment in which to learn; they also had one-on-one consultations with their supervisor/s to explore their interests in the context of formulating a sharp research focus, which they then worked towards articulating in a well-developed research proposal. Care was taken to ensure alignment and authentic integration of 1. the different seminar themes and 2. between the seminar themes and the students' individual research projects. [13]

In supporting students—particularly under-prepared students—much depends on supervision, and the quality of formative, ongoing feedback and assessment. Supervision is widely acknowledged as influencing the quality of postgraduate theses, and by association, of postgraduates (RAU, 2008, p.1). Our aim as supervisors is to see students assimilating new knowledge at a deep level, engaging critically with it, applying it in ways that demonstrate their solid grasp of content and research processes, and synthesising all these efforts into a good thesis. Thus, one aim and focus of supervision is the *thesis-as-product*. But this is not all: we want to see students applying their new knowledge in ways that reflect their unique thinking. We want to see them push their thinking to more advanced and sophisticated levels, which is a vital step towards them developing their academic personhood, but also towards them becoming critical and creative citizens. This further aim and focus of supervision is concerned with the *person-as-product*. Thus processes of postgraduate learning and supervision manifest at two levels: the *thesis* as a product of formal education/pedagogy, and the *person* as a product of his or her processes of learning (Ibid.). [14]

3. Working with Biographies/Narratives/Documents of Life: Metatheoretical Questions

Researching narratives as a field focuses on the biographical descriptions that people give of their everyday life experiences. These biographical descriptions overlap with terms such as autobiography, auto-ethnography, life history, life story and documents of life (such as diaries or memoranda). *Research in this field* often relies on in-depth interviews that are conversational, dialogical,

informal or semi-structured, open-ended, reflexive, collaborative and guided. These in-depth interviews are social encounters between researcher and participant. The participant collaborates in producing accounts or versions of her/his past, present or future actions, experiences, aspirations, thoughts and feelings. Given the nature of narratives and the study thereof, training for this field needs to address specific issues. In the following sections we focus on some of these issues, starting with the metatheoretical questions related to the sociological analysis of this field. [15]

Our programme aims to build students' capacity to master and apply metatheory, substantive theory as well as research methodology. For this reason it starts off with the underlying philosophy of science or epistemology of research in the field of narratives and biographies. There is mostly agreement within the discipline of sociology that the three most influential metatheoretical traditions are positivism, phenomenology and critical theory (BABBIE & MOUTON, 2001, p.20). The epistemology of *research in narratives and biographies* is largely based on the phenomenological/interpretivist tradition where the emphasis is on understanding people as conscious, self-directed, engaged in sense-making, continuously interpreting, justifying, rationalising and constructing interpretations. The phenomenological/interpretivist tradition is primarily aimed at understanding individuals in terms of their interpretation of reality. The typical rhetoric includes subjectivity, consciousness, intentionality, lived experience, life-world, meaning, self-definition, stock of knowledge, typification and reflexivity (ROGERS, 1983). [16]

The field of narrative studies largely operates within an idealist theory of knowledge where descriptions of people's intentions, interpretive understanding, intersubjectivity, engagement and empathy are given prominent attention. This emphasis on subjective understanding or interpretation provides the hermeneutical key to our programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives*. The exchanges and interactions between researcher and research subject usually lead to the construction of a text that constitutes the record (document) of the subjective experiences of life, drawn from testimony and memory, as revealed during in-depth interviews. The intentions, hopes, suffering, fears and joys of people are conveyed by means of words and these emotions and experiences constitute the text—of which the researcher will attempt to open the meaning. Hermeneutics becomes the tool or mechanism through which understanding is manifested and restored, through which meaning is unwrapped (OUTHWAITE, 1987, p.62). The hermeneutic process contains a "... dialogical relationship between interpreter and text; the dialectic between question and answer" (BLEICHER, 1982, p.73) and in our programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives* we depart to a large extent from this process. [17]

Hermeneutics does not address the issue of interpretation and the unwrapping of meaning in its entirety. An unconditional adherence to idealism and an unqualified anti-naturalist stance do lead to further questions. Critical realists insist that what is known (knowledge) would be real irrespective of whether or not it was known. People do interpret and construct social reality, they do experience the social life-world, they do make sense of and constitute meaning. But these constructions,

experiences and constitutions of meaning are fallible, open to correction and should be situated polemically in relation to alternative accounts. In this respect the realist stance of Roy BHASKAR (2008, p.187) convincingly argues that social structure and human agency are distinct, but at the same time highly inter-dependent entities. [18]

When interpreting/analysing narratives we need to understand that the social reality underlying the narratives is intrinsically dynamic and complex. It consists of human agency, structures and contexts within which social action takes place and within which meaning is constructed. None of these components are given or fixed; the one presupposes the other without being reducible to the other. The narrative analyst's understanding can be seen as an interpretation, and the language we use in this interpretation is part of a process that needs to be taken further by drawing on all available information concerning the structure within which the narratives are situated. In this respect our reading of the text depends upon the language at our disposal (the broad context within which we attempt an understanding) as well as the independent text. [19]

4. Biographies/Narratives/Documents of Life: A Theoretical Framework

Researching narratives and biographies can never be the exclusive domain of any one of the social and human sciences. Narrating the life-world is an intrinsic part of philosophy, linguistics, history, education, political science, geography, literary studies, psychology, anthropology and sociology. In designing our postgraduate research programme on *The Narrative Study of Lives* it makes sense to look at the attempts of theorists who have engaged themselves in a wide-ranging manner and across disciplines with different modes of thinking in as far as understanding the logic of the life-world and of human meaning-making is concerned. A theorist whose work does indeed engage such a wide range of topics and disciplines is Pierre BOURDIEU. In terms of his perspective *The Narrative Study of Lives*, being a programme within sociology as a discipline, can be situated somewhere in the spectrum of the concrete reality of a "unified political economy of practice" on the one hand and the intangible domain of "symbolic power" (see BOURDIEU, 1980) on the other. The need to incorporate the elements of this spectrum into our thinking about the life-world and about the act of human meaning making is well-documented in BOURDIEU's work and for this reason the structure and logic of his ideas are briefly summarised. [20]

Loïc WACQUANT(1992, pp.2-23), one of the foremost experts on BOURDIEU's work, summarised the structure and logic of the latter's thinking on the way in which sociology should approach its analysis of social reality as follows:

- Straddle the seemingly irresolvable antagonisms such as between subject and object, between symbolic and material and between structure and agency (WACQUANT, 1992, p.3).

- Avoid the reduction of the sociological enterprise to either the "objectivist physics of material structures or the constructivist phenomenology of cognitive forms" (p.5).
- Apply a "double reading" to the bi-dimensional "system of relations of power and relations of meaning". In terms of this view one's analysis makes provision for society as consisting of an objective structure and a subjectivist or "constructivist" dimension (pp.7-9).
- This double reading implies a "social praxeology" that "weaves together the structuralist (positions) and constructivist (dispositions) approach" (p.11).
- The concrete and the symbolic dimensions of social reality are "genetically linked" and should therefore be subjected to the "double reading" referred to above (p.13).
- BOURDIEU's methodological relationalism entails both his key concepts of "habitus" and "field". These concepts designate the objectivist/structuralist and the subjectivist/constructivist as "bundles of relations": the *field* as the "patterned system of objective forces", "endowed with a specific gravity", acting as a "space of conflict and competition", and the *habitus* as the "structuring mechanism" and "strategy generating principle" (WACQUANT, 1992, pp.16-18).
- Between the agent and the world exists a "relation of ontological complicity" or "mutual possession" and the agent as player on the field develops a "field vision" in terms of which she/he can anticipate, intuitively predict, act and react on, precognise and recognise, and can read "... in the present state the possible future states with which the field is pregnant" (pp.20-22). [21]

So strong is BOURDIEU's emphasis on the "primacy of relations" that any form of methodological monism or dualistic alternative (such as system or actor; structure or agency) is rejected. Randall COLLINS's work on interaction ritual theory (2004) might not stand BOURDIEU's test of true methodological relationalism, but it does provide an important dimension for research in biographies, narratives and other documents of life. His theory of interaction ritual and interaction ritual chains is a theory of situations. "It is a theory of momentary encounters among human bodies because they have gone through chains of previous encounters" (COLLINS, 2004, p.3). COLLINS (p.4) continues: "My analytical strategy, is to start with the dynamics of situations; from this we can derive almost everything that we want to know about individuals, as a moving precipitate across situations". He elaborates on this point, explaining that to a large extent the individual is the link between past interactional situations and new situations. The individual is therefore an important ingredient of a situation, but is not the determinant of the situation. "A situation is not merely the result of the individual who comes into it, nor even of a combination of individuals (...) Situations have laws or processes of their own ..." (p.5). [22]

In sensitising our students to the need to situate their research projects within a comprehensive theoretical (sociological) framework, we emphasise that the terms "micro" and "agency" are not identical. It is here where the ideas of COLLINS

come in handy. In *working with narratives and biographies* students should be sensitive to the fact that there is structure at all levels of the living together of people—including at the level of micro-situations. When individuals narrate their personal experiences, they do so against the backdrop of past situational encounters. Their personal reflections often aim at and come from communicating with other people. For this reason individual narratives have to be situated within an interaction ritual chain. It is also for this reason that we distinguish in the next section between the biographical, organisational and societal contexts within which an individual biographical or narrative account needs to be situated. [23]

5. Programme in *The Narrative Study of Lives: Contextualising the Field*

In aiming to reveal "lives or segments of lives of people" (HARRISON, 2009, p.xxiii), *exploring* narratives has traditionally placed a strong emphasis on individual agency. This developed as a corrective to traditions where the focus was explicitly on structure, institutions, organisations and processes on the societal level. This does not mean, however, that the lives of individuals can be viewed as isolated from the socio-historic contexts within which they develop. On the contrary, "people's lives as a whole, or in part, are data for understanding the complex two-way relationship between self and social context" (Ibid.). Narrative accounts of individuals about (segments of) their lives inform us not only about their life-courses and biographies, but also about contexts situated on the meso- and macro-level of analysis. In similar vein we argue that societal and institutional contexts not only have a direct impact on the lives of individuals, but also on their biographical or narrative accounts. This raises conceptual and methodological questions. On a conceptual level, we need to situate the individual within his or her relevant contexts and to theorise these interrelations. Not only are the habitus, identifications and self-understanding of individuals in various ways resilient or open to change, but so are the group- or discourse-related contexts within which individuals act and live their lives. These relations warrant conceptual reflections. Concerning methodology, we need to take into account that the main data source for *narrative studies* consists of in-depth interviews and/or (focus) group discussions, which are usually set up explicitly for research purposes and are thus not a "naturally occurring" part of the individuals' everyday life-world routines. Any research design is confronted with questions of how valid statements about the reality "outside" the interview or focus group situation (with reference to the narrative constructed therein) can be generated. [24]

To sensitise our students to these questions, we distinguish between three contexts: the biographical context, the institutional, organisational and group-related context, and the societal context, all of which are relevant in the lives of individuals, and all of which may constitute a relevant focus within a student's research project. For each of these contexts, a variety of specific qualitative social research approaches have been developed, each operating with different assumptions, different units of analysis and traditional research realms and different forms of data collection and analysis. Out of many, we have chosen four approaches to show how the corresponding contexts could be conceptualised and to illustrate the different ways in which individuals, their lives and their

narratives are significant and relevant within these approaches. The schemata are not meant as step-by-step instructions for the students; rather, they provide students with a starting point from which to engage in methodological and theoretical reflections on the relationship between lives, narratives and the corresponding spheres of social reality, and are intended to help students think about how the issues are linked to their specific research interests. [25]

5.1 Biographical contexts

Central to life story research is the *biographical context* with its focus on the life-course of an individual and its narrative (biographical) representation in the present. Both the life-course of an individual and the narrative representation thereof structure and enable the meaningful organisation of lived experiences and mediate the relationship of the individual and society. Research in this realm can be clustered into two broad strands (cf. ZINN, 2010, §27ff. for this distinction): The first strand of research focuses on the reconstruction of single cases, aiming at linking stages of the life-course with the current (auto)biographical representation, and interested mainly in the reconstruction of (the structure of) "personality" or "identity". The second strand of research has been "concerned with action modes in specific social fields, and the way individuals respond to certain problems" (§39), and uses narratives to reconstruct habitualised modes of identification, interpretation and action. Table 2 outlines key factors in working with biographical contexts.

| Approaches | Unit/object of analysis | Research spheres | Foci of The Narrative Study of Lives | | | Preferred methods of data collection and analysis | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|--|---|
| | | | Individuals and their lives ... | ... as research "objects" | Narratives | | |
| Analysis of biographical interviews | Life experiences of an individual and their narrative representation in the present as a social dimension that structures and enables the meaningful organization of experiences in the life-world and the relationship of the individual with her/his social environments and society. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Societal functions of biographies, biographical self representations and their constitution. Types and ways of narratively organizing the past and current engagements with the life-world (and its socio-cultural conditions such as milieu, professions, gender, race, class, etc.). <p>Examples: Ethnic and cultural belonging in migrants' biographies, risk, uncertainty, biographical challenges, etc.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals engage in a life-long process of biographical work, relating themselves to society. Individuals face institutional demands of the "right" biography. The present context and its challenges have a bearing on what individuals will remember of their lives, as well as how they will remember it. | The primary research focus is individuals and their lives. Thus, individuals inform us mainly about their current and lived lives, habitual dispositions, and identities. | Individuals accomplish biographical work predominantly in "talk" during interaction, a situation that is precarious in principle. The "narration of experience [is a] vehicle for revealing one's own experiences to others". Narratives are thus central to producing, maintaining and transforming biographies and biographical self representations. | <p>Narrative interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (transcriptions).</p> <p>Various forms of "naturally" occurring data such as diaries, letters, photo albums, etc.</p> <p>"Objectified" data on lives, such as birth date, living places, education, profession, income, etc.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analysis of biographical data. Text and thematic field analysis (self-representation in the interview). Reconstruction of the case history (lived life). Detailed analysis of single text segments. Contrasting the narrated and the lived life. Formation of types. |
| Various other approaches ... | | | | | | | |

Table 2: Biographical contexts [26]

5.2 Institutional, organisational and situational contexts

The second contextual sphere, the meso-level of analysis, is mainly related to groups, organisations and institutions, and emphasises the importance of local interaction settings that are structured by specific sets of practices. Individuals are members of various groups, of spatially situated interaction scenes with routine participants that develop and reproduce group-specific "idiocultures" (cf. FINE, 2012). Such interaction scenes have been a main focus of ethnographic sociological approaches. In this regard, the analysis of narrative accounts of individuals is sensitive to how lives, habitual dispositions and identifications are shaped by the everyday involvement in interactional settings and cultures. This may require the collection of additional data to reconstruct the "ethnographic context" of the accounts and its cultural themes (cf. SPRADLEY, 1979, 1980). Narratives are crucial in reproducing local cultures and may, as patterned forms of communication, structure social interaction. The communicative genres approach aims at reconstructing such conventionalised patterns of communication forms, which may be typical for particular contexts or for societies at large (GÜNTNER & KNOBLAUCH, 1997). Informed by such an approach, the interpretation of individual narrative accounts is sensitive to the way certain communicative genres structure these accounts. Table 3 shows key aspects of working with institutional, organisational and situational contexts.

| Focus of <i>The Narrative Study of Lives</i> | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|
| Approaches | Unit/object of analysis | Research spheres | Individuals and their lives ... | ... as research "objects" | Narratives | Preferred methods of data collection and analysis | |
| Ethnographic semantics (including phenomenological life-world analysis/ethnography) (other approaches focused on mundane practices include ethnomethodology and conversation analysis) | Culture as the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and to generate behaviour. | Reconstruction and analysis of cultures and cultural themes of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Groups, organisations Types of social situations Types of activities. Examples: Cultures of comprehensive institutions (such as prisons), restaurant kitchens, urban neighbourhoods, sport teams, class rooms and associations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actors engage in (typical) cultural behaviour, endowed with cultural knowledge, using and/or producing cultural artefacts. Actors and their relationships are structured by how they are categorised, by the culturally "appropriate" actions in terms of categories in certain contexts. | The primary focus is culture, i.e. persons are viewed as competent members of a culture and are thus regarded as informants about the culture or overall reality. More specific foci include the institutional and cultural creation and shaping of self-conceptions (cf. "institutional selves", GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN [2001]). | Cultures of groups, organisations, situations, and activities are constituted by (certain types of) narratives. Narratives are important in (re)producing cultures. Various kinds of narratives, from short exchanges to elaborate practices of story telling, may be typical for certain cultures. | Ethnography <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observation with varying "degrees" of participation fieldnotes Ethnographic interviews audio recording transcription field notes Collection of "natural" artefacts (documents, images, audio-visual material, etc.). | Analysis of domains, taxonomies, components and cultural themes. |
| Analysis of communicative genres Various other approaches ... | Communicative genres as "historically and culturally specific, societally 'solidified' and formalised solutions of communicative problems, whose function—which differs from genre—is to cope with, to convey and to pass down the intersubjective experiences of the life-world" (GÜNTNER & KNOBLAUCH, 1997, p.282). | Analysis of communicative genres pertaining to the <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>internal structure</i>: language variety, stylistic and rhetorical figures, topics/themes, textual structures, etc. <i>situational realisation</i>: rituals of establishing/ ending contact, participation format, genre aggregations, etc. <i>external structure</i>: typical use of certain genres in social events, milieus; structuring of social relations, etc. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actors use more or less competently communicative genres (that fulfill a certain function), the use embedded in their own relevance system. Relationships to other actors, in social events and milieus are structured by the communicative genre(s). Examples: Studies on gossip, disputes, fairy tales, stories, anecdotes, life memories, legitimating stories, PowerPoint presentations, SMS communications, meetings and congregations. | The primary focus is on communicative genres, i.e. the communicative activities of individuals inform us about what types of communicative genres are in use in – and structure – certain social events, milieus, institutions, etc. | The concept of communicative genres encompasses all types of <i>patterned</i> narratives. Narratives are seen as crucial to convey intersubjective experiences. They are thus central to societies in general. Patterned narratives structure social interaction and social relations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audio and/or visual recordings of "naturally" occurring settings (transcription). Use of "natural" artefacts (documents, images, audio-visual material, etc.). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conversation analysis. Sequential analysis. |

Table 3: Institutional, organisational and situational contexts [27]

5.3 Societal context

Thirdly, we use the notion of the *societal context* to refer to bodies of knowledge and systems of relevance that go beyond the local context. Among many approaches, an approach to discourse analysis that conceives discourses as large structural connections (KELLER, 2008) may help to account for how such bodies of knowledge structure the lives of individuals. Discourses may be crucial for the self-understanding of individuals by providing them with specific identity templates, and individuals may use discourse-related interpretive repertoires to frame phenomena in specific ways. The analysis of individual accounts could aim at showing how individuals' lives are affected by discourses and how individuals actively employ and use certain discourses. Such an analysis could aim at relating the narrative accounts of individuals to discourses used in other contexts

such as the mass media or the field of politics, or it could embark on developing a "bottom-up" typology of discourses. Key components for working with societal contexts are outlined in Table 4.

| Approaches | Unit/object of analysis | Research spheres | Focus of <i>The Narrative Study of Lives</i> | | | Preferred methods of data collection and analysis |
|---|--|--|---|--|---|--|
| | | | Individuals and their lives ... | ... as research "objects" | Narratives | |
| Discourse analysis from a sociology of knowledge approach. (The terms "discourse" and "discursive" are used for a wide range of research foci; other discursive approaches include the analysis of phenomena in a similar way to conversation analysis and the analysis of communicative genres.) Various other approaches ... | Discourses as historically established and socially reinforced "statement practices resp. units of statement events with institutionally stabilised structural patterns, practices, rules and resources" (KELLER, 2008, p.34). Examples: Studies on political discourses (liberal, conservative discourses), environmental discourses, race discourses, economic discourses, etc. | Analysis of how discourses are produced, how social phenomena are constituted, the power effects of discourses, the use of discourses in everyday life and discursive formations. Reconstruction and analysis of discourses pertaining to their "content structure" (phenomena, classifications, patterns of interpretation, narratives) and their materiality (actors, apparatuses, practices etc.). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals are addressed by discourses, including subject conceptions and identity templates. Individuals' perceptions and practices are (partially) structured by certain discourses. Individuals may be in certain speaker positions, places, linked to role sets, for the legitimate production of statements within a discourse (e.g. academic degrees). | The primary focus is on discourses. Thus, individuals inform us <ul style="list-style-type: none"> how and by what discourses their practices are structured how their lives are affected by discourses to what ends they actively employ and use certain discourses. | Mundane individual or institutional narrations are structured by certain discourses, depending on the context and/or issue. Discourses themselves are narratively structured, insofar as patterns of interpretations, classifications and dimensions of phenomena are related to each other with discourse specific story lines, plots and scripts. | Primarily collection of "naturally" occurring data: written documents, images and audio/visual material from the research realm of interest, often from the mass media, political field, academic field, state institutions, etc. Interviews and participant observation for the analysis of discourse uses in everyday life (transcriptions, field notes). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coding practices of grounded theory. Sequential analysis. |

Table 4: Societal contexts [28]

Thus, *The Narrative Study of Lives* relies on the in-depth interview as the major data source from which to unwrap the social realities people live in. But there must be simultaneous awareness of the different methodological considerations and theoretical conceptions that are called for by different contexts. *The Narrative Study of Lives* effectively "puts individuals, their lives, their experiences, and the contexts in which they are situated, to the forefront of both theoretical and substantive concerns and foci for investigation" (HARRISON, 2009, p.xxiii). [29]

6. Concluding Remarks

Training for *The Narrative Study of Lives* focuses on sensitising students for understanding the complexity of the experience of social reality as well as the way in which participants narrate these experiences. This postgraduate programme kicked off in 2012 and the following titles were registered:

- old stories and new chapters: a biographic study of Afrikaans speaking identity;
- the experience of aging;
- voices from historically disadvantaged young upwardly mobile people;
- breast cancer and the medical encounter;

- life experiences of first generation students;
- lived experience of HIV-positive men on anti-retroviral treatment. [30]

Not only is it important to explore how people experience reality but also to be able to situate these experiences within particular historical, institutional and societal contexts. The emphasis is on building students' ability to critically engage in research on participants' narratives of first-hand life experiences, on students' understanding of these experiences and being able to position the narratives within the broader social system. The narratives are mechanisms by which our experience and apprehension of the life world occur. The telling and writing of life stories are constructions bound by historical time as well as by social and physical space dimensions. Advanced training in *The Narrative Study of Lives* for these reasons needs to develop analytical rigour in students in order they can constantly open up the possibilities of more adequate understandings of lives and the contexts in which narrators' lives are lived—including the social structure, institutional and broader social processes as well as the biographical sphere of the narrator. All of these elements are incorporated in Figure 1 hereunder.



Figure 1: *The Narrative Study of Lives*: Integrating the contexts (enlarge this figure [here](#)) [31]

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