

# Biography and Society

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**BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY**  
RESEARCH COMMITTEE 38 OF THE ISA

NEWSLETTER / MARCH 2008

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT MARCH 2008

Dear members of RC 38 and colleagues,

Besides informing you about the next interim conference in Barcelona (Sept. 2008) this newsletter is mainly dedicated to report about our last interim conference "***Ethnicity, Belonging, Biography and Ethnography***" in December 2007 at the University of Goettingen, Center of Methods in Social Sciences. Michaela Koettig and I organized this conference in cooperation with Julia Chaitin and John Linstroth, our colleagues from the Nova Southeastern University (NSU) of Fort Lauderdale, South Florida. With Julia, John and students from both universities we conducted a research project on 'Biography and Ethnicity' under the umbrella of the TransCoop Program of the Humboldt Foundation. The focus of our comparative study is on biographical processes of changes of constructions of collective belongings in the context of transnational migration. This project is conducted in diverse social contexts in South Florida and Germany.

The conference was also convened on behalf of the Committee Biographical Research of the German Sociological Association.

The conference brought together about 200 researchers and scientists from over 30 nations, participants from Asia, Africa, Australia, the US and Europe. The 70 lectures, 14 sessions and workshops covered a wide range of fields dealing with the social construction of ethnic or other collective belongings, migration, transnational biographies, networks and belonging, violent ethnic conflicts, politics of belonging, intergenerational transmission and intersectionality.

At this conference we have been able to bring together an interesting collection of experienced scholars, some of whom have been working in the field of ethnicity, biography and related areas such as transnational migration for many years. Our intention was to create the opportunity for an improved dialogue, last but not least across neighboring disciplines, between researchers of ethnicity and practitioners of biographical research as well as other methods of qualitative empirical research. The subject of ethnicity has been rather high on the agenda of social science research during the last 15 years. Given the growing relevance of migration across continents, of sub- or transnational ethnic and religious conflicts as well as new transnational forms of governance and conflict management there are few doubts that it will remain there for a considerable time to come.

I believe it is time to take stock of the very rich and valuable research work done, to analyze and try to synthesize the results of this work but also to open new vistas for future work such as a more intense cooperation and closer intertwining of the theory and analysis of ethnicity (and other collective belongings) on the one hand and the methodology of empirical research, particularly biographical research, ethnography and historical research, on the other. Up to now the choice of methods and data in the research on ethnicity has often been rather haphazard or arbitrary and without close contact to either methodological techniques or theoretical traditions. In other words the process of a mutual adjustment, and consequent refinement, of discoveries and research techniques that is a sign of the maturity of a field of empirical research has almost just begun.

In my opinion the discussions raised on the conference have led us a step further and I hope both the dialogue and the interdisciplinary cooperation with colleagues from related disciplines will continue in the future.

Concerning the publications related to the conference we shall inform you in time.

It is a pleasure for me to publish, in this newsletter, several reports of the conference written by colleagues from different research areas and from different parts of the world. Thank you so much for these contributions.

Warmest regards

Gabriele Rosenthal  
President, Biography and Society (RC 38)

## RF

If you are not a member of our RC perhaps you are interested in becoming one. Just write an email to Michaela Koettig ---- and ask her about the conditions.

## Membership fees:

|                                                                      |         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| Regular members                                                      | US\$ 40 |
| Students and members from countries B and C<br>(see ISA regulations) | US\$ 20 |

**Bank account:** Michaela Koettig  
Sparda-Bank Hessen, Germany  
bank code: 500 905 00  
account number: 101 548 312

For bank transfer by members from European countries  
IBAN: 13 500 905 000 101 548 312  
BIC: GEN ODE F1 S12

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**Conference Announcement  
Interim Conference RC 38  
First ISA Forum of Sociology  
Sociological Research and Public Debate**

September 5 - 8, 2008, Barcelona, Spain

**CONFERENCE**  
**ETHNICITY, BELONGING, BIOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY**  
**GOETTINGEN DECEMBER 2007**  
**IMPRESSIONS**

**Jana Ballethin/Corinne Büching**

Students of Georg-August-University of Goettingen, e-mail: [balmandcreak@gmx.de](mailto:balmandcreak@gmx.de), [corinnebueching@gmx.de](mailto:corinnebueching@gmx.de)

We are Corinne Büching and Jana Ballenthien, two students of sociology at the University of Göttingen. Already several years ago we visited Gabriele Rosenthal's introduction-seminaries and became acquainted with the methods for biographical research she introduced. In our main study period we attended to her so-called „Lehrforschung (student research seminars)“ and „Forschungswerkstatt (method workshops)“. The eminently productive and also relaxed atmosphere during these seminars quickly cast a spell over us and led us to author an empirical final thesis based on Gabriele Rosenthal's methodology. The Conference „Ethnicity, Belonging, Biography and Ethnography“ took place during our working period for the thesis. At this point we had just finished our interview-analysis. The conference gave us motivation and enthusiasm to examine our final thesis critically, to reinforce it theoretically and to range it in the common biographical research.

What are our experiences with the conference? It was the first scientific conference we attended and everything was new and exciting. We really felt a little bit insecure due to the professional organization of the congress and the fact that all participants – who arrived from 5 continents and 35 different countries – seemed to know each other. The open and limbered atmosphere between the well-established scientists gave us a feeling of being small students in the giant ocean of research. But when we took part in the conference dinner in the evening the initial restraints and anxieties were forgotten already. We catch ourselves talking about theoretical issues by drinking our after work-beer and late at night we had hot methodologically discussions on the dance floor. The research had entered our everyday life unnoticed!

Within the next three days we experienced an interesting process. The bibliographies of our final thesis got faces and the research became more vivid then ever before. Some of the speakers we had not known before, inspired us so intensely that we read some of their books and articles the same day. Certain concepts and ideas they had gained influence on our thesis. It is astonishing how easy we got an approach to the biographical researchers' works, only because we got to know with personalities who respected us as scientists during the whole conference and let us be a part of their community. We made friends with young researchers from other countries. For the first time, the attending students of the University of Goettingen perceives their selves as a generation of students of interpretative biographical research - like it is supported for instance by Gabriele Rosenthal. This feeling lasts till now.

After the end of the conference we went to the Christmas fair in Goettingen and had a mulled wine together solemnizing our new friendships.

It took us a few days to internalize our new knowledge and experiences. Afterwards, we devoted our energy to the completion of our final thesis with new rapture.

There is only one thing we regret: It is a pity, that there was only a limited number of students who dared to visit the conference. Next time it would be nice to acquire more young researchers who would participate in such an event and can profit from it as we did.

Not least because of the positive experiences in the "milieu" of the biographical researchers at this conference-weekend, we decided to delve ourselves into biographical research in a doctoral thesis.

### **Roswitha Breckner**

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The most important impression for me was that at this conference the presenters of papers as well as the audience was mostly talking 'from' the intricate issues concerning ethnicity, belonging and biography and not 'about' them from a seemingly non-involved social scientific position. This manifested in the articulation of different perspectives related to different ways of involvement in the field, professionally and biographically. Furthermore, the quality of papers and discussions as well as the biographical and political significance of the issues allowed combining societal with experiential perspectives, something that rarely succeeds in social scientific, and even less in public debates on ethnicity, belonging and biography. Probably this is due to the fact that this field is strongly structured by politicised discourses (e.g. touching concepts of nation states, of (social) identities, social policy, etc.) in which concepts of ethnicity, belonging and biography are virulently at stake, especially in situations of social conflicts and/or migration processes. The articulation of the experiential dimension always is connected with dominant discourses, and – given the political virulence – in danger to be overrun, exploited or misused by them. Therefore there are rare occasions, where the experiential, professional and collective involvement in (contested) societal spheres like ethnicity, belonging and biography, can be presented, discussed and dealt with in a complex, sensitive, and social scientifically very well informed way. This conference was such an occasion.

Furthermore, it was a really international space providing knowledge concerning ethnicity and belonging in many places of the world, and showing ways of dealing with conflicts related to these issues. Altogether it was an inspiring, enriching and atmospherically very pleasant conference, allowing also new contact to colleagues all over the world.

### **Julia Chaitin**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Sapir Academic College, Israel, e-mail: [jchaitin@yahoo.com](mailto:jchaitin@yahoo.com)

This was a wonderful conference that brought together young and more experienced researchers from many different places and disciplines, who are working on the topics of ethnicity and belonging, and who are carrying out their studies with sensitive qualitative research methods that get at the heart of these highly complex issues.

The special combination that this conference offered – one that brought together topic of inquiry with specific research methodologies – gave the event a special flavor. That is, not only were the case studies that were discussed fascinating, but the ways in which the researchers are exploring their topics and the ways in which they presented their work made this more than an academic conference; it often had a strong emotional impact as well.

It was fascinating to meet researchers from different countries and continents, and learn from them about the myriad issues facing our world (since these issues are very real in their social, educational, cultural and political consequences and impacts) concerning ethnic belonging, migration, experiences of being refugees and immigrants. I especially enjoyed the student researchers who presented their work; we are cultivating a very impressive new generation of researchers in this field of inquiry, and I was highly impressed with the studies being carried out by these students. I have no doubt that we will be hearing more from them in the next years to come.

The conference was also organized very well with enough time allotted for presentation and discussions. This is always important in conferences, and too often there is not enough time for all members on the panel to present their ideas and to leave time for dialogue between the researchers and audience. In most sessions that I attended, we had time for both, and that added to the quality of the conference. In addition, I also very much liked the fact that the conference was well attended, but not too large; it gave me the sense that a lot of research is going on in these fields, but the scope was not too overwhelming and it was easy to make new acquaintances, re-new older ones, and have a feeling of intimacy as well.

The students who volunteered their time to help organize and help with the technical arrangements were wonderful! This also contributed a great deal to the conference's success. Things ran smoothly, there was always someone to ask for help, the needed help always came and it was done in an extremely congenial manner.

I hope that there will be a follow-up to this conference and that we researchers who explore these topics of ethnic belonging and immigration can continue to meet on some regular basis and deepen our knowledge not only of the conceptual field, but also in additional sensitive methodological thinking and tools that can help us better understand these issues that are so often illusive, paradoxical, yet fascinating.

**Khansaa Diab**

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To the Author: Her major research interests are dialogue between Palestinians and Jews in Israel, Issues in the Arabic Educational system. She is involved in peace education in the Palestinian-Israeli context at all levels – teaching, lecturing, writing, researching, participating and mediating in workshops. She has taken part in and led many programs on interfaith dialogue and on developing Arab and Jewish women's leadership. She is from the Arab village of Tamra in the north of Israel.

Although I joined the group of presenters at the Conference late, the reception and efforts of the organizers and hosts made me feel at home. I arrived on Friday morning at Goettingen, and after receiving a room arranged for me by the conference organizers I traveled straight to the University where the conference was held.

Although there was a female majority, one pleasant male student received me and provided me with all the information and details regarding the conference, including where it was worth eating lunch every day. I still remember his words: How was your flight? How do you feel now? I have attended many conferences but had never encountered such a personal gesture. The conference had very many participants, but was nevertheless quite intimate because of the warmth and dedication of the organizing team who were constantly present and available to the participants, whether regarding the rooms in which the panels were held through to the generous coffee and fruit available.

I was the only Palestinian Arab at the conference but I quickly found company for many of the sections and topics. One was Hannah from Vienna who wanted to get to know me; it suddenly transpired that she spoke Hebrew, at which point two attractive women smiled at us indicating that they too spoke Hebrew and thus understood every word of our conversation. We all laughed and continued to talk, analyze and discuss many matters, mainly the content of the interesting lectures we heard.

The main part of one of the panels analyzing data included my presentation of the narrative of the Palestinians in Israel and its significance in the Israeli educational and public discourse. This study observes that the time has come for a self-search for the missing narrative of the Arab Palestinians living in Israel. An attempt was made to illustrate the Arab-Palestinian myth that was created by the War of Independence and even beforehand, as told by the Palestinian grandparents themselves who recount it to their sons and grandsons. The other issue of nationality was raised and the meaning of its historical narrative as opposed to the Zionist narrative.

Today in the post-modern era no-one is looking for the sharp, concise, and coherent word anymore. We are obliged as educators to call on pluralistic society to re-examine its views and the myths that are well rooted in the Jewish-Israeli public and that have been perceived, till now, as undisputable.

I stayed another two days after the conference for working meetings with Prof. Gabriella Rosenthal in order to promote our shared Israeli-German-Palestinian project. Thus I had time to wander the small, unique and elegant city of Goettingen and could think and process the experiences from the conference. The conference was about belonging and identity and biography.. and I suddenly had a thought that made things easier for me: Suddenly I am not alone in my complex identity as an Arab, Palestinian and Israeli woman in the shadow of the social-political context in Israel and the Middle East. There are so many more identities and complex relevancies that were presented in the conference, and I felt part of most of those multi-faceted and diverse identities. And not only that. Suddenly I have other definitions and understandings of the reality of my life in Israel. I could see myself as a refugee who left the Arab village in the north of the country and migrated to Jerusalem to study and work, and remained there till now - both an internal refugee and migrant from desire with all the implications of these insights.

**Noga Gilad**

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I want to share with you some of my reflections provoked by attending the conference in Goettingen, in Germany, in the beginning of December 2007. I have been a member of the RC38 since the World Congress in Montreal in 1998, and before that a member in research teams studying the influences of the Holocaust in three generations, headed by Prof. Gabriele Rosenthal and Prof. Dan Bar-On. In the early 1990s I was also involved in a research project about new approaches to acquire literacy skills to novices, as you can realize from the general attitude of my paper. Presently, besides working on completing my PhD study, comparing public discourse with biographic constructions (supervised by Prof. Hanna Herzog from the Sociology and Anthropology Department at the Tel-Aviv University), I have also been teaching Academic Literacy skills for B. A. students.

The conference, lasting for three days, was taking part at the Center for Methods in Social Sciences in Georg-August-University. It provided a wonderful opportunity to hear papers from all over the globe, dealing mainly with immigration and emigration and the consequent evolvement of ethnicity. The conference was very well organized; warm hospitality was "poured on us" by the conference organizers and the Center's students, who energetically helped carrying out this huge project. It is the time again to say to you all - Thank You! Exceptionally successful was the attempt to break the "glass-walls" of the community (often seems to be quite homogenous): speakers came from all continents, like a real good international conference should be, lighting spots on different parts of the globe. For these reasons and more, it was one of the most meaningful conferences I attended so far (not implying of course that others were meaningless).

In more general terms, I was experiencing fine mixtures of familiarity and foreignness, which are essentially the key components of the issue of belonging in a biographic perspective. For instance, it was the first time to attend the University and the Methods Center, after all the years I have only heard of them. Similar was the experience of meeting old acquaintances and getting to know new colleagues; or hearing papers about new and old research projects. The combination between new and familiar was refreshing and inspiring, and allowed exploring this issue at the biographical level of the scholar as well.

Perhaps the cost of having such a wide range of presenters, some new to the community, is the fact that some of the papers had nothing to do with biographic or any other method. That is a recurring question in all conferences - inclusion or exclusion, acceptance or selection? Still, because it is really such an effort on part of all participants to come, I would expect a bit more supervision by the session chairs and the scientific committee, encouraging presenters to present a more mature paper at the conference. All would gain from it.

Still indeed, I find the biggest challenge of a conference relying on the ability to combine successfully all three dimensions constituting a scientific community: the hosting community in its place; encounters among colleagues, and getting a taste of research projects going on in other places and fields. These dimensions are essential to the constitution of a notion of "our community". Certainly, Anderson demonstrated how difficult it is to identify with one's nation and/or state, so much that they have to imagine they know it. And what about a scientific community?

It is practically impossible to feel a member (the essence of belonging), without moments of concretization a conference provides. These ease the strains and frustrations of constant imagination!

The ideal of internationality makes the concept of a scientific community stretching beyond formal borders, geographically and thematically. Yet perhaps that is also the source of its appeal. And so, meeting in an international conference exhibits exactly this point: on the one hand-side concretization: we meet concrete colleagues, hear about concrete projects; stay in a concrete towns and Universities. At the same time, abstraction: those present represent all those who didn't attend; papers we hear refer to all those we didn't, and the concrete University reminds us of all those places where we imagine science is being done. A civic ritual?

These thoughts always escort me going to a conference, but it was especially evident in a conference studying together belonging and biography; ethnicity and belonging; biography and ethnography. For once, these are "eternal" concepts, always valid as a social phenomenon, always deserving a study. On the other side, they become especially relevant today, their problematic is new and different, and in many points of the world, as we learnt in the conference. And yet again, if we see each concept "peeking" from so many parts, presented in so many points of view, it apparently becomes somewhat clearer, valid even.

Belonging is indeed a very complicated and central issue. For example, in some sense I felt an outsider in the conference, because the topic I am studying "merely" deals with belonging and biography, and not with ethnicity, which for so many of the papers was very present. Or was it again the imagination that others "were more at home" than me? However, this position that ethnicity is highly celebrated as "the thing to be" was quite helpful in reflecting upon a former interesting discovery. It was interesting for me to recall that the social elite of my study, the Jewish Settlers from the West Bank and Gaza, expressed their desire to solve their problem of belonging to their state as ethnic minorities do. They seemed to express jealousy at the supposedly simple sense of belonging one "has" when defined as ethnic! In their case, it was not clear how to treat religion, or their political affiliation. It seems to me that such an outsider perspective helps also revising our understanding of what ethnicity takes or gives to its' members.

From yet another angle, belonging was easy and flowing and the conference empowering. In the session I was presenting my paper, a rare miracle happened and all three papers connected very well one with each other, materializing a common discourse that realized the notion of a community in the room. Suddenly we were a group of members interested in similar questions, listening and talking one with the other, rather than merely talking with ourselves.

Actually, I expected this conference to materialize this imagined notion for me in advance. That is because prior to my arrival I struggled with developing my narrative biographic arguments for my dissertation, and surely I couldn't expect a better environment to discuss my dilemmas and questions with! Even after arriving I decided to actually invest all my time firstly to preparing my presentation to be the clearest and most convincing. It harmed the impact of some other papers whose memories are now quite dim for me, yet it provided the goal I set for myself, so in that sense I was content.

Naturally, there were other in-between experiences, of those not so clear whether I or my perspective 'belonged' or not, to what or to whom. All in all, I guess this ability to enjoy all the

hues and shades of this issue - belonging in general, and to a particular branch of a scientific community in particular, and in this short and intensive period, is the real key to a good productive empowerment process - the core of my story here.

As all narratives, this one too edited and revised the original experience. For instance, I totally evaded the issue of ethnography, emphasized more the issue of belonging, and added a concept that did not explicitly participate in the title, but implicitly I found it complimentary - empowerment. Can biographic research foster empowerment, of our subjects, and not only of us? Perhaps that is a good starting point for thinking about the next conference.

### **Kaja Kaźmierska**

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In December 2007, I took part in the conference entitled "Ethnicity, Belonging, Biography and Ethnography" organized by the Center of Methods in Social Sciences, University of Goettingen. If I am to share my impressions from the conference, first of all I want to congratulate organizers who successfully faced the difficult task of arranging presentations of so many participants and coordinating the whole event, especially because usually biographical conferences or workshops are not that big. The conference was a very good opportunity to meet members of Research Committee 38 and share our recent work and projects. On the other hand, such big meetings have some disadvantages: one misses many interesting papers as sessions overlap – in the case of Goettingen conference there were 3 or 4 simultaneous sessions; time for each presentation was restricted to 15-20 minutes, which is very difficult when presenting qualitative (and particularly biographical) materials. In this context, the idea of organizing two-hour workshops was particularly good.

Because of my personal interests, I concentrated on papers analyzing the problems of ethnic identity, migration and intercultural dialogue. Therefore, I appreciated such presentations as Tamar Rapaport and Edna Lomsky-Feder's *Memory work on migration*, Thea Boldt speaking about ethnic belonging, Pnina Dolberg analyzing differences between identities of two generations of Russian Jews immigrants to Israel, or Lena Inowlocki, Angelika Rieber and Heiner Schwartz's presentation about German high school students analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Also due to my interests, from the plenary session papers I liked the most Dan Bar-On's *Redefining dialogue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. The author showed how theoretical perspective can be combined with practical dimension of social life, in what way biographical memory can be influenced by collective memory and how difficult the process of overcoming mutual prejudices is. Whereas Bar-On's paper gave me a sort of "positive energy" showing that social researcher may try to work on social reality, Ann Phoenix' lecture made me draw more critical conclusions. Her vivid, very well presented and very attractive to listen to paper made me realize, how few biographical researches know about each other in terms of methods of narrative analyzes. Dilemmas and ideas presented by the author as problems to be investigated, seem to me as already analyzed in the field of interpretative sociology relating to narratives as a process of construction of meaning. Therefore, my general conclusion from the conference is that biographical approach is now very complex and multi-theoretical. The question that rises is whether one working within this field should relate to some sort of general com-

pendium of biographical methodology knowledge, or each of us presents a certain "school" and is released from this task?

**Tazuko Kobayashi**

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I was very happy to be able to participate in this well-organized conference, from which I received many fruitful suggestions. In one of Sunday's sessions, 'US-American Identity' chaired by Michaela Koettig, I presented a paper under the title, 'Public Story and Biography: Reconstructing the Life Story of a Japanese American', focusing on a first generation Japanese American named Takuji Yamashita, who immigrated to the United States at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and fought a legal battle against racial discrimination toward Japanese Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While examining the public story created through the series of events where he was reevaluated and portrayed as a man of perseverance, I tried to look at his life and construct a biography from stories that occurred at a different level from that of the public arena. One of my research aims, based on the theme of life story methodology, involves considering the possibility of a biographical method of depicting a life through the oral stories of others. This could be useful in the case of an individual like Yamashita, who died a half century ago, making it impossible to conduct oral life story interviews, and who did not discuss his life in writing. When attempting to understand the 'life' of this person, listening to the narratives of other individuals who retain personal memories of him is, in my view, effective as a method for capturing the life of a person. When putting together the personal narratives, multilayered oral stories make it possible to construct a dense and multi-faceted biography.

I was encouraged to pursue this method by a member of the audience who gave me a positive comment on its potential as a biographical method. Furthermore, some of the presentations gave me inspiration in this regard, and two papers in particular were very interesting. One was by Nicole K. Konopka, who has carried out research on the letters of 19<sup>th</sup> German emigrants to the U.S., and another was a method workshop organized by Roswitha Breckner, who dealt with visual images. The former encouraged me to think about the use of literal documents; the latter to think about photo analysis, which is interesting as I found many family photos from the 1920s. Several sessions prompted me to reexamine my research from the point of view of ethnicity and sense of belonging. I am deeply grateful to the organizers and participants of the conference who gave me such valuable suggestions.

**John Linstroth** ([linstrot@nova.edu](mailto:linstrot@nova.edu)), **Patrick Hiller** ([p.hiller@gmx.de](mailto:p.hiller@gmx.de)), **Denese Edsall** ([dened62431@bellsouth.net](mailto:dened62431@bellsouth.net)), **Paloma Ayala Vela** ([payala@nova.edu](mailto:payala@nova.edu)), **Mamyrah Prosper** ([mamyrahp@gmail.com](mailto:mamyrahp@gmail.com)), **Allison Hall** ([alishall@nova.edu](mailto:alishall@nova.edu)), Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Nova Southeastern University, Florida, USA

### **Department of Conflict Analysis & Resolution (DCAR) goes abroad to Goettingen, Germany**

Together with their professor Dr. J. P. Linstroth and Dr. Julia Chaitin (a former professor at Nova Southeastern University, now a senior lecturer at Sapir Academic College), five doctoral and masters students from the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nova Southeastern University presented a research paper titled "Hyphens of belonging: ethnicity and community among Haitians, Cubans and Guatemalans in the United States" at an international conference on Ethnicity, Belonging, Biography and Ethnography hosted by the Georg-August-University in Goettingen Germany.

Our research on identity and belonging among immigrant groups in the United States, specifically South Florida, is funded by a research grant from the Humboldt Foundation and the Nova Southeastern University's President's Research and Development Grant which were received in the 2006-2007 academic year. The funding for the conference trip was made possible through the Humboldt grant as well as a Dean's Grant at from the department.

For our DCAR students and faculty the trip provided the heady combination of having the opportunity to participate in a forum with several academically sound scholars and practitioners and the thrill of being in a foreign country. For some, it was their first time presenting at and/or attending an academic conference and for others it was their first time visiting Germany.

The highlights of the conference include keynote presentations by Dan Bar-On who discussed the concept of a "bridging narrative" for addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Floya Anthias on the "intersectionality" of gender, ethnicity, and class in the conceptualisation of identity formation, and Ann Phoenix on transnational biographies created by those who have experienced "non-normative" childhoods.

The breakout sessions were also note-worthy. Our group presentation was extremely well received and generated questions and discussion even days afterwards. Individual presentations by J. P. Linstroth: "Al Norte: cognition, memory, and identity among Guatemala/Maya living in South Florida" and Julia Chaitin: "Identities in peace and conflict: belonging among Israeli and Palestinian émigrés to the United States" were insightful and instructive and a welcome contribution to the proceedings.

Sharing innovative thoughts on theories and methodology regarding ethnicity, belonging, biography and ethnography stood out as the main theme of the talks, the panels, the workshops, the breaks, the meals, the group discussions, individual conversations, etc. We were just as amazed by ideas of methodological photo analysis (Roswitha Breckner) as the analysis of local identities of Rumanian villagers through their own maps (Christina Craciun).

This immense richness of thought, reflection and knowledge could only have been made more complete by broadening the scope of speakers to a more global level, i.e. having (more) contributions from African, Latin American and Asian scholars.

In conclusion it should come as no surprise that we are extremely happy and grateful to have been invited to this conference as contributing participants. The organization could not have been better.

### **Andrea Petö**

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About the author: Andrea Petö was born in 1964 in Budapest, Hungary. She is an associate professor at University of Miskolc, where she directs the Equal Opportunity and Gender Studies Center and an associate professor at the Department of Gender Studies at the Central European University where she is teaching courses on social and cultural history of Europe. Her books include: *Women in Hungarian Politics 1945-1951* (Columbia University Press/East European Monographs New York, 2003), *Geschlecht, Politik und Stalinismus in Ungarn. Eine Biographie von Júlia Rajk*. Studien zur Geschichte Ungarns, Bd. 12. (Gabriele Schäfer Verlag, 2007). Presently she is working on gendered memory of WWII and political extremism

### **Farewell to politics?**

It is always important to meet the women behind the book(s). That was one of the reasons I was looking forward to the conference organized by Gabriele Rosenthal and Michaela Koettig in Goettingen in December 2007. I was teaching my first oral history course in 1999 at the Central European University and it was not a question if I should I include the "Rosenthal method". I was also using narrative analyses with my interviews on neo-fascist women in Hungary. So I was excited to meet these women whose books I am reading, appreciating and using in my teaching.

Summarizing my experiences with the conference in Goettingen I am mentioning two points. The first is how happy I was to see the several enthusiastic Ph.D Students who were not only involved in the tedious organizational work, but were also ready to chat in the breaks about city. It is obvious that they are appreciated by the program and they are handled as future colleagues, which is very rare in the feudal German academic setting.

The second is a more general comment about politics of using narrative analyses, which made a long way from the first experiments, was conducted in a not necessarily supporting German academic environment. The method was born in obvious dissatisfaction with not only the existing positivist heuristic paradigm but also with the apolitical topics social scientists were engaged in that time in Germany. What I was witnessing at this conference in Goettingen was the de-conceptualization of politics. Most of the papers were connected to migration which emerged as the dominant cognitive frame used for thinking critically about our today's world. As one of the greatest challenges what the European Union is facing now it impossible to overestimate the importance of studying migration. However I find that remarkable the migration is the frame where subjectivity formation is studied recently by most of the distinguished scholars who have started their career somewhere else and in quiet moments of the conference I was wondering of the consequences of this "migrational turn". I wished in a bitter moment that I had decided earlier to give a paper on this conference on my oral history project with pre-1989 migrants and

not on neo-fascist women in Hungary. In what extent does research on other burning issues are influenced by the papers presented here? Of course I know that the "nomadism" is one of the ways to destabilize fixed subject positions in narration still I was keeping on wondering about the non-nomads. For example the children of the Hungarian war criminals whom I am interviewing now. The elderly Polish who are not in England. Or about three million out of total ten million impoverished Hungarians who feel they are not only losers of the transition process but they were born too late to experience the "communist welfare" so they are not even nostalgic towards the communism. Being a "*homo politicus*" I was hoping that those issues I would rank as burning issues for the part of Europe I know the best: poverty, traumatic memories of the past, revival of political extremisms will be addressed in future conferences. Some issues are too important to be left to "disciplinary scholars". Therefore we should not consider saying Farewell to politics in the field of biographical research in the future but it is rather a political imperative to map new territories.

**Steve Tonah**

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I was particularly delighted to have been invited to attend and present a paper at this international conference held at the Georg-August University in Goettingen/Germany. Of course, my mind immediately went back to the difficult decision I had to take some 24 years ago when I decided against pursuing a graduate course in "Agricultural Sociology" at the University of Goettingen and instead chose to study at "Development Sociology" in the University of Bielefeld. Rural and agricultural development courses were the dominant themes at that time for African students studying in Germany and the University of Goettingen was one of the most popular universities to study in Germany.

The conference itself dealt mainly with concepts and subjects that I was quite familiar with. As a sociologist who conducts extensive research in rural northern Ghana, the ethnographic method is one of the basic methods of data collection that I frequently employ during my field work. Furthermore, my research work in Northern Ghana deals mainly with migration and inter-ethnic relations and I have found the use of narrative interviews and life stories particularly useful in the study of migration and migrants' life and experiences. I have, however, not employed the biographical method as a key data collection and research tool and in a consistent fashion. This conference therefore gave me the opportunity to interact and share ideas with other scholars who utilize the biographical method in a more detailed and consistent way. I particularly enjoyed the presentations by several doctoral students who used the biographical method in their research work and was surprised to learn what a well-designed and consistent use of the biographical method can contribute to social research.

My own research interest was more on ethnicity and belonging and my paper examined the links between the democratization process in Ghana and the politics of ethnicity. There were several papers dealing with ethnicity, identity and belonging and I did not only enjoy these sessions but found them intellectually enriching. The research findings again confirmed the complexity of human and societal experiences in the different countries and showed how much interrelated concepts such as identity, belonging, ethnicity are variously employed in different

contexts and research areas. Studies on ethnicity, identity and belonging remain popular and appear to have increased over the years with increasing numbers of migrants and trans-nationals. Although most of the papers presented were based on research work conducted in Europe, there were quite a number of presentations from scholars working in diverse regions including the USA, Sri Lanka, Israel, Japan, and Indonesia. Ghana was, I should say, quite well represented at the conference and I was particularly delighted at the opportunities this offered for 'small talks' and discussions during and after the presentations. Besides my own paper, there were two other scholars who presented papers on Ghana: Carola Lentz spoke on elite biography in northwestern Ghana while Artur Bogner's paper was on the role of NGOs in the peace process in Northern Ghana.

The Goettingen conference also provided me many of the advantages of attending such international meetings. Besides the very useful reflections and comments received on my own paper, the interactions with other scholars provided some new insights in the study of ethnicity and belonging, the different approaches used by the various scholars and other very interesting dimensions to my own research. I got the opportunity to meet and interact with scholars whose works I had read in the past, and of course, and I was also able to establish links with scholars in universities in Germany, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Portugal. Hopefully, these networks would result in practical academic exchanges in the future. The social gatherings and the group meals at lunch time and supper provided the ideal conditions to establish such contacts. Well, as is also common at such conferences, some of the sessions were held concurrently and it was sometimes not easy to decide to attend one session at the expense of another. Hopefully the papers will be made available to the participants at a later date. Finally, let me thank the organizers, especially those who worked behind the scenes providing participants with travel information, accommodation, papers, handouts, and making sure that technical facilities required for the presentations were always ready. I was very impressed about the excellent organization of the conference.

### **Katharina Wesenick**

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Some reasons why this conference was thought-provoking to me.

- I could get in contact with people who represent international standards with respect to the necessity to avoid naturalisation and biologisation when conceptualising, describing and analyzing social categories such as gender, belonging, ethnicity and so forth.

This is even more the case considering, that unfortunately there is (still) no such standard within the broader scientific community of the social sciences.

- I had to realize painfully that up to this conference I had been studying in a white scientific community in Germany and, as this is almost the case within the white privileged community, without questioning it. Thus I had to reveal the racist and classist stereotype patterns floating in my mind when I was confronted with people of colour doing excellent research work. So adhering wanting to be anti- racist did not prevent me to have discriminating ideas at all.

- Almost all participants and their respective approaches did not make a split between methodological and theoretical efforts on the one hand and ethical and political standards on the other hand. Thus I could get in touch with people that are aware of the social responsibility of every researcher not committing the mistake to neglect the fact that science is something that is deeply political and societal. This is also a phenomenon I am not used to be confronted within the university- day- to – day life.

- I had expected this conference to deal mainly with identity, belonging and ethnicity in a strict post modern sense, thus risking to neglect socioeconomic life conditions and their role within the creation of social categories and possibilities to partake in society. Fortunately, my expectations failed. It was especially Ursula Apitzsch who outlined convincingly that a theory of belonging has always to bear in mind the category of participation: in its material, cultural, political, emotional and representational dimensions.

The conference took place when I was about to finish my final exam thesis. It is about a biographical reconstruction of the life of a Cuban man who immigrated 16 years ago to Germany. In this thesis I tried not only to reconstruct his (family) life trajectories but also to figure out in how far his case can be understood in terms of ethnicity, (multiple) belongings, positionality and intersectionality. Thus this conference fitted not only perfectly in my own research project but it enriched it and gave me a lot of inspiration.

### **Hee-Young Yi**

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In December 2007 I was so excited about flying to Germany to attend a conference of the RC 38 in Goettingen. Before completing my doctoral thesis in 2004 and returning to Korea, I had lived in Germany for about ten years. Now I am a professor in Department of Sociology at Daegu University in Korea and directing several projects on the everyday life of Minorities in Korean society. This time I visited Germany as a Korean Researcher who had tried to discuss and conduct biographical research for a few years, but had often been confronted with an atmosphere amongst Korean researchers which is strongly orientated towards the quantitative paradigm.

As expected, the conference provided me with a very special opportunity to connect my past experiences in Germany with my present in Korea. The dinner party, in particular, was a friendly and constructive space in which I could share thoughts and experiences with my old friends from the university in Berlin not only with regard to our new lives in different countries, but also discuss our various ongoing research interests, ideas and useful information. Furthermore, preparing a data session in cooperation with a Swiss researcher was a very positive experience for me. We had never met before, but we could rely on common resources, thus enabling a very productive collaboration between Switzerland and Korea only via the Internet.

Unfortunately, my working paper under the title of "*Understanding Others and (Re)constructing Identities: A Case Study on the Life History of North Korean Refugee Poet Kim Joohee*" was not as actively discussed in the session as I had hoped. First of all, the presentation which had to be shortened for the conference could not appropriately show the whole structure of the cases.

Secondly, the important social context of the North Korean cases such as the disastrous famines during the 1990s, sexual violence etc. was, from my point of view, not easy to understand so that this constituted also a barrier among us. Although a deeper understanding of the political and cultural differences between the Korean peninsula and other societies could not be sufficiently conveyed through my case study as a "window", the conference showed me evidently that the biographical approach affords a sensitive view into the complexity of social reality on different levels.

Within the sessions, the theoretical discussion on issues such as "*Ethnicity as belonging and participation*" and the methodological approaches such as "*Stranger, in public pictures*" were very impressive for me. The former led me via the normative concept to revisit the possibilities of reconstructing given notions of social science based on fieldwork results. The latter motivated me to look deeper into the 'ordinary' borders in the general public, which consist of special images and symbols.

The conference also gave me the chance to meet other researchers from Asia, i.e. Japan and Taiwan. We met on the other side of the globe, confirmed the current positive resonance of qualitative research in each country and were thrilled to learn from each other. The memories of the creative discussions and friendly meetings in Goettingen still inspire me to organize a new research plan. I hope that some day we can meet in Asia!

## CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENTS

### INTERIM CONFERENCE RC 38 FIRST ISA FORUM OF SOCIOLOGY SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND PUBLIC DEBATE

September 5 - 8, 2008, Barcelona, Spain

#### **Main theme Biographical research and its importance for public policy and debate**

Biographical Research has expanded greatly in research practice in the last twenty years. Not only has it developed in terms of methodological and theoretical sophistication it has also been used to study an increasing range of substantive issues and policy areas. The importance of the 'voice' or 'story' of differing groups in society is increasingly recognised not only with academic research but more generally, as an essential part of societal participation.

#### **Programme Coordinators**

President: Gabriele Rosenthal, University of Goettingen, Germany, [g.rosenthal@gmx.de](mailto:g.rosenthal@gmx.de)

Vice-President: Brian Roberts, University of Glamorgan, UK, [broberts@glam.ac.uk](mailto:broberts@glam.ac.uk).

Further information see at: [http://www.isa-sociology.org/barcelona\\_2008/rc/rc38.htm](http://www.isa-sociology.org/barcelona_2008/rc/rc38.htm)

#### **Session 1: Biography for society: Health, poverty and social policy**

Chair: Victoria Semenova, Russia, [Victoria-sem@yandex.ru](mailto:Victoria-sem@yandex.ru)

The session is going to discuss the problems of applying biographical data to more wide social context and social policy: how and for what extent it could be useful for practice, for those who work in the spheres of health and social policy; what is its point of view that makes it special kind of social knowledge and what are its advantages and disadvantages in this aspect; and what makes it important social resource for understanding social reality in different countries.

#### **Session 2: Professional identities – Biography and life experience**

Chair: Henning Salling Olesen, University of Roskilde, Denmark, [hso@ruc.dk](mailto:hso@ruc.dk)

This session intends to attract papers of a theoretical nature as well as specific empirical work dealing with professional identity of particular groups or in particular situations. The focus should be on the significance of life history contexts for professional learning and identity building, and the interpretation of this by professionals themselves.

#### **Session 3: Biographical approaches and the study of youth**

Chairs: Vasintha Veeran, [vasintha.veeran@nuigalway.ie](mailto:vasintha.veeran@nuigalway.ie) University of Galway and Michaela Koettig, University of Goettingen, Germany, [michaela.koettig@gmx.de](mailto:michaela.koettig@gmx.de)

Youth is a phase of development, which is variously experienced locally, nationally and globally. It is generally conceived of as a period of "storm and stress". Moreover, it has been identified in the life course of human beings as fraught with dilemmas around identity, and questions about "where do I belong". In addition, much of the debates around youth illustrate dichotomized Western/non western conceptualizations. Evident in this dichotomy is the lack of a significant debate on the presence of ethnicity and cultural factors in the construction of the concept

"youth". The complex interplay of culture, social class, language, ethnicity, gender, geographic location etc. is said to impact significantly on this life stage transition. In this session we would like to invite papers focusing on life experiences and constructions of belonging: how youth construct their sense of belonging through, ethnicity, youth movements, political groups and other organizational affiliations. Other lived experiences, which also impact and influence this sense of belonging, include migration, nationalism and social exclusion. This session will focus on a range of factors that contribute to the development of these constructions of belonging and the various manner in which they become embedded and generated in the course of this life stage.

#### **Session 4 and 5: 'Turning points' in biographical theory and analysis**

Chair: Feiwei Kupferberg, Malmo University, Sweden, [Feiwei.Kupferberg@lut.mah.se](mailto:Feiwei.Kupferberg@lut.mah.se)

The concept of "turning points" was introduced by Anselm Strauss in *Mirrors and Masks* (1959). This session invites both theoretical papers elaborating explicitly on the concept and empirical papers where the biographical analysis is structured around some type of turning point. The idea is to evaluate the concept by an ongoing dialogue between papers, asking questions such as: 'What does turning points mean in different contexts?' and 'Is it possible/ meaningful to try to make a more general definition?'

#### **Session 6: Ethnicity, race, and minority relations - Transnational identities**

Chairs: Lena Inowlocki, University of Frankfurt, [Inowlocki@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:Inowlocki@soz.uni-frankfurt.de), Germany and Kathy Davis, Utrecht University, Netherlands, [Kathy.davis@let.uu.nl](mailto:Kathy.davis@let.uu.nl)

In our rapidly globalizing world, societies are characterized by differences and belongings. The multiple belongings of individuals to different collectivities can entail many kinds of ambivalence, strain, and even conflict – for example, the ambivalence of "passing", the suffering from lack of recognition, discrimination and exclusion, and polarized conflicts between majority and minority groups. But hyphenated and transnational belongings of "marginal" men and women to conflicting collectivities can also find an expression in their becoming mediators: interpreters, teachers, or political activists (Stonequist 1937).

#### **Session 7: Cross-theme session**

Chair: Henning Salling Olesen, University of Roskilde, Denmark, [hso@ruc.dk](mailto:hso@ruc.dk) This Session presents papers that are drawn from a number of areas of biographical research.

#### **Joint Sessions**

##### **Joint Session 1: Gender, biography and transnational practices**

##### **Joint Session with RC05 Ethnic, Race and Minority Relations**

Chairs: Helma Lutz and Kathy Davis Please send abstracts to: Helma Lutz: [lutz@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:lutz@soz.uni-frankfurt.de) and Kathy Davis: [kathy.davis@let.uu.nl](mailto:kathy.davis@let.uu.nl) and Brian Roberts: [broberts@glam.ac.uk](mailto:broberts@glam.ac.uk)

This session explores the genderedness of transnational biographies – that is, biographies which involve multiple border-crossings. In the context of globalization, the rise of information and communications technology, and widespread transnational migration and travel, more and more people are engaging in transnational practices in the field of work, parenting and care

relationships, consumer culture, and more.

## **Joint Session 2: Biographical and feminist methods in a global framework**

### **Joint Session with RC32 Women and Society**

Chairs: Marilyn Porter, Memorial University, Canada, [mporter@mun.ca](mailto:mporter@mun.ca), Fatimah Daud, International Islamic University, Malaysia, [fatimahd@iiu.edu.my](mailto:fatimahd@iiu.edu.my) and Brian Roberts, University of Glamorgan, UK, [broberts@glam.ac.uk](mailto:broberts@glam.ac.uk)

This joint session (RC38 and RC32) will bring together different perspectives on how feminist thought has influenced biographical methods and vice versa. In particular it will focus on the problems of how theory can sometimes get in the way of understanding how people (women and men) understand their own lives and how they communicate that understanding in biographical interviews.

## **Joint Session 3 and 4: Biographical research and sociology of art**

### **Joint Session -RC 37 Sociology of Arts/RC38 Biography and Society**

Chair: Felicia Herrschaft, University of Frankfurt, Germany, [f.herrschaft@soz.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:f.herrschaft@soz.uni-frankfurt.de)

Artists use language in a performative way to express their relation to the art world. Artistic processes of creating an artwork can be analyzed through their language use and also through the "working alliance" of researchers with artists. Artists can be seen as opening up a world of action in which they build houses for the visitor, who is no longer someone experiencing a work of art but becomes part of an action. In this session, we propose a substantial and methodological reflection on sociology of art, performative social science, visual sociology, and biographical research, to understand the role of research in the art world. Questions to be raised and discussed can include the following: is the artistic biography changing? What kind of "biographical work" do artists do? How do artists reflect the artistic process of creating an artwork? Does a transnational and cosmopolitan concept of life play a role in the art world and how is it expressed? Are there differences in concepts how artists create artworks and how the curator is involved in the artistic process? Very welcome are papers concerning concepts of art form also in African and Asian countries and different regions of the world.

## **Joint Session 5 and 6: Biographical coping with risk and uncertainty**

Joint session of RC38 Biography and Society with TG04 Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty

Co-Chairs: Jens O. Zinn, University of Kent, UK, j. [zinn@kent.ac.uk](mailto:zinn@kent.ac.uk) and Brian Roberts, University of Glamorgan, UK, [broberts@glam.ac.uk](mailto:broberts@glam.ac.uk)

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