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Comparing cases and policy relevance: squeezing the juice from biographical methods

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ABSTRACT
Drawing from the SOSTRIS project (*Social Strategies in Risk Society*, 1996–9), the paper focuses on the comparing of cases and the formulating of policy proposals, two later stages of biographical research. It centres on the case study of Steven, an unemployed graduate, second generation immigrant in Britain.

KEY WORDS
biographical methods, comparing cases, policy impact

IZVLEČEK
Prispevek, ki se vsebinsko naslanja na projekt SOSTRIS (Socialne strategije v družbi tveganja, 1996–1999), se osredotoča na primerjavo študij primerov in formuliranje predlogov strategij, dveh kasnejših stadijev biografske raziskave. Osrediča se na vzorčno študijo Stevena, brezposelnega diplomiranega imigranta druge generacije v Britaniji.

KLJUČNE BESEDE
Biografske metode, primerjanje študij primerov, vpliv taktike

In this paper I focus on the later stages in biographical research of comparing cases and having a policy impact.[1] This is because these stages often receive short shrift, not least because the early steps of case analysis can be so captivating and time consuming. Key phases in biographical methods comprise interviewing, case analysis, compar-

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1 The talk preceded two intensive training courses in interviewing and analysis of biographical interviews. The biographical method concerned follows procedures elaborated by Gabriele Rosenthal and taught by Quatext in Berlin. In Britain the method has become known as biographic-narrative interpretive method (BNIM) as expounded in Wengraf, *Qualitative research interviewing* and his *Short guide*.

ing cases, theorising from cases, making policy proposals. Each stage is full of "juice", and the later ones tend to remain under-squeezed. This is seen at conferences, where case studies, detailed and fascinating in themselves, are often under-interpreted in terms of social science theory or policy implications. As in planning, beginning with the final goal and working backwards ensures consideration of the whole process.

The paper mainly draws on the SOSTRIS project (*Social Strategies in Risk Society*, 1996–9), and falls into the following sections:
1. our mode of working, and considerations of time
2. ways in which cross-cultural differences influence policy contexts and receptivity to biographical approaches
3. the purpose and process of comparing cases, maintaining their *gestalt*
4. a case example, showing the emergence of social issues from case particularities
5. policy issues emerging from the case study

Time considerations

The SOSTRIS project explored whether Giddens' theories of individualisation in modern society and Beck's theory of "risk" were borne out in Western Europeans' experience of social transformation.[2] The research focused on biographical interviews with six social groups in seven countries (unemployed graduates, early retired, lone parents, unemployed youth, migrants and ethnic minorities, ex-traditional workers; in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, UK).

Our seven teams met three times a year, with an enjoyable and productive time in workshops, interpreting each others' cases in order to align our methodologies, and then comparing cases. In the third year we investigated agencies considered innovative in tackling social exclusion in each country. Our narrative approach to the "biography" of each organisation was warmly received by the agencies themselves, and led to invitations for further collaboration. And yet we realised afterwards that we had needed that third year to continue comparing and theorising our initial biographical cases, and to shape and present

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[2] See *Biography and social exclusion in Europe*, *SOSTRIS Final Report* and *SOSTRIS Working Papers*. Further chapters on the SOSTRIS project are listed in References and literature.

our policy proposals.[3] The rich research material needed more time for imaginative, collaborative thinking. We prioritised the production of six *Working Papers* of biographical case study materials, but this robbed time for journal articles and the development of the book.

Cross-cultural differences

Biographical methods are important for social policy for several key reasons: a) they reconnect policy with lived realities and experience; b) they can focus attention on the crucial interfaces between service users and professionals; c) they link the personal and the social, operationalising and exploring theories of agency and structure – throughout the 1990s Giddens produced books on structuration theory, without any follow-up in empirical data. These are pertinent assets for policy research across Europe.

On the other hand different countries at different epochs have greater and lesser degrees of receptivity to biographical methods, depending on their sociological and policy cultures and traditions. Effective cross cultural collaboration needs to appreciate and grapple with these differences.[4]

Britain

In Britain there is a particular degree of clash between the complex, subtle material produced by biographical methods and the evidence-based targeted-output culture of government regulation. British regulatory frameworks comprise an extreme straitjacket – producing many of the dishonesties and distortions that became characteristic of centrally planned systems. Another recent feature of UK politics has been to enhance consumers, dividing off service users from professionals, as part of the project of undermining and demoralising public services.[5] On the brighter side, there are signs that the tide is turning, against the excess of testing in schools, for example. Moreover British individualism does entail interest in complex forms of subjectivity.

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[3] Whether we would have got EU funding if we had left out the second stage is a moot point. We all probably "pack" applications in order to impress funders.

[4] We broached this in the SOSTRIS project by each team producing a paper on how the concept of social exclusion sat within and had evolved within their sociological tradition. See *SOSTRIS Working Paper I.* We also approached it more experientially, in small groups each individual recounting an experience in which he or she had personally felt socially excluded. That revealed a fascinating mix of personal, social and cultural factors.

[5] How this is reflected, even in biographical and oral history research, is explored in: Apitzsch et al., Introduction.

In the 1990s, when sociology was dominated by post-structuralist interest in discourse and representation, the Cultures of Care[6] and SOSTRIS projects met hostile accusations of being "realist". After all "the author was dead". But gradually "identity" grew in interest, and then the acting, feeling, experiencing, embodied, even defended subject, with inner and outer worlds.

There is probably a tendency across countries for social policy thinking to be dominated by quantitative mindsets which are resistant to in-depth qualitative methods. Yet, as Michael Rustin argues in *The turn to biographical methods*, law, medicine and politics have always relied on case studies.[7] No-one objects to the idea of human truth in plays, novels or poetry. The problem in social science dates from its separation from the humanities in favour of an alignment with natural science. In the 1960s in Britain a documentary, case study-based film on homelessness called *Cathy come home*, became a resounding icon that stirred the national conscience. That is the kind of impact we need to achieve with biographical methods. The opportunities are greatly enhanced with digital technology. Currently in the UK and the US there is excited interest in new presentational forms using performance, dance, graphics, multi-media.[8] The challenge, it seems to me, is to safeguard the depth and complexity of case study material in such methods.

France and Germany

From the vantage point of individualism within British neo-liberalism the more relational concepts of Social Europe seem enviable. Emphasis on the state in France has led to more focus on professional cultures and coordination. French concepts such as animation, proximity, social solidarity, *habitus* are all hospitable to biographical concepts, as are, in Germany, hermeneutics and the interactive focus of social pedagogy, *Vergesellschaftung*, and more specifically biographical terms such as biographicity, biographical work and unlived lives. The difficulty for "outsiders" of understanding such concepts points to another problem, that of cross-cultural communication in social science. (I myself have difficulty understanding "process structures", for instance, a term widely used in German biographical work.)

Preparing the collection *Biographical methods and professional practice* led me to realise some key differences between Germany and

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[6] An ESRC supported project 1992–4. See Chamberlayne and King, *Cultures of care*.

[7] Rustin, Reflections on the biographical turn.

[8] A particularly lively network is run by Kip Jones at Bournemouth University, ‹performsocsci@jiscmail.ac.uk›.

Britain in policy hospitality to biographical methods.[9] In Germany at that time there was renewed emphasis on "professionalism" in social work as pivoted on the subtle point of interaction between client and client. Emphasis on interaction is clear in the following three examples:

Praxis – the objective and non-reducible reality of a concrete individuated and unique life form, which becomes autonomous by solving its own unique crises [10]… professionals and their clients forming a reciprocally binding working alliance in order to solve a specific personal crisis[11] … a hierarchical situation in which nevertheless the free consent and collaboration of the client is regarded as necessary.[12]

Biographicity – creatively appreciating one's own, often hidden biographical resources and aspirations, tapping into them and realising them in new ways.[13] This requires different professional skills, identities and organizational structures.

New interaction order/regime – personal biographies of managers, professionals and clients within a given organisation are all "institutionalised interaction histories". Accordingly, biographising lies at the heart of institutional and organisational transformations.[14]

Comparing cases

How to compare cases was something we had to learn how to do, something we puzzled over a great deal at first. After all, how do you compare diamonds?

Thematic comparisons run the risk of disaggregating the *gestalt*, as happens with such programmes as Nudist or Atlas-ti. Our approach has rather been to think the whole case, to hold the whole in mind, in its broad character, its dynamic and in its detail. And instead of working from written case studies (though we have those too), we learned to present cases verbally and diagrammatically to each other, two by two. In small groups we then brain-stormed and free associated about the differences and similarities. Now when we do this in training we encourage groups to think in visual images, and following a workshop on a particular case we ask participants to write down there and then their individual summaries so far. People's capacity to think the whole in considerable subtlety is remarkable, as is the interviewee's capacity

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[9] *Biographical methods and professional practice.*
[10] Oevermann, *A revised theoretical model*, p. 1.
[11] *Biographical methods and professional practice.*
[12] Schütze, Organisationszwänge und hoheitsstaatliche Rahmenbedingungen, p. 193.
[13] Alheit and Dausien, The 'double face' of life-long learning, pp. 15–16.
[14] Hanses, *Soziale Arbeit*; Roehr and Maurer-Hein, Biographie und soziale Arbeit.

to craft an improvised account of complex experiences through his or her life.

So at the point of comparison we urge people to think with the *gestalt* or dynamic of the case, and to keep moving between the particularities and the whole. At times we also used aspirations, opportunities, constraints and resources as a check list or frame for comparison.

We elaborated this approach in our recent evaluation of an arts based community centre.[15] Here we felt that kite-flying (taking seriously the wildest creative ideas) and allowing time for emergence, together with patience and trust, were central to the Centre's ability to reproduce its culture in a counterposed regulatory environment. Observing these dynamics and reading about artistic process led us to appreciate more the imaginative dimension in research interpretation. "Syncretistic thinking" in art, as described by Ehrenzweig,[16] delays arriving at the *gestalt* in order to think the whole better, and uses the subjective responses of researchers as data, taking time to dwell on primary process – meaning gut reactions.[17]

When we were analysing individual cases in the SOSTRIS project, our partners complained that they were too psychological. During the Cultures of Care project, Annette King and I similarly despaired at achieving the more structural purposes of the project.[18] However, when we began to compare whole cases the problem vanished, because exactly those structural differences sprang into view.

A distinctive feature of BNIM lies in the use of panels to kickstart processes of interpretation.[19] Panels also play a crucial role in the holistic comparing of cases – as I hope has become clear.

Case study of Steven

My purpose in presenting a biographical case study is twofold: a) to show how such a case study reveals the intertwining of the personal and the social, and b) to demonstrate the emergence of policy issues from such material.[20]

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[15] Froggett et al., *Integrated practice.*

[16] Ehrenzweig, *The hidden order of art.*

[17] See Chamberlayne, Inter-subjectivity in biographical methods; Froggett et al., *Integrated practice.*

[18] In the Cultures of Care project, home caring served as a window on the informal sphere of welfare in different welfare regimes. Chamberlayne and King, *Cultures of care.*

[19] For details of interpretation procedures see Wengraf, *Short guide.*

[20] For an account of how we theorised this case by comparing it with two others, see Chamberlayne, Second-generation transcultural lives.

Steven was born in 1970 in London. He is Afro-Caribbean and was interviewed as an unemployed graduate in 1997 as part of the SOSTRIS project. He is not strictly unemployed, but neither has he achieved stable employment commensurate with his degree. He is a reflective character recounting his *Bildungsroman* – the travails of a second generation black British young man moving through childhood, teenage, student and young adult years in the context of Britain in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Still finding his own way in life, he vividly depicts his milestone experiences and decisions.

Steven's challenge is to pioneer an independent and transcultural alternative to his parents' first generation strategy of defiant protectionism, which has been based on "removal" and self-reliance – as I will show. Steven studied graphic design and is seeking entry to the media industry, which requires flexible, multi-cultural team work.

Steven's parents worked in the 1960s and 1970s in London Underground, a unionised setting, at a time of determined struggles against racial discrimination in education in Britain. They were married several years before their children were born, and had a nephew living with them whom they sent back to the Caribbean, on the grounds that after three years he knew less than when he arrived – the school only encouraged him in sport. This threat of removal hangs over Steven, whose mother was decisive: *From the time that I was born her whole idea was, well, I'm not mucking about with you.*[21]

When teachers began to say Steven was disruptive (letting off stink bombs and setting fire to a Christmas tree), he was moved to a private black church school (all black kids and teachers), where he leapt ahead. He was bright and artistic, and fascinated by science fiction. At 13, when his friends abandoned a joint Sci-fi magazine project, his mother advised him to carry on alone. But his parents were also negotiators. When Steven became fascinated by religious and philosophical questions, his teacher protested, *Oh stop questioning, just believe.* His parents and other teachers complained, and Steven was invited to write an article for the school magazine, which was *one of the biggest experiences.*

It is interesting how Steven speaks of his parents. Although his mother is decisive, she is not domineering. She gives him time to reach his own conclusions, and he is fond and appreciative of both of them:

She's not like, well, if you don't do this, this is going to happen to you if you don't do. She's never been like that with me at all. … 'cos like most things she says it takes me a while to kind of, erm, get 'em. But no, there's never any

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[21] *Mucking about* means sloppily taking chances.

pressure from Mum and Dad … he's like -, he's just not as vocal, that's all. He worries.

At college Steven graphically describes the process of entering a mixed environment, in which different groups stuck together, and how he makes friends with a white student:

I was fascinated by him, I don't know why … I was just like,"oh, you collect Science Fiction", he was like "oh, yeah, yeah", and then I started telling him what I liked and he goes "oh, that's crap, that's rubbish". But instead of doing like my usual I'd be – I'd have just walked off or something but I just sat there and we just ended up talking, and even though we had totally opposing views on a lot of things it was just really fun being able to talk to him … And now I've got such a mixed bag of friends. It is unbelievable.

Faced by a switch in the degree course to a market orientation, Steven holds out for his own creative interests, which lowers his marks. The second year adopts a looser study approach, which S finds *like swimming in jelly.* After his degree he is shocked by the difficulty of getting a job. *It was like, well, okay, what experience have you got?* Working for a science fiction bookseller, he was given cleaning jobs in an unheated warehouse. When he was sacked following 'flu' (influenza), his mother rang up to protest. About that he says:

I really wanted to feel bad about the fact that I'd lost this job but I just did – I tried so hard to make myself feel really bad and I didn't. It was really amazing. I was – I was more scared of the fact that I didn't feel bad about it.

This seemed a turning point to a stronger sense of self: he could try different strategies and find solutions. He managed to combine an interviewing job at a research agency with pursuing science fiction. He got on well with colleagues and supervisors whatever their ethnic background. So, pretty much on his own, he has made some major transitions: towards multiculturalism, to open learning, and in reconciling creative and market realities in his studies and in the job market. He did get ill in the process, especially with a phobia of the tube[22] in the second year of university, which he only mentions in passing. His parents worked in the London underground railway, so the phobia may have related to the struggle to become independent of them. As researchers we also reflected on London underground as a metaphor

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[22] The *tube* means the underground railway in London. (Footnote added by the editor.)

for moving on in life, requiring trust that there is a fully planned and functioning system, that there will be guidance at decisive points, that there will be ways of dealing with unforeseen problems – all these things resoundingly missing in his university experience.

Policy implications

Like many others in the SOSTRIS project, and despite his strong family backing, Steven is not well supported by mentors or a moral community. Many of the SOSTRIS cases pointed to the absence or loss of collective structures in making life transitions, the lack of and need for supportive mentors and political discourse, for collective scripts, since many people are in similar situations. As Baumann says: *People no longer notice that their isolation is a mass sentence, that individualisation is the citizen's worst enemy, emptying the agora*.[23] At the same time these individuals are pioneering social change.

Surprisingly, Steven does not talk about racism, although he is most certainly confronted and surrounded by it. We wondered if he belongs to a generation that prides itself on self-responsibility and re- fusal of victimhood? Is racism also too painful and complicated to talk about, involving fear, anger, envy and shame, about which, again, policy has no discourse. Is this worse for the second than for the first generation? Would he have talked differently to a black interviewer?

The SOSTRIS project concludes that if social professionals are to help people to find their own way in society they have to understand the inner and outer social and cultural worlds of their clients. Numa Murard (our SOSTRIS French partner) says that young people need to find a spark which will light the way between their family and class milieu, and the public world, which have often become very dislo- cated, and that it can take a lot of courage to take such steps.[24] Steven gives us an eloquent account of the biographical work involved.

The policy conclusions of the SOSTRIS project had much in common with other European research on life transitions and life long learning, much of which has used biographical or life story approach- es.[25] Some of our findings surprised us, such as the fact that lone par- ents seemed mostly concerned with partnership issues, and come from families with a trans-generational pattern of absent fathers, whether

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[23] Baumann, *Liquid modernity*, p. 41.
[24] Murard, Guilty victims.
[25] For one such project, SEM (Self-Employment of Migrant Women), see Apitzsch, Balancing precarious work; Kontos, Considerations on the biographical embedded- ness; and the Special Issue of the *International Review of Sociology* on SEM.

from war, death, divorce or illegitimacy, so that negotiating partnerships was more of a problem than parenting *per se*. Many of our findings spanned our six social groups such as the fact that the erosion of collective structures and supports was individualising imaginative worlds and horizons. The dislocation between political discourse and people's life worlds meant that they were making unscripted transformations, feeling isolated despite being in common situations. We advocated more supportive and appreciative political discourse, that would recognise the pioneering nature of people's lives.

Conclusion

Conclusions from the SOSTRIS project are written up in the final chapter of the book *Biography and social exclusion in Europe: experiences and life journeys*.[26] The chapter aims to encourage the grounding of theoretical concepts in social policy teaching in first hand experience through case studies. We hoped also to gain an edge with policy makers and politicians, but in this we needed consultation and guidance, for example from scientific officers in Brussels. Since then measures have been put in place to facilitate dialogue between projects, and to support processes of dissemination and exploitation. Gaining access to policy makers is an arcane art in most societies, one for which possibilities vary greatly, as I suggested earlier.

I hope I have conveyed that we arrived at our conclusions from comparing cases, rather than from individual cases *per se*. Very often one case can be written up to exemplify broader points, and indeed, a great advantage of the single case lies in its capacity to move and engage an audience. Policy makers and politicians need to be moved!!!

I began by making a plea for balancing the time between various stages in the research process, allowing enough attention to the later phases. This method is often thought to be too time-consuming. Actually "thinking the whole" often gets to the heart of things pretty rapidly.

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[26] *Biography and social exclusion in Europe.*

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Primerjava študij primerov in pomen strategije: iztiskanje soka iz biografskih metod

Povzetek

Prispevek se posveča primerjanju študij primerov ter formuliranju predlogov politične strategije, dveh poznejših stadijev biografske raziskave, s čimer želi poudariti, da je slednjima potrebno nameniti dovolj časa. Preučuje tudi sprejemljivost dostopnih socioloških in političnih konceptov za biografski pristop tako na lokalni kot na evropski ravni, ter izziv, ki ga holistična biografska raziskava v nastajanju predstavlja dominantni revizijski kulturi. Primerjanje študij primerov lahko opišemo kot bogat proces v nastajanju, v katerem se prepletajo empiričnimi detajli in sinkretistično mišljenje, rezultati pa so odvisni tako od narave posameznega primera kot od domišljije raziskovalca.[27] Prispevek, ki črpa iz projekta SOSTRIS (Socialne strategije v družbi tveganja, 1996–1999), se osredotoča na študijo primera Stevena, nezaposlenega diplomiranega imigranta druge generacije v Britaniji. Študija v biografskem materialu prikazuje vzajemno igro osebnega in družbenega ter moči in strukture. Implikacije strategij iz Stevenovega primera so – skupaj s splošnejšimi zaključki o strategijah – vzeti iz knjige projekta SOSTRIS z naslovom *Biography and social exclusion in Europe* (Biografija in družbeno izključevanje v Evropi).[28]

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[27] Ehrenzweig, *The hidden order of art.*
[28] *Biography and social exclusion in Europe.*