

Gabriele Rosenthal  
*Experienced Life  
and Narrated Life  
Story*

Gestalt and  
Structure of  
Biographical  
Self-Presentations

## Experienced Life and Narrated Life Story

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Gabriele Rosenthal

# Experienced Life and Narrated Life Story

Gestalt and Structure of  
Biographical Self-Presentations

Translated by Ruth Schubert

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# Preface to the new edition

The present volume is an extended new edition of my habilitation thesis from 1993, published by Campus Verlag in 1995. This thesis and my writings relating to biographical research based on it, some of which have been published in several languages, are recognized as important contributions to sociological biographical research both in the German-speaking world and internationally. A new German edition of this book<sup>1</sup>, and also an English edition, have been a concern of mine for some time. This concern is justified by its continuing importance both for my own work – empirical research projects, which I have always carried out together with colleagues – and for many of the research projects I have supervised, mostly in the context of doctoral or other theses. This research continues to be based on the conception presented at that time of a dialectical relationship between experiencing, remembering, and narrating or, more generally, speaking about the experienced and handed-down past. The investigation of this relationship, combined with an increasing focus on the interactions between it and the collective memories of diverse groupings in respect of events and activities in different historical phases, as well as their effects in the present, runs as a central theme through my later work (Rosenthal 2016a). For example, I am currently co-leading a research project with Maria Pohn-Lauggas on slavery and the slave trade in individual and collective memories in Brazil and Ghana.<sup>2</sup> An essential concern of this research, in addition to reconstructing

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1 A translation in Brazilian Portuguese was published in 2017.

2 This project, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2022–2025, is being carried out in cooperation with Steve Tonah (University of Ghana, Legon/Accra) and Hermilio Santos (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre). The team in Germany includes Eva Bahl, Artur Bogner and Lucas Cé Sangalli. See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/650363.html>.

current patterns of action and interpretation or discourses, is to investigate their genesis. This means that we always have to ask to what extent speaking about the past is based on memories of what has been experienced (which also includes the experience of transmitting the past by the older generations), and to what extent this gives us clues to what was experienced at the time. While this question is at the forefront in this book, the later methodological modifications – that is, the increasing use of other methods of data collection – are due to an effort to reconstruct, to a greater extent than before, discourses that prevailed at different times and present patterns of activity. I will return to this later.

Until 1995, my empirical and theoretical research was focused on the social and individual consequences of the collective crimes committed during National Socialism. Even after that, it has been largely focused on the thematic field of collective violence and its consequences (see Bogner 2021). With Artur Bogner, I conducted research on extremely traumatized “child soldiers” of the so-called Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda who had returned to civilian life (Bogner/Rosenthal 2020).<sup>3</sup> Thus, I was still confronted with the question of the extent to which narrated life stories are determined by the components of a memory damaged by traumatization in the context of macro-violence (see chapter 4.1.4), by the discourses prevailing at different times, which often deny violence, and by the frequent outsider position of victims of collective violence. When interviewing victims of collective violence, we social scientists are particularly challenged to support the interviewees in the process of remembering and narrating. In addition, it is necessary to decipher the differences between the present perspective and the perspectives of the interviewees at different times in the past when analyzing or evaluating the interviews. This is a challenge that is all the more important in biographical interviews with (former) participants in violent crime, who often try hard to deny their involvement or to omit this topic and the corresponding phases of their life as far as possible, or even try to invent a different biography (cf. Rosenthal 2001, 2002).

However, when we conduct interviews with people, or use their written biographical self-testimonies, regardless of which groupings they belong to,

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<sup>3</sup> This project “Child Soldiers in Context. Biographies, family and collective histories in Northern Uganda” was funded by the DFG (2014–2017). Principal investigators: Dieter Neubert & Gabriele Rosenthal; researcher: Artur Bogner; research assistants: Josephine Schmiereck, Katharina Teutenberg. See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/153963.html>

we are always confronted with the problem that we cannot draw direct conclusions from texts about the behavior and action patterns of the speakers or writers, let alone about what they experienced in the past.

The methodological implications of the basic conception of mutual interaction between remembering, experiencing, and the presentation of experiences, as discussed in this volume, as well as the method of biographical case reconstruction which I propose (see chapter 6.2), continue to inform my conception of a fruitful research design. This is primarily due to the need for historically grounded social research that seeks to understand and explain social phenomena in their processes of emergence, reproduction, and change. This involves reconstructing the collective and biographical trajectories that led to particular behavior or actions, to particular ways of remembering, and to the establishment of particular discourses. For about twenty years now, especially as a result of my collaboration with Artur Bogner, I have integrated into my work theoretical and methodological approaches from figurational sociology, partly because of my increasing interest in the methods of historical sociology, but mainly because of my growing awareness of the constantly changing balances and inequalities of power that are operative in all human relationships. The assumption of the constant presence of power balances and power inequalities presupposes an at least partially “structural” concept of power, as discussed by Norbert Elias, but also, for example, by Max Weber or Richard M. Emerson (cf. Bogner 1989: 36–41; 1986; 1992). In Weber, power is the “chance” one has for a certain form of action, and thus does not *per se* imply the corresponding form of intention or its active realization or passive perception.

With a greater interest in the perspective of figurational sociology, the focus on individual interviewees which the present volume might suggest – although this was by no means intended at the time – shifted to a more strongly applied focus on we-groups, and other, less clearly networked or integrated groupings of people, which is more clearly laid down in the research design. I began to focus increasingly on reconstructing the interconnectedness of individual cases, the figurations between different groupings, we-groups, and organizations, and, concomitantly, the changing power balances and power inequalities between the various groupings over the course of history.<sup>4</sup> Many

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<sup>4</sup> Roswitha Breckner und Monica Massari conducted an interview with me on the theoretical, methodological, and above all content-related development of my work, which has been published (2019).

of the research projects I have supervised take into account the additional perspective of figurational sociology. To explain this development toward a synthesis of social-constructivist and figurational biographical research, the present edition concludes with a chapter co-authored with Artur Bogner (see also Bogner/Rosenthal 2022).

Parallel to developing a more figurational perspective, my methodological approach changed significantly as a result of my field experiences in the “Global South”. These taught me to combine biographical case reconstruction – which always remained at the center of my work – even more strongly with other interpretive or reconstructive methods. I began to follow more consistently the principle of openness (cf. Rosenthal 2018: chapter 2), not only in terms of modifying the original research question or sample, but above all in terms of increased flexibility in the planned use and combination of methods of data collection. It should not go unmentioned here that my own research planning, the use of certain methods, and the resulting experiences have also been shaped by quite a few of the dissertations I have supervised. It will not be possible for me to go into all these research projects in this context, but I can say that they have all been based on the method of biographical case reconstruction presented in this volume. However, at least some of them should be mentioned. An explicit combination of social-constructivist biographical research with discourse analysis in the tradition of Michel Foucault and of the sociology of knowledge was first carried out by Bettina Völter (2000; 2003; Schäfer/Völter 2005) in the research project “The Holocaust in the Lives of Three Generations”, described below.<sup>5</sup> As in the other works cited, Völter’s case analyses, which refer to the case level of both the individual biography and the family, are characterized by a careful reconstruction of family history and family dynamics.

This combination of methods was also used by Maria Pohn-Lauggas (2014; 2017; 2021<sup>6</sup>), first in her study of so-called *Trümmerfrauen* in Austria, and later (together with image analysis<sup>7</sup>) of resistance fighters under Na-

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5 This DFG-funded project, “The Holocaust in the Lives of Three Generations. Family Biographies in Germany and in Israel” was conducted from 1992–1996 in cooperation with Dan Bar-On (Beer Sheva, Israel). The principal investigators were Fritz Schütze & Regina Gildemeister. The interviews with most of the members of the grandparents’ generation of Jewish families in Israel had been conducted by me in the period 1989–1991.

6 Published up to 2014 under the author’s former name, Pohn-Weidinger.

7 See Pohn-Lauggas (2016). An elaborated, differentiated conception of combining biographical case analyses with image analyses has been presented by Roswitha Breckner (2010; 2021).

tional Socialism. Other dissertations based on a reasoned combination of biographical analysis and discourse analysis in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge include that by Ina Alber (2016a; 2016b) on civic engagement in Poland, and that by Rixta Wundrak (2009; 2010; 2018) on the Chinese community in Bucharest. In addition to the reconstruction of collective discourses, it very often makes sense to include participant observations in the analysis of case reconstructions, whether of individuals, families, social groupings or local settings (cf. Bahl/Worm 2018; Becker/Rosenthal 2022). This makes it possible to contrast what is said in the interviews with behavioral patterns and concrete interactions in the interviewees' everyday life. A consistent and not simply incidental inclusion of participant observation in the case analyses was first practiced by Michaela Köttig (2004; 2005) in her work on right-wing extremist young women and girls. This research was done at a time when, in contrast to the beginnings of sociological biographical research in the USA or Poland, biographical research in German-speaking countries was based primarily on autobiographical material (including, for instance, letters or diaries, in addition to interviews). Michaela Köttig was one of the first biographical researchers to present a methodologically justified proposal for combining biographical case reconstruction and the analysis of interactions documented in observation situations. By the time Rosa María Brandhorst (2015; 2023) presented her analysis of migration and transnational Cuban families, this combination had become established in sociological biographical research. With her field research in Cuba and in Germany, this author demonstrated the advantages of a "multi-sited" approach (in the sense of a "multi-sited ethnography"), which is unfortunately not yet common in sociology.<sup>8</sup> The empirical study of structures and contradictions of police work by Miriam Schäfer (2021), in which conducting biographical interviews was made possible by her previous participant observations in the field during patrol service, showed very clearly the potential of linking observation and analysis of professional practice with an investigation of the biographical experiences of those acting in this professional field. The combination of interviews, group discussions, and participant observations also had a significant impact on the dissertations that emerged from the research projects I describe in more detail below.

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, sociological biographical research had been characterized from the very beginning by a procedure that is comparable to the demands of "multi-sited ethnography". See Apitzsch/Siouti 2014 and Ruokonen-Engler/Siouti 2014.

While Johannes Becker (2013; 2017) and Eva Bahl (2017; 2021) placed more emphasis on an ethnographic approach, Hendrik Hinrichsen (2020, 2021) and Arne Worm (2017; 2019) combined individual with group interviews. Here, too, however, biographical case reconstructions were at the center of the analysis.

So, what does this multi-method research, and especially this flexibility in methods of data collection, mean in detail? In our research project on three-generation families of Shoah survivors and Nazi perpetrators (Rosenthal 1998/2010), my collaborators and I used a combination of individual interviews and family discussions. This research constituted an important empirical basis for the methodology explicated in the present volume, both with regard to the effects of trauma on memory and narrative processes, and in respect of a trauma-sensitive but memory-supportive interviewing approach (see chapters 5 and 6.1.). Due to the often extremely difficult family dynamics caused by the distressing family past, whether in families of Nazi survivors or perpetrators, it was only after analyzing the individual interviews that we were able to decide which combination of family members we could propose to the interviewees for a family interview.

This kind of advance planning changed in the following projects with an increased awareness of the need to react spontaneously to conditions and events in the field. This meant that both the choice of methods and the order in which they were used depended on the particular situation, including unexpected means of access to the field, on the problems that arose, and what was found to work well or less well. In other words, whether we started our research with group discussions, family interviews, individual interviews or participant observation depended on what emerged in the research field. In a study on *established* and *outsiders* in Israel and the West Bank<sup>9</sup> (Rosenthal 2016b), it was often the case in the Palestinian groupings that peers or family members showed up for what was initially intended to be an interview with only one individual, or visitors arrived unexpectedly and joined the family members. This requires the competence to decide in each situation whether

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<sup>9</sup> This comparative project “Belonging to the Outsider and Established Groupings: Palestinians and Israelis in Various Figurations” was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and located within the Program for Trilateral German-Israeli-Palestinian Cooperation. Duration: 2010 – 2015. Besides the author further principal investigators were Shifra Sagy (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel) and Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi (Al Quds University, Al-Bireh, Palestine). See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/77993.html>

to continue a one-on-one interview with the person initially contacted, or whether to gradually switch the mode of interviewing to a family interview or group interview. Many other aspects of our planning were also changed according to our experiences in the field. It happened repeatedly that we conducted interviews (sometimes through online media) with members of groupings or families who were not in the geographical area where we intended to collect data, or in the focus of our research. This led to an expansion of the geographical and national context. This process became very clear in the context of a project on figurations of refugees and long-established residents in Jordan.<sup>10</sup> Here we were able to empirically reconstruct a number of distinct groupings, both among the old-established residents and among refugees or families of former refugees, that are not normally considered in the research literature (Hinrichsen/Becker 2022). Expanding the sample also affects whether we decide to expand or narrow down the geographical space of observation, how long we decide to stay in the field, and whether we need to change or limit our research questions. All of this may require us to change the case level; that is, rather than the “biography” of an individual, we may choose the case level of a “clique of friends”, or a “family”, or that of a neighborhood or district.

For a project on the construction of border zones<sup>11</sup>, in which we interviewed refugees in Israel and North Africa, for example, we had not planned to remain in contact with the interviewees. Initially, we maintained contact via online media in certain cases only, because we cared about these interviewees, wanted to give them emotional support, or simply to keep in touch in case of unanticipated questions or problems. However, it became increasingly clear to us that the stations of their continued migration and their different experiences of national and other collective borders could be important for our analyses. Also, new questions kept emerging during our background research on the collective histories of the people we had interviewed. This then led to further online interviews, or an exchange of written messages, or follow-up interviews in the usual face-to-face format (see Rosenthal et al. 2017). We needed to broaden our ideas of the geographic or national

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10 This project: “Dynamic Figurations of Refugees, Migrants and Old Residents in Jordan since 1946” was also funded by the DFG (2017–2022). See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/555157.html>.

11 In this comparative DFG research project (2010–2015), led by myself, the German researchers Eva Bahl and Arne Worm focused their research on the Morocco-Spain border zone, and the Israeli colleagues, who were our cooperation partners, Efrat Ben-Ze’ev and Nir Gazit on the Israel-Egypt border zone. See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/477891.html>

context in which the interviewees lived, and do further research on the legal conditions under which they had lived, or were still living, in the different countries they had passed through.

The method of online interviews, which has become increasingly established in our research practice, was extremely useful during the Covid-19 pandemic for two research projects that were ongoing at the time, when it became impossible to carry out the planned field trips to Jordan and Brazil (cf. Bahl/Rosenthal 2021).<sup>12</sup> The experience that even biographical-narrative interviews with people with whom there had previously been no contact could be carried out online was also beneficial for doctoral dissertations currently in progress. For the thesis by Lucas Cé Sangalli (forthcoming), a comparison of Sudanese migrants living in Germany and Jordan, only a sample of online interviews with those living in Jordan was available. He also conducted online interviews with experts in Sudan. Victoria Taboada Gómez (2021), who is writing her PhD on the life histories of indigenous women in Paraguay and who was not able to carry out the second field trip planned for this purpose until much later, due to the Covid-19 restrictions, has the advantage of being able to examine the differences between online interviews and face-to-face interviews.

Such a comparison of face-to-face and online interviews, or a comparison of several interviews conducted by different interviewers with the same person, makes it possible to analyze more specifically the effect of different framings on biographical self-presentations, on the rejection or allowing of memories and narrative processes. Thus, I have been able to further empirically substantiate the theoretical conception of a processual dialectic between experiencing, remembering, and narrating presented in this volume (cf. chapter 3). According to this conception, memory processes are determined both by past experience and by the constantly changing present perspective, as well as by the concrete narrative situation. To illustrate this, Ahmed Albaba, Lucas Cé Sangalli, and myself (Rosenthal et. al. 2022) have used the example of a man who fled from Mauritania to France via Spain and was interviewed several times in very different settings by different interviewers between 2014 and 2021. We investigated how the framing of the interviews, and the collective history and biography presented with regard

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<sup>12</sup> The field work in Brazil which was planned for 2020 was part of the project "Biographies of Migrants from Syria and West Africa in Brazil and in Germany" and funded by the German Research Foundation (2019 – 2023). See: <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/586186.html>

to the experience of enslavement and, more generally, the continued existence of slavery in Mauritania, depended on the ethnic, religious, social, cultural and national affiliation of the interviewers. The presentations were also clearly determined by the respective contexts of the man's life, the milieus in which he moved, and the discourses that prevailed there, and thus differed considerably.

Up to the time of the first edition of the present book, my work had been based already for a long time on a combination of biographical case reconstruction and discourse analysis. However, since then I have devoted myself increasingly to reflection on, and consistent implementation of this combination of methods (cf. chapter 8 in this volume). Chapters 1–7 correspond to the text of the first edition, apart from updating some references. Regarding citations from literature in German, I have referred to English translations if available and if I deemed the translation as consistent with my reading of the German text. In other cases, the quotations are my translation from the German.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Lukas Hofmann, who has supported me with great dedication in producing this new edition. I am also very grateful to Ruth Schubert for her careful correction of the English text.

*Gabriele Rosenthal*

Berlin, September 2023



# Preliminary note

The willingness and openness of all my interviewees enabled me to gain insight into a wide variety of life worlds. My special thanks go to all of them.

The closeness and gratitude I feel towards my interviewees in Israel, who supported me as a non-Jewish German in my research, can hardly be expressed in words. Over the years, many of them have repeatedly motivated me to continue and publish my analyses through their sympathy for my work and their detailed feedback, especially after my lectures in Israel. My friend, Dr. Viola Torok, who herself survived the Auschwitz extermination camp, has supported me quite substantially in my less sentimental and more objectifying form of scientific presentation of the subject of “survivors of the Shoah”. I thank her above all for her trust.

Without Prof. Dan Bar-On Ph.D. from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev this part of the study would not have come about. Not only that he invited me to Israel and enabled me to have so many contacts there, but with his supervision of my interviews and with his empathy he has played an essential part in my scientific but also personal life journey. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him and all the members of the Department of Behavioral Sciences for their warm welcome.

The ease with which I was able to write this thesis, in which I freed myself from disciplinary constraints and got involved with Gestalt theorists, who for some seem slightly dusty, is primarily due to Prof. Dr. Fritz Schütze. His liberality and his confidence in my abilities were a very important support for me. Many thanks to him as well as to the other colleagues involved in the habilitation process.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Roswitha Breckner (Berlin), Christiane Grote (Essen), Dr. Lena Inowlocki (Rotterdam) and Yael Moore (Tel Aviv)

for their many suggestions. They have helped me again and again to overcome depths and to not let attacks against my work have a blocking effect.

Wolfram Fischer put me on the track of Aron Gurwitsch as early as 1985. At that time I would not have thought it possible how much reading this much too little respected phenomenologist could give me. I thank him above all for always encouraging me on days when I doubted my ideas.

*Gabriele Rosenthal*

Berlin, September 1994

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Problem

The boom in biographical research that began in the 1970s continues; in a wide variety of disciplines, narrated and written life stories are used as a data basis.<sup>1</sup> Sociologists and psychologists, for example, hope that biographical material (interviews, diaries, essays, letters) will give them insight into certain milieus and into the perspective of the actors; anthropologists approach foreign cultures with this method of data collection, and scholars of Oral History use biographical interviews as a further source for their analysis of historical epochs. The biographical method is also increasingly used in various fields of practice, such as social work or job interviews.

Is biographical research just a fashionable trend that will soon fizzle out, contributing little to social science research and hardly anything to theory building? In my estimation, biographical research in recent years has gone far beyond what could be called a fashionable trend. It is also becoming increasingly clear that, due to the changes of the modern world, biographies are becoming established as a means of social structuring and that biographical analyses are becoming more and more compelling. Especially in the Federal Republic of Germany, well-founded conceptions and programmatic outlines for the advancement of the theory of biographical research in sociology, developed by authors such as Peter Alheit, Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal, Martin Kohli and Fritz Schütze<sup>2</sup> – to name but a few – have been brought into

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1 Cf. the bibliographies in Ohly 1984; Ohly and Legnaro 1987; Heinritz 1988; and the survey by Alheit et al. 1990 made for the Biographical Research section of the German Sociological Association (DGS).

2 Cf. Alheit 1990a, 1990b; Fischer-Rosenthal 1989, 1990a, 1991b, 1995; Kohli 1983, 1985, 1988; Schütze 1981, 1983, 1984, 1992.

the discussion. Also, the methodologies and methods for reconstructing life histories that emerged from these conceptions have been continuously developed in recent years, and the narrative method presented by Fritz Schütze (1977; 1983) has become established in sociology beyond this circle<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, it has been convincingly shown to what extent the concept of “biography” is a way out of the dualistic impasse of subject and society (cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 1990b). The phase in which biographical sources were used only instrumentally as a source of information is gradually being replaced – especially in sociology – by a phase in which biography as a social construct or as a social reality of its own kind (Kohli 1983) is itself becoming the object of social science analysis<sup>4</sup>. The “study of the biographical as a social quantity” is concerned with both the question of the social function of biographies and the social processes of their constitution (Fischer-Rosenthal 1991b: 253). Fischer-Rosenthal further breaks down the socio-biographical guiding question: “What *meaning* and significance has biography acquired for members of society in the course of socializing and socio-historical developments? Which *functions* does it assume on the lifeworld level of social action, and which on the level of society as a whole? How are biographical *structures* generated, maintained, and liquefied?” (ibid.).

The conception of biography as a social entity that constitutes both social reality and the worlds of experience of the subjects, and that constantly affirms and transforms itself in the dialectical relationship between biographical experiences and patterns offered by society, offers a chance to come closer to answering one of the fundamental questions of sociology, the relationship between the individual and society. Through “biographical self-presentation”<sup>5</sup> we gain access not only to the biographical process of internalizing the social world in the course of socialization, but also to the integration of biographical experiences in the stock of knowledge, and thus to the constitution of patterns of experience that give present and future orientation in the social world.

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3 Cf. the studies by Heinemeier et al. 1981; Hermanns et al. 1984; Inowlocki 1990, 2000; Riemann 1987.

4 In addition to the authors already mentioned, see the anthologies by Brose/Hildenbrand 1988; Kohli/Robert 1984; Matthes, J. et al. 1981; and the compendium by Fuchs 1984.

5 Since life histories are not only presented through narratives, but also through descriptions of past or present lives, through argumentations about the past, present, and future, or with the help of self-testimonies from the past – such as photographs, letters, or documents – I use the term “biographical self-presentation” as being more accurate than “narrated life story”.

This integration, which constitutes the experiences as meaningful and generates the *biographical overall view* and the biographical designs of the subject connected with it, can by no means be understood as an accidental, individual achievement. Rather, it too is socially constituted. It takes place in the interaction with others and follows social guidelines, “recipes” for “how what is to be classified where” (Schütz/Luckmann 1979: 172 ff.). However, it is not identical with the intentions of the individual, nor with social prescriptions. Biographical research that analyzes only the patterns offered, and not their spelling out by the biographers in the biographical practice of action, as well as their linkage with the respective biographical experiences, remains with a conception of the subject as a passive projection surface of social processes.

The central concern of this study is how to analyze the constitution of the biographical overall view, which is relatively stable but changes in the course of a person's life as a result of experiences. In contrast to *biographical global evaluations*, which represent the biographer's consciously presented and intentionally directed assessment of his past and future life in the present, the biographical global view is a latently acting mechanism that controls both the retrospective view of the past and present actions and plans for the future. Global evaluations which are expressed in comments such as: “I have had a fulfilling life so far”, sometimes deviate considerably from the biographical overall view, which is constituted by the person's biographical experiences (cf. chapter 4.1.3).

The biographical overall view is not an intentional achievement of the individual, but the latent ordering structure of the organization of experience and action. Even if social researchers grant biographical self-testimonies the same status as other sources, or even place them at the center of their analyses, they usually strive nevertheless to use methodological testing procedures that are intended to help them distinguish between the true and the untrue – in the sense of what actually took place and what is invented. Such efforts are usually based on a dualistic conception of the experienced *life history* and narrated *life story*. This dualism is often preceded by that of event and experience. The experienced life history breaks down into what objectively took place and what is subjectively interpreted, what was experienced at the time and what has been subjectively falsified in the process of remembering. This means considering not only what was really experienced, but also the events themselves, which, freed of the subjective, receive sanctification as objectivity. What happened then is to be investigated here and now. Those who only search for what actually happened at that time, just like those who

only want to grasp what was experienced at that time, fail to recognize the constitutive part of the currently *narrated* life story. Life and text are seen as two things that can be separated from each other, where the function of the text is seen as providing information about what it refers to: about the reality outside the text. Here the text interferes, so to speak, with the search for objective reality. The dualistic conception of experienced life history and narrated life story mostly follows from the basic conceptual dualism between what is presented to the subject's perception, i.e., an object or an event, and its perception. Thus, the first "sources of error" are to be found in the experience itself. Furthermore, there can be corrections in the memory process, the autobiographer may not have "stored" some things, or may have forgotten them in the course of the years. The third "source of error" lies in the narrative situation, in which the autobiographer turns to what has been stored in his memory and – depending on his attitude towards this constant object – reproduces it in the narrative in a colored or falsified way. Both in the experience and in the narrative situation, according to this conception, the autobiographer is offered something constant, something endowed with a hard and unchangeable core, which is then seen and represented in a different, more or less adequate light, depending on the perspective.

If one understands the experienced life history as something constant, as something that has taken place and is fixed in memory, this means that it presents itself to the autobiographer in a particular way because that is the way it is. The Gestalt theorist Kurt Koffka (1935/1963: 75) describes this position as follows: "things look as they look because they are what they are". If one then notices again and again that the biographer does not perceive his life as it was, one must look for the reasons why his perception is wrong. Thus, it is not the perceived that is subject to modifications, that is constituted in the act of perception – it always remains the same – but the attention paid to it, its observation is modified, or lets it appear in a different light. The "distortion" or one-sided observation may be due to the specific situation during the production of the text – like the influence of the interviewer, the internal condition of the perceiver – like the need to see life in a rosy light, or by a deficient memory. Accordingly, this position assumes that the perception of the event when it occurred was affected by external influences: "things look as they do because the proximal stimuli are what they are" (Koffka 1963: 80). Applied to the consideration of biographical events, this means that they appear as they do because situational stimuli external to the organism shaped the way they were experienced at that time. They have already been stored in

“distorted” way because of these stimuli. What is decisive about this conception is that it assumes a constancy of what is to be perceived, of the objective events. To this constant objective, something subjective is then added, a) in the situation of the experience, and b) in retrospect, in each case by the act of perception and memory. If social researchers succeed in subtracting this unwanted added something, then they come to the events as they really were. The experienced events play the role of an objective stimulus, which would be experienced in the same way by all people. Although this is by no means in accordance with empirical experience, the assumption of constancy is not abandoned, but the differences between event and experience are explained by additional factors added to the stimulus.

Even among those social scientists who give an important place to the subjective, to the interpretations of the autobiographers, or who consider its analysis necessary for understanding social action, there is still a certain belief in the “objective world” independent of subjective experiences and interpretations. Early biographical research in the social sciences, which began during World War I with the study of migration by William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918–1920) at the University of Chicago, and then blossomed in the 1920s at the sociology department there through the initiative of Ernest W. Burgess and Robert E. Park<sup>6</sup>, was motivated by insight into the need for “getting inside the actor’s perspective”. The advantages of the biographical case study for capturing subjective perspectives of members of different milieus were recognized. However, even these so meritorious works contain traits of dualism between the subjective and the objective, although this is in contrast to the theoretical and methodological positions of the pragmatists or interactionist action theorists. These tendencies are not overcome even in later studies, but rather maintained or strengthened by understanding the perspective of the agent as subjective and internal, and observable behavior as objective and external<sup>7</sup>.

The distinction introduced by Thomas and Znaniecki between attitudes as individual dispositions of action, as a “process of individual consciousness”, on the one hand, and social values as “givens with an empirical content accessible to the members of a social group and with a meaning in

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<sup>6</sup> Chicago School works include, for example, Wirth’s study of the ghetto, Zorbaugh’s of slums, and Trasher’s of gangs. For a discussion of the Chicago School and Symbolic Interactionism, see Schütze 1987b.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Blumer (1973) in particular contributed to this reading of Symbolic Interactionism.

terms of which this givenness can be an object of action”, on the other (*ibid.* 1918–1920/1965: 75), which they discussed in their methodological preface to the “Polish Peasant”, can certainly be interpreted as, for example, Sigrid Paul (1987: 27) does, as an individual disposition to act, on the one hand, and objectively given social facts, on the other. If one considers the narrated life story as the individual sense-making of an objective course of events, one can deny its value as a reliable source for capturing the “factual course of life” and consider it, like Martin Osterland (1983), as a “retrospective illusion”<sup>8</sup> – a position that was also supported a few years later by Pierre Bourdieu (1986/1990) in complete ignorance of sociological biographical research.<sup>9</sup> Osterland draws from his view the consequence that the narrated life story can only serve to capture current patterns of interpretation. Is the narrated life story then only an “invention”, as formulated by Max Frisch (1968: 9): “Every man invents a story for himself, which he then holds, at enormous sacrifice, to be his life”. If we do not understand this invention as one that is based on what is experienced and is by no means arbitrary<sup>10</sup>, we only go to the other side of dualism with a position such as that advocated by Osterland. While some are in search of the “outer world” and thus let all inwardness of experience be absorbed in the outer behavior triggered by stimuli, others are on a one-sided search for inwardness. Those who intend to reconstruct patterns of interpretation without reconstructing their biographical genesis, and thus the biographical constellations of action, assume that it is possible to interpret interpretations of the past independently of the past. Thus, some search one-sidedly for the events to which the narrated life story refers, while others search one-sidedly for patterns of interpretation in the present of the narrators. In both, though from opposite poles, the interaction of past, present, and future is missed. It is not seen that the past is constituted by the present and the anticipated future, and the present is constituted by the past and the future. The extent to which the biographical past manifests itself in the present of the narrative has been elaborated in particular by Fritz Schütze (1981; 1984) in his empirical work. Schütze’s analyses show how narrative structures correspond to the structures of experience, and how

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8 Cf. the critique by Harry Hermanns (1985).

9 Bourdieu (1990: 80) insinuates that researchers working with biographies are “complicit” “in the construction of the perfect social artifact ... called ‘life history’” and ignores the achievement of biographical research in reconstructing the social processes of construction. For a rejection of Bourdieu’s critique, see Lutz Niethammer 1990.

10 Cf. Henningsen (1971: 75), who discusses the “pre-formedness” of stories.

the accumulated layers of experience correspond to the way the narrative is structured, which by no means implies homology of the narrated and the experienced.

Rejection of these dualistic positions, however, does not mean that we can claim to have found a better way. How can we find our way out of dualism at all – for are we not always faced with the dual? According to Waldenfels (1980), certainly not by thinking that inside and outside, objective and subjective simply coincide. Nor is it enough to insist on a dialectical conception, and to hide behind this or other conceptualizations that may evoke respect but not understanding. What does a mutual interpenetration of what happened, what was experienced and what was narrated mean? What does the narrated life story tell us? Which methodological procedures can help us to understand and explain this social phenomenon? Building on a phenomenological interpretation of Gestalt theory, as done by Aron Gurwitsch (1929; 1964/2010), and the consequent rejection of the assumption of constancy, I would like to pursue these questions here, based on my empirical analyses of narrated life stories. About 110 biographical narrative interviews conducted in different research contexts by myself or by students taking part in the teaching projects I have led serve as the empirical basis. For the “Hitler Youth Project” (Rosenthal 1986; 1987) at the Free University of Berlin, members of the Hitler Youth were asked to tell their life histories, focusing on the Nazi and post-war periods. For the project “Living with the Nazi Past” (Rosenthal 1990) at the University of Bielefeld, we interviewed members of three generations (born 1899–1929) with the same focus. For the project “Biography” (Rosenthal 1989) at the University of Bielefeld, as in all following projects, we asked relatives of different ages, occupational groups and milieus to tell their entire life history. In the state of Hesse (West Germany) I spoke with veterans of the First World War, born between 1888 and 1900 (Rosenthal 1991/2019). As a visiting lecturer in Israel, I interviewed European Jews whose lives were affected by National Socialism, i.e., both those who fled Europe and survivors of the Shoah (Rosenthal 1995a). In addition, I had at my disposal interviews carried out by the graduate students I supervised and from a project led by Dan Bar-On in Beer Sheva, Israel, in which I was a methodological adviser. The life stories of survivors of the Shoah stand in this study next to biographies of people with completely different backgrounds, along with autobiographies of fellow travellers and perpetrators of National Socialism. For me as a non-Jewish interviewer, and for me as interpreter of these life stories, this entails very different experiences, feelings, and also political and moral

responsibilities. In the presentation of my analyses, on the other hand, I address the common constitutive mechanisms of the biographical constructions. Can this be seen as a “violation of the First Commandment of Holocaust scholarship – “Thou shalt not compare”, as sarcastically formulated by Henryk M. Broder (1993: 8)? Without comparisons, the extreme experiences of survivors would sink into the realm of the unmentionable and the unspoken. Even if, contrary to my intention, we tended to develop special conceptions of biography for severely traumatized people, this would not be possible without reference to other biographies. Nevertheless, in order to prevent misunderstandings, I would like to emphasize at this point: comparing does not mean equating. Rather, comparing means reconstructing the structural differences and similarities. If, on the other hand, we persist in discrepancy and in viewing Auschwitz as another planet whose survivors no longer belong to this world, we contribute to the further isolation of the victims. By assuming an insurmountable discrepancy between us and the survivors of the Shoah, we prevent any empathic interpersonal encounter. Ruth Klüger (1992: 109 f.) writes as a survivor of Auschwitz about the silence imposed on her by Germans: “You may and can speak about your war experiences, dear friends, but I cannot speak about mine. My childhood falls into the black hole of this discrepancy. ... And I remain silent and am only allowed to listen and not to speak. We were people of the same generation, well-meaning and able to speak the language, but the old war has blown up the bridges between us, and we are squatting on the pillars jutting into our new houses. But if there is no bridge at all from my memories to yours, why am I writing this at all?” (1992: 109 f., translated from the German). As already mentioned, in this study I will turn to the question of the interrelation between experienced life history and narrated life story in a phenomenological interpretation of Gestalt theory. I will concentrate on this theoretical approach and draw on discussions from other theoretical traditions only for additional explanation and substantiation. On the one hand, this limitation is due to a desire to make Gestalt theory fruitful for biographical theory building and research. On the other hand, I consider the newer discussions that have taken place since the 1980s, for instance in the fields of narrative psychology<sup>11</sup> or psychoanalysis<sup>12</sup> about the

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11 Cf. Bruner (1987), McAdams/Ochberg (1983), Rosenwald/Ochberg (1992), Ochberg (1994).

12 Here, the discussion was triggered primarily by the work of Donald Spence (1982) and Roy Schafer (1983). For a critical discussion of Spence and Schafer, see Kerz-Rühling (1984) and Leary/Arbor (1989).

relationship between life and text, to be new editions and rediscoveries of a longstanding and, in my opinion, theoretically more sophisticated sociological discourse. Furthermore, using Gestalt theory to consider the question of the relationship between life and text offers us more insights into the dialectical relationship between the presentation of a life (noema) and the meaning given to this life (noesis). By contrast, Donald Spence (1982), who rejects the archaeological reading of psychoanalysis which assumes that “historical truths” or past realities can be excavated, comes down squarely on the side of “narrative truth”. By arguing that “historical truth” is unknowable to the analyst because he lacks the tools to do so, Spence moves to the other side of dualism with his constructivist approach, which lacks a methodology. As important as his study may be for psychoanalytic practice and critical discourse within the psychoanalytic community, theoretically it is far from a dialectical conception of life history and life story, as also called for by the philosopher Widdershoven (1993), among others, who draws on the analyses of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. The experienced life history can neither be understood as presenting itself as a constant, unchanging object which is remembered and presented differently by the autobiographer depending on perspective and mood, nor as an object that can be constructed arbitrarily each time it is considered. Rather, I argue that the narrated life story is mutually constituted by what is presented to the consciousness in the situation of experience (perception noema) and the act of perceiving (noesis), by experiences that are presented by memory and sedimented in Gestalt-like form (memory noemata) and the act of considering the experience in the present of the narration. Experienced life history and narrated life story are bound up in a mutually constituting relationship.

I will discuss this basic assumption in chapters 2–4 on the different levels of experiencing, remembering and telling. The discussion is based on the following additional assumptions:

On the level of *events and experiences* (cf. chapter 2):

1. Events are not perceptible as they are, but only in the how of their presentation.
2. Not only does the act of perception produce the organization of what is presented, but also what is presented to perception gives structuredness.
3. Event and experience are mutually constituted.

On the level of *memories and narration* (cf. chapter 3):