

Biographical-narrative interviews

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Just like matters related to our way of life, a glimpse at our lives as a whole is closely connected to spaces. It is not possible to live, plan, or recount our lives without answering the question of “where?” Despite the fact that space is omnipresent across biographies, studies that focus on space analytically and theoretically are still rare, although space (generally as urban space) and spatial references (e.g., as a source of identity for Polish immigrants) certainly played a key role in the early days of biographical research: namely, in studies by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958 [orig. 1918–1920]) and later within the *Chicago School of Urban Sociology*.

However, as it was the case in a large share of the social sciences, space disappeared again from the biographical research agenda. On the one hand, this was related to the prevailing concept of seeing space solely as a container for the social without giving it explanatory power (see Löw 2001). On the other hand, especially in Germany, one can assume that the spatial rhetoric during the period of National Socialism made it difficult to address this issue explicitly.

Space reappeared as a prominent item on the agenda of the social sciences thanks to the reflections of Henri Lefebvre (1991 [orig. 1974]) and later on in the wake of the “*spatial turn*” (Bachmann-Medick 2006). It was only quite recently (Becker 2017; Weidenhaus 2015) that approaches emerged again in the field of biographical research that use space and its reconstruction as a central research topic and introduce space as a dimension of biographical research, and quite successfully at that as we will demonstrate below.

Within sociology, biographical research constitutes a research perspective that allows many different topics to be addressed using various methodological techniques. Within this research school, biographical-narrative interviews are a basic form of data collection, which also imply certain methods of data analysis. The methodological concepts of the sociology of space and biographical research are outlined below with a focus on biographical-narrative interviews, followed by two possible approaches to combining biographical-narrative interviews with spatial analyses.

1 The basics: Narrative interviews, biographical research, and spatial conception

In this section, we present the key concepts of the sociology of space and biographical research with a focus on the biographical-narrative approach in order to prepare the considerations on reconstructing space by means of this method.

1.1 Spatial theory

When investigating space itself in social sciences, it is first necessary to unfold the concept of space in this context. If space is not to be regarded simply like an independent variable within biographical research (as some earthly section in which biographies play out), then we need a conception that understands space itself as a social construct. This is decisive because space can certainly be conceptualized differently in the context of physical research.

The notion of *space* has three different connotations in everyday life and in science. It either defines the distance between several points in the outside world (e.g., the table is one meter wide), addresses social spatial constructs such as nations, or it is related to prelinguistic, subjective perceptions of distance (e.g., a fear of heights). These definitions can be used to differentiate between the terms physical and social space and between an immediate perception of distance and an inner psychological space.

Physical space is understood as the product of an outside universe. A wide array of measures serve to define distances in this space, whose incredibly complex characteristics are described in physics. Based on their reference to the outside world, the acceptance or rejection of such assertions depend on these definitions as well. The sentence “This apartment is 95 sqm big” is not refuted by the sentence “It seems smaller to me though.”

Social constructions of space are fundamentally different. Their origin can be understood, in reference to Martina Löw’s “The Sociology of Space” (2001), as the comparison of different elements (*synthesis*) and as the positioning of those elements (*spacing*). The constitution of a large number of social spaces—such as living rooms, homes, or nations—is institutionalized, directly linked to meaning, and historically mutable. It is not possible to reduce social definitions of space to physical definitions of space. For example, a place is not necessarily part of my home, even if it is located in my home town.

Ultimately, the immediate and subjective perception of distance is studied primarily in the field of perceptual psychology. This field also includes spatial definitions such as the sensation of a frighteningly great height when stepping onto a three-meter diving board at the swimming pool for the first time. As a rule, people overestimate vertical distances in comparison to horizontal distances (Künnapas 1955). Our consciousness generates immediate impressions of distances and the position of our own body, which cannot be reduced to metric measurements.

Objectified definitions of distance impact social spaces: We move away from home (social definition of space) because our new job is located 300 kilometers away (physical definition of space). Therefore, the fact that spatial definitions with different references

to the world¹ are mutually irreducible in no way means that they cannot influence one another. However, it is important to note that such influences are anything but clear since they depend on the social contexts: A passionate driver does not have to relocate at all if they have a fast car and the infrastructure is developed enough. Exploring when and which physical definitions of space can be empirically translated into socio-spatial constructs merits a separate research project in and of itself, which would have to take into account the differentiation between the references to the world and thus the different spatial terms at the conceptual level.

Within the context of spatial research using biographical-narrative interviews, the concept of social space is obviously helpful since it is required to determine which socio-spatial constructs are relevant for biographical processes and which spaces are produced through people's actions (e.g., setting up a home and thus creating it in the first place).² Several basic considerations of a relational concept of socio-spatial construction are described briefly below, based on the work of Martina Löw and Edward Casey:

According to this notion, spaces can be understood as relational arrangements of objects and people in places (Löw 2001: 159 et seq.). As such, a space is not a passive container filled with something, but rather it is produced by the goods and living beings that belong to the space and by the spatial relationships in which these elements are arranged. What matters is what subjects perceive as spatially constitutive and which meaningful relationships are established between these elements.

The constitution of social spaces is a phenomenon that must be comprehended as a structure formed by human action on the one hand and as human action formed by structure on the other. This means spaces form a structure that exists objectively in the outside world, and we adapt our actions to these given spaces. In general, acts of spatial constitution are carried out in the practical consciousness (Löw 2001: 161). The fact that they are usually not available in consciously articulable form primarily means one thing for the social sciences: namely that scientists frequently rely on interpretative reconstruction work in order to reveal spatial constructs for the research process.

There is a conceptual difference between the terms *space* and *place*. Places are points at which the living beings and goods relevant for a spatial construct are located, while a space represents the complex formation produced from these goods and living beings at locations, as well as their relational references (see Löw 2001: 198 et seqq.). Hence, it is possible to imagine multiple spaces at one location because a positioned social good or living being can be part of multiple spatial constructs. For example, the gas station as a place can become a key location for youth culture, or it can be regarded as part of a product chain or as a functionally specific place in a road network.

From a phenomenological point of view, constructs of place also feature several special characteristics, which can be useful for connecting the sociology of space to biographical research. Edward Casey (1996) argues that people gather experiences concretely, meaning physically at places. From this perspective, places hold space and time

1 For a differentiation between communicative references to the world, see Habermas (1981).

2 A physical spatial reference would ask only where someone was in the course of their life and when without making the space an object of interest. Thus, it is only possible to study *in* the space instead of studying the space itself.

together and have a symbolic meaning. At the same time, places are produced by subjects referencing them with the help of locations. Therefore, the reconstruction of such localization processes represents (as demonstrated by Johannes Becker; see Section 3.1) a possible connection between biographical research and the sociology of space.

These explanations are intended to illustrate that we are dealing with an almost infinite number of social spaces in the social world. In this sense, “space” exists solely as a formally analytical term, but not in the form of an empirical entity that encompasses everything. The spatial concept presented here is thought of relationally with regard to the constitution of spaces. Such a formal-analytical concept can help reconstruct spatial constitutions relevant to subjects, thus making it easier to understand their actions. This is especially relevant because it can be assumed that different people and groups constitute different spaces.

1.2 Basis for biographical research and biographical-narrative interviews

Biographical research is a long-standing discipline, not only within the social sciences but also in many other academic fields, such as psychology, education sciences, and literary studies. Within sociology, this research method was first used in the US as part of the *Chicago School*, after which it was quickly brought to Europe through diverse research contacts, where it was refined considerably (Kohli 2013; Aitzsch/Inowlocki 2000). In terms of its exact methodological design and purpose, biographical research has remained quite diverse. Biographical analyses are carried out within ethnographies and other qualitative research methods. Various data formats can be used, and the analysis often focuses on subjective experiences. Biographies can also serve as starting points for quantitative studies that explore patterns and structures in the life histories of large groups. Over the last several decades, an intense debate has taken place regarding the methodological design of biographical research in the social sciences, which led to its establishment as a method (see Bentlin/Klepp in this handbook).

Below we focus on a specific type of data collection, the biographical-narrative interview, and the associated approach of data analysis. Biographical-narrative interviews, which take the narrative flow of the biography as the starting point of the analysis, have been used in Germany for a long time and were expanded on methodologically by Fritz Schütze (Schütze 1977, 1981). The interview process often has three steps: First, a generative starting question aimed at the personal experiences of the interviewee to stimulate a narrative, which should not be interrupted. Then, follow-up questions can be asked in reference to what was said in order to prompt new narratives. Finally, what are called ex-manent follow-up questions can be asked with regard to aspects that were not addressed in the interview but that are pivotal for the research question (Rosenthal 1995; Küsters 2006). The data can be analyzed using various techniques. One of the most common is Fritz Schütze's narrative analysis (1983), which first involves performing a textual analysis of the individual cases and then consolidating all of the cases to create a theoretically founded concept. In addition to this analytical technique, which is primarily aimed at the subjective, methods have been developed that aspire to link objective structures with subjective meanings (Fischer 1978; Fischer-Rosenthal/Rosenthal 1997). Rosenthal, for example, connects the textual analysis of the narrated, subjective self-representation (*narrated*

life) to the reconstruction of the life history (*experienced life*) in order to carry out a typification (Rosenthal 1995). Furthermore, biographical-narrative interviews can be analyzed by means of grounded theory (Dausien 1996) documentary methods (Franz/Griese 2010), sequential analyses (Soeffner/Hitzler 1994), or objective hermeneutics (Silkenbeumer/Wernert 2010).

Against this backdrop, we will now present two possibilities for combining biographical research in the social sciences with the sociology of space in the context of concrete research projects and based on biographical-narrative interviews. Both approaches endeavor to make spatial constitutions the explicit object and not to simply understand institutionalized spaces as distinct but pre-existing social contexts. Such a perspective can certainly be worthwhile, for example, if it can be used to focus on the invalidation of educational qualifications when crossing the border in the case of refugee biographies. However, this generally does not imply a spatial-sociological perspective since the social processes of constituting spaces are not addressed.

2 Spatial analyses

Spaces are a central figure in biographical narratives. Biographies occur in places, and biographers localize themselves constantly in those places. Ultimately, space was the key focus at the onset of biographical research in the context of the *Chicago School*, where the city represented the thematic core and focus was placed on the study of the local and the associated lines of conflict and upheavals (Fuchs-Heinritz 2005). Two more recent studies also explicitly concentrate on the spatial in biographical-narrative analyses (Becker 2017; Weidenhaus 2015). We present both studies below in order to illustrate how the biographical-narrative method is used in spatial analyses.

Johannes Becker (2017) reconstructs biographical locations, thus performing an analysis of special spaces (in this case, the Old City of Jerusalem) and their socio-historical meanings. Gunter Weidenhaus (2015) reconstructs biographically relevant spatial constitutions, that is to say "*lebensraum*,"³ thus obtaining a typology of the spatial "existing in the world" in modern German society. Thus, the *localization of biographies* (Becker) and *reconstruction of lebensraum* (Weidenhaus) represent two proven methods that combine biographical-narrative interviews and the sociology of space systematically with a well-reflected methodology.

2.1 Biographical locations

Johannes Becker (2017) explores locations, especially at the level of experienced life histories. The biographical-narrative interview forms the empirical basis for the analysis of

3 The term *lebensraum* is problematic due to its use and instrumentalization during the period of National Socialism. We reject any naturalized conception of *lebensraum* as used in the Nazi worldview. In this context, the term refers to spaces that are relevant to an individual from a biographical perspective. The study can demonstrate that it is not possible to assume that these spaces have a certain natural structure, but rather *lebensraum* can only be understood appropriately as a cultural product.

such socially/processually conceived locations since it allows them to be assessed effectively. Becker uses specific biographical locations within the Old City of Jerusalem as an example for the significance of social spaces in the life history of its residents. In this case, he distinguishes between places and locations in order to reconstruct the localization process methodically from the biographical stories, which can both occur in places and co-construct places. This socio-constructivist analysis conceives individuals as powerful actors within socio-spatial structures on the one hand and as subjects localized by discourses and politics on the other. From this perspective, locations are understood as potentially changing and thus must be differentiated from the static concept of place.

In accordance with Edward Casey, places are understood as complex, multifaceted, and mutable structures that, in addition to the purpose dictated by their materiality, are constructed by the interpretations and actions of the actors (Becker 2019: 8–10). These actors are incorporated into a figuration and thus into specific power constellations that allow for and restrict actions. Therefore, places are negotiated under the auspices of power and conflict, which also means that different discursive uses of places are available as a result and thus can be found in parallel (ibid.: 11–20).

How the actors perceive spaces changes as a matter of course, especially as a result of alterations in the material world itself but also due to the constantly changing perceptions of the actors. This is particularly important for reconstructing places and locations based on biographical-narrative interviews as this aspect must be reflected in the analysis. To understand how people describe spaces, it is necessary to take into consideration both past experiences and current discursive spatial constructs.

The study by Becker combines participant observation with biographical-narrative interviews. A two-step procedure is used to combine results from ethnography and biographical research, leading to a focus on specific, empirically derived, heuristic research spaces, which can then be explored further to achieve theoretical saturation. The first, relatively open collection phase is followed by a second focused phase, where the new findings are transformed into a second *spatial sample*, which in turn is analyzed by means of ethnography and narrative-biographical interviews. The first phase starts with a relatively open research question and broad-based data collection. In the second phase, this culminates in focused research spaces, in which biographies and their socio-spatial locations are explored further. This made it possible to demonstrate that locations change in the course of life and that people localize themselves at different places within the same research space. Thanks to biographical research, it is then possible to draw conclusions about the individual biographical self-presentation with regard to places. Thus, it is possible to create typologies of “localization places” on the one hand and of “localization processes” on the other. Types of localization places provide information about the location itself and its creation, while localization processes say something about the stability of locations and produce results, for example, with regard to an experienced expansion or contraction.

2.2 Constructing *lebensraum*

Based on biographical-narrative interviews, Gunter Weidenhaus (2015) reconstructs various spatial modes of “existing in the world.” The guiding categories with regard to con-

structing spaces are (a) the levels at which biographically relevant spaces exist, (b) the relationship of these spaces within a biographical narrative, (c) the constituting practices of the individual spaces.

In terms of the methodology, it is first important to note that an immense range of spaces are mentioned in a biographical narrative. We can virtually never tell a story without addressing the “where” of our experiences. However, not all of these spaces are biographically relevant, which means that not every space mentioned in an interview has to be reconstructed.

When reconstructing individual spaces, two questions are particularly expedient: first the question of which goods and living beings are included in the spatial constitution (*synthesis*), and then the question of what concrete biographical meaning this space has specifically. Is, for example, a certain city important for the biography because a long-standing group of friends lives there or because potential employers are located there? The answers to these questions reveal information about the appropriation (or to be more precise, about the *assimilation strategy*) of these spaces. Based on the reconstruction of the synthesis work or the assimilation strategy, it is now possible to determine the biographical significance.

If all biographically relevant spaces of a certain case are regarded at once, this results in the *lebensraum*: a unique pattern of spaces that can exist at the same or at different levels. In the case of spatial constructs at the same level, it is necessary to ask whether the functions of these spaces are similar or different for the biography. If they are similar (e.g., Hamburg and Berlin as potential places for personal artistic projects), it can be assumed that these places are compared and hierarchized by the narrators themselves. In the case of different functions (e.g., Hamburg as home and Berlin as a springboard for the career), the spatial constructs tend to be complementary. If the spaces exist at different levels, it can be assumed that biographically relevant spaces form such a complementary structure (since home and nation will have different meanings in the biography even if both constitutions are highly relevant).

This method is appropriate for the construction of ideal types, which Weidenhaus (2015, 2023) did as an example for modern German society in an exploratory research project to generate hypotheses (for empirical examples from Kenia see Weidenhaus/Mock 2022; Weidenhaus/Korte 2022). He developed three ideal types of *lebensraum* constitutions that differ from one another fundamentally. The classic-modern mode can be regarded as a *concentric lebensraum* constitution. Positioned around the home as the center of life, further spaces are made biographically relevant, such as the neighborhood, the city, the home region, and the nation. In the case of concentric types, all of these spaces exist at different levels and therefore have different meanings for an individual's life. A relocation always necessitates establishing a new home and is therefore deliberated at great length. This indicates a correlation that is easy to prove empirically: People with a concentric *lebensraum* constitution consistently constitute the historicity of their lives linearly, meaning they plan their future. Therefore, we can call this a concentric-linear space-time type.

The second form of biographical spatial construction can be referred to as *network-like*. The most striking characteristic is that a home is not mentioned in these cases. The place where the individual's bed is located remains largely irrelevant from a biographi-

cal standpoint. Relevant living spaces can be found exclusively at the level of cities and neighborhoods, which are assimilated primarily based on their atmospheres and the associated scenes represented there. These urban spaces are constituted by means of unspecified options that are offered there. In these cases, it is possible to observe a heightened relevance of post-traditional forms of community building in scenes (Hitzler et al. 2001). Over time, a network of interconnected, relevant living spaces is created at the level of cities and neighborhoods, which are compared with one another and hierarchized (does London or Berlin offer better options?). The network-like spatial structure of this rather post-modern type correlates to an episodic temporal structure that leaves the past, present, and future of an individual's life largely unconnected and allows for a biographical change of course depending on the options available.

A third form of *lebensraum* constitution can be referred to as *insular*. It is more common among people with a lower socio-economic status and is frequently observed in connection with long-term unemployment or precarious employment. In these cases, the *lebensraum* generally consists of only the individual's home, which is separated by clear border constructs from what is perceived as a hostile outside world. This type of *lebensraum* constitution is always related to a type of biography that essentially postulates an eternal present, which is why this can be called an insular, eternally present biographical space-time.

3 Conclusion: Complementary approaches

We have demonstrated how space can be explored as a key category of the social using biographical-narrative interviews. Biographical-narrative methods offer possibilities for analyzing spaces, but also has limits. This applies with regard to the focus of the analysis as not every space can be studied by means of biographical-narrative interviews. The studies selected as examples illustrated how space can be analyzed based on biographical-narrative interviews. The biographical reconstruction serves as the key point underlying the spatial analysis and to which the selected spatial concepts are connected. Weidenhaus (2015) used this biographical approach to determine how people exist spatially in the world, which spaces are relevant within an individual's life, and how those spaces are constituted. However, biographical-narrative interviews can also be used to analyze biographical localization processes and thus to identify different references to places. As Becker demonstrated, they can be used—in connection with ethnographic method—for spatial analyses and for emphasizing the subjective reference to spaces.

In contrast to the method proposed by Gunter Weidenhaus, the approach developed by Johannes Becker (2017) allows for a methodical preselection of research spaces (in this case, the Old City of Jerusalem) in which one can search empirically for locations and then determine their biographical significance for different cases. In doing so, it is possible to make assertions about the various typical meanings these locations have for specific groups of the population in order to better understand space in terms of its social relevance and, for example, to estimate the potential for conflict resulting from certain urban transformations (e.g., tearing down a symbolically relevant building).

By contrast, Weidenhaus inquires into the manner in which people position themselves in the world spatially in the context of their subjectivity. The biographical spatial constructs are interpreted as answers to the challenges of life and have the potential to diagnose the present by applying a historical perspective. If the classic concentric-linear lifestyle model of the modern remains hegemonic with its normative implications—such as long-term, rational life planning and centering (family) life around a home—it can be assumed that the subjects are put under pressure internally. Network-like, episodic models are rewarded with a more flexible working world, while a retreat to an insular, eternally present lifestyle is suggested as a result of exclusion.

Both approaches appear suitable for effectively combining spatial and biographical research and for producing relevant findings depending on the topic of interest. Moreover, the questions of experienced locations according to Becker and ways of constituting *lebensraum* according to Weidenhaus can be seen as complementary and can certainly be addressed in unison.

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