

## SOSTRIS Working Paper 6 - Methodological Annexe A

### Contextualising subjectivity in the exploration and presentation of cases in biographic narrative research

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#### Overview

Over the last three issues of *Biography and Society*, the house-journal of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 38, there has been a 'vigorous' three-way debate between Thierry Kochuyt, and Daniel Bertaux, and Gabriele Rosenthal and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal about 'realism' and 'subjectivism' in biographical research, with 'Some Reflections' by Kathy Davis in the 1997 issue. The debate has been over the analysis of individual narrative interviews and their sociological value, or lack of it.

One accusation by Daniel Bertaux has been that some researchers have a 'more and more idealist' approach, focusing on

“‘ the subjective meaning contained in a particular life story’ and thereby such researchers are ‘distracted from collective phenomena and processes specific to social milieux or categories’, ‘affirm[ing]that... symbolic phenomena... constitute the only ‘reality’ one can talk about’”

This has been taken as referring to a 'German school', and some implicated culprits defended themselves vigorously in the last issue of *Biography and Society*.

Previously, in Sostris Working Paper no.3 (1998: 120-127), I discussed certain questions around the comparative study of cases. In this paper, I discuss other questions, starting with those raised by Bertaux's critique of a possible way of working which might be thought to apply to Sostris.

#### Introduction: some issues of comparative case-study research

We can summarise briefly the BIM procedure of generating and then analysing narrative interviews. Developed by Schutze, Rosenthal, Fischer-Rosenthal and others over the last 20 years (Rosenthal, 1998: 2-7 and refs; Breckner 1988), BIM, a phenomenological and grounded-theory set of principles and procedures, involves the production of data by way of a narrative interview and the interpretation of that data by deriving two analyses from it:

- an analysis of the biographical data (life-events) contained within it, on the one hand, and, on the other,
- an analysis of the way the life-story is told from the present perspective of the stories-teller (the interviewee).

These two separate analyses are then brought together into a meaningful whole.<sup>2</sup> Reports in this and other Sostris Working Papers are based on this procedure.

Four issues are raised:

- Are BIM reports oriented to exploring subjectivity subjective in presentation and in analysis? I argue that they are not.
- Is studying individual cases ('single specimens') a worthwhile enterprise or does it lack any sociological value. I argue that more cases are better but that even a single case analysed well can be of great value.
- How does part-whole analysis and contextualisation increase the chances for greater objectivity in the analysis of subjectivity?.
- What textual strategy of presentation of the results of narrative interviews should be chosen: narrative, non-narrative, or some combination of both? I argue for a combination.

## **1. Does the biographic-interpretive method of analysing narrative interviews lead to subjectivity-dominated case-reports?**

We will not expand Bertaux's 1996 critique already cited. There is one passage there where he comes very close to the approach of BIM, but draws a conclusion which is revealing different.

“Eight of the older bakery workers we interviewed in 1969/70 were re-interviewed by Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame several years later about their apprenticeships who discovered that they had not changed their accounts. Having remained workers throughout their lives, they retained their resentment against the physical and verbal violence they suffered from their masters. Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame also interviewed seven older bakers who had passed their apprenticeship in the same period and had become bakery workers. Unlike the first group, though, they later succeeded in establishing their own bakeries. They talked about their apprenticeship in altogether different terms, describing which tasks they had learned in which order. There was no spontaneous mention of either abusive language or beatings. When questioned on this subject, however, they acknowledged having undergone such violence, laughing about how ‘there is no other way to learn’.

The key to these systematic differences obviously lies in the different life courses of these two groups. A tough apprenticeship takes on a different sense retrospectively if one has been able to establish oneself independently ten or fifteen years later, especially when told from a position in which one has, in turn, mistreated apprenticeships and reproduced one's own suffering. Thus the long past is seen through the eyes of the masters they have become.

This example shows that it is not the life story as a whole which is a reconstruction, but rather *that which is reconstructed* is (in part) *its sense, the meaning of a certain life period, its colour, if you like....*(Bertaux,1997: 4, italics added)”

As it stands, this would be an exemplary short BIM-statement of the way in which people differently placed by success or failure in a particular path of upward mobility give a different meaning to one or more of their specific life periods. So wherein lies the difference from BIM?

Immediately after the words quoted above, Bertaux goes on:

“ But at the heart of these reconstructions one can—if one looks—find a hard kernel of truth”

By this I take it Bertaux implies that the differences in the subject’s attributed ‘meaning of a certain life period’ does not provide a useful truth, but non-truth, only ideological epiphenomena. ‘Subjective meaning (of a certain life-period) ’ distracts from *collective phenomena and processes specific to social milieux or categories*’, using Bertaux’s phrases quoted earlier. The text-structure and text-content of the told story adds nothing to our understanding of reality, and just ‘distracts’....

If this were Bertaux’s full position, those holding such a position would certainly find no way of using any discussion of the ‘told story’<sup>3</sup>.

However, Bertaux’s own account reveals a contradiction. He has just shown that *the self-justifying omission of recollections of violence by the successful bakers is itself a collective phenomenon and process specific to a particular social category*. His account of the two categories of bakers has just shown how the different self-presentations in their told story can be shown to arise genetically from the different “historically situated matrices of social relations in which life courses and practices have been embedded (Bertaux)” for those two groups.

His *conclusion* (previously cited) is that there is ‘a hard kernel of truth’ outside which the reconstructions flourish but should be disregarded by those searching for the kernel. I argue that *his account is the best argument against the conclusion that the ‘reconstructions’ should be ignored*.

That he is not quite happy with his own argument is perhaps also indicated by what follows. The materialist argument one might expect to follow from the “kernel of truth” metaphor does not in fact follow, at least not in the uncompromising form one might expect. Bertaux’s concept of the kernel is, luckily, surprisingly open:

“ But at the heart of these reconstructions one can—if one looks—find a hard kernel of truth. Places and dates of events, situations defined by outside constraints, *moral commitments*, relations of production, *norms of action*, and *practices* ( the abuse in the example cited above) all constitute *the factual profile of an existence*..(italics added)”

It seems to me that Bertaux’s ‘factual profile of an existence’ is very close to BIM’s notion of a ‘biographical data chronology’ of the lived life.

The scope given by Bertaux to the concept of the facts that can be components of such a ‘factual profile’ is surprisingly large.

- For BIM, *norms of action and moral commitments* would be possible emergent phenomenon arising from an analysis of the *told story*. They could not be decisively derived from the description of the *lived life*.
- However, both Bertaux and those following BIM would agree that Bertaux's analysis of the way the bakers told their stories, and the explanation he gives as to how the stories were told differently depending on the current perspective of the erstwhile baker's apprentices, gives good insight into the reality of experienced lives.

I conclude, therefore, that the expected gap between the practice of Bertaux and the practice of those following the Berlin school of BIM may not be as great as may at first appear.

Bertaux warns us of a post-modern vortex of a 'world of pure signs', where one 'cannot even use the concept of *reference* (to extra-linguistic realities)', and where 'these symbolic phenomena.... constitute the only 'reality' one can know and talk about' (Bertaux, 1996). Those who argue, for example in the pages of *Qualitative Inquiry* for an extreme 'constructionist' position very often bear out this denial of the need to ever concern oneself with any criterion of truth, or 'adequacy to the real'.

However, at least in the case of the BIM-practitioners of Sostris, there is no danger of becoming lost in a world where symbols are the only reality about which statements can be made. Given the Sostris emphasis on *distinguishing the lived life with its objective life events*—defined much more restrictively than Bertaux's 'factual profile of an existence'—from *the told story in which many of these objective life-events are embedded and from which many of them may also be absent*, it would be surprising if this were not the case.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Understanding single-cases, understanding many cases

### *Is studying a single specimen any use?*

We have discussed so far how any (individual or collective) story should be researched and whether Bertaux is as distant from BIM-practice as he experiences himself as being. There is a further question, which always vexes qualitative researchers without a random sample: how many cases?

Bertaux (1996) argued that

“the condition for a sociological use of life stories is the collection of multiple life stories from the same social category or milieu; *an isolated life story may be the delight of psychologists, narrativists, or sociolinguists, but it has no sociological value whatsoever* (italics added)”

This was a very strong statement, and I doubt whether it is sustainable in its strong form. However, it reflects an important potential critique of working with stories *in a wrong way*.

A similar position has also been put by Ivor Goodson (1995). In 'The story so far: personal knowledge and the political', Goodson has an interesting argument about the dangers of the one-sided systematic promotion of 'new voices and life stories'. In a way with which Bertaux might well sympathise, Goodson argues that the post-modern world has seen a tendency to divorce stories from their social contexts and the social practices in which they are produced:

The opportunity-cost of story-telling is that personal minutiae and anecdotes replace cultural analysis... Alongside these emerging new voices, a systematic attack on median or secondary associations is underway on schools, universities, libraries, welfare agencies and the like. Economic restructuring is being closely allied to cultural redefinition. *There is emerging a clear reduction of contextual and theoretical discourse, coupled with an overall sponsorship of personal and practical forms of discourse and cultural production*<sup>5</sup>. The overall effect will be substantially to redraw existing modes of political and cultural analysis. We may end up with what Harvey (1989) calls the *tyranny of the local* alongside what we might call the *specificity of the personal*. General patterns, social contexts, and critical theories will be replaced by local stories and personal anecdotes..... The cultural buffer of theory, critique and political commentary will...wither..... In the 'end of history', we shall indeed see the closure of cultural contestation as evidenced in theoretical and critical discourse. In its place will stand *a learned discourse comprising stories and practices -- specific to local situations but divorced from understandings of social context and social process.....*(Goodison, 1995: 90-97)

This strong point backs up Bertaux. Goodison goes on to discuss specific features of the ways that stories express and may transmit social control:

"Stories.... are most often carriers of dominant messages, themselves agencies of domination. Oppositional stories can be captured, but they are very much in the minority and are often themselves overlaid or reactive to dominant story lines. As Gordon Wells (1986) has warned us, an expression of reality is largely

.... a distillation of the stories we have shared; not only the narratives that we have heard or told, read or seen enacted in drama or news on television, but also the anecdotes, explanations and conjectures that are drawn on in everyday conversation (Wells, p.196)

Or as Passerini (1987) noted "when someone is asked for his life-story, his memory draws on pre-existing story lines and ways of telling stories, even if these are in part modified by the circumstances". (P.28). Put another way, means that we often narrate our lives according to a 'prior script's script written elsewhere, by others, for other purposes..."

His conclusion, however, is careful:

“It is not sufficient to say we wanted ‘to listen to people’, ‘to capture their voices’, ‘to let them tell their stories’. *‘As individuals construct their past, they leave unresolved contradictions at precisely those points at which authoritative discourse conflicts with collective cultural meanings’* (Weiler, 1991 on Passerini 1987,1989)

A far more active collaboration is required.....a genuine collaboration between the life story giver and the research taker..... *a story of action within a theory of context* (Ivor Goodson, 1995: p 90-97, italics added)

The corollary of this argument, I would argue and support, is *that, provided there is research on, and therefore a useful theory of, context*, then even a single story can be a useful sociological document.<sup>6</sup> More with more, quite a lot with one.<sup>7</sup>

The social contexts of stories need to be powerfully present in the analysis of stories: and, given that *‘as individuals construct their past, they leave unresolved contradictions at precisely those points at which authoritative discourse conflicts with collective cultural meanings’*(Weiler cited above), examining the textual structure of stories to discover ‘unresolved contradictions’ and ‘collective cultural meanings’ in conflict within discourse can be an important research activity<sup>8</sup>. And, my point here, even ONE story *analysed in the right way* can be of value.

The American anthropology Kroeber wrote a very famous case study called *Ishi: the last of his tribe* based on interview work with the last surviving member of a native American tribe. Clearly, it would have been better to have worked with a number of key informants and not just one. Clearly it would have been better to combine information from multiple informants with evidence from direct participant observation, artefacts and other traces of collective life. Nonetheless, even with just one informant, a work of anthropological / sociological value was produced.

It could be argued that Sostris with its 42 cases in each category and 42 cases in each country, 256 overall, cannot be accused of single-specimen research if the group of which the case is a specimen is either the social category or the nation. Indeed, if western Europe is the whole, then there are 256 cases.

However, it is clear, if a restrictive concept of (interactive primary group) *milieu* is taken as critical, that it would be equally possible to say that Sostris is engaged in single-specimen research.

No attempt has been made within Sostris to collect cases who are engaged in the same social milieu or have direct social relations with each other. These are not interpersonally-linked lives. Some of the cases might be said to have come from the same milieu (2 printers, 2 miners, etc) but the methodology was to look for contrasting, not linked, cases.

Indeed, it is from our informants that we gradually develop a sense of what the milieu is in which they may have been said to have originated and how this

original milieu-embeddedness may be said to have remained the same or changed over the life course.

Milieu change can be a result of macro-shifts (the destruction of a traditional industry, a change in welfare or educational provision, or the demolition of houses and the relocation of populations, or migration through war and genocide, or mutation after a war or the collapse of the Berlin Wall). Milieu change can be a result of local collective action — where a park is built or a cooperative constructed —and it can be the result of individual action where a person after a turning point in their lives constructs a quite different network of social relations from those he or she had before. This latter can be the result of marriage, illness, divorce, or simply moving to another part of town, or of Europe. Some very isolated people may not see themselves as being in any milieu whatsoever, that reality must be taken into account, even if the sociologist treats such a condition as being in a very specific milieu in a very specific way.

How do we study specimens, and can we justify studying single cases? Is ‘milieu’ a significant ‘whole’ to which any individual life can be related as a ‘part’? A most explicit case for relating cases to contexts has been made recently by Scheff.

### ***How to study a specimen: relating least parts to largest wholes***

Thomas Scheff (1997) in his chapter “Part / whole morphology: unifying single-case and comparative methods” argues strongly for the “microscopic examination of single specimens, and, if more than one specimen is available, the comparison of specimens with each other (1997: 19)”. I cite from several (numbered) pages

“To summarize my approach: with or without initial exploration (stage 1), the researcher would examine individual specimen cases (such as verbatim texts) microscopically (stage 2). This step can lead directly to the development of a theory grounded in intimate knowledge of the specimen cases, but oriented towards placing them in the largest possible context, generating a micro-macro theory. Should such a theory seem promising, the final stage, verification ([stage] 3) could follow (20)”

“Understanding ordinary language and other kinds of human behaviour requires the consideration of the smallest parts of expressions and their relationship to the largest possible wholes (not just grammar and syntax, but biographical structures, as well as the structure of the entire language and culture. Part / whole analysis of this kind would seem to be the key component of what is called ‘commonsense’....(p. 22)”

“This chapter suggests that the determination of meaning is neither mostly subjective, as assumed by theoretical approaches, nor objective, as assumed in most empirical research, but a varying mixture of subjective and objective. To the extent that researchers *locate all relevant context* and to the extent that their *hypotheticals are confirmed by factual data*, their interpretation of meaning is objective (28).... No matter how exhaustive the analysis of a text, the determination of meaning will be incomplete and therefore partially subjective without referring to relevant historical and biographical knowledge (1997: 30)”

Concerned as he is in a brilliant chapter for the analysis of small specimens of discourse-in-context, he writes, in a way that Kroeber would have been happy with,

“Verbatim excerpts from discourse, one might argue, are *microcosms*, they contain within them, brief as they may be, intimations of the participants’ origins in and relations to the institutions of the host society..(Scheff 1997: 48 italics added)”

***Can we pin down more precisely exactly what the ‘wholes’ are in terms of which ‘parts’ should be analysed?***

### ***Scheff’s part/whole ladder***

Scheff provides us (1997:54) with a provocative part / whole ladder for a 2-person analysis:

1. Single words and gestures.
2. Sentences
3. Exchanges
4. Conversations.
5. Relationship of the two parties (all their conversations).
6. *Life histories of the two parties*
  
7. *All relationships of their type: i.e. therapist-patient, man-woman, etc.*
8. *The structure of the host society: all relationships.*
9. The history and future of the host civilization.
10. The history and destiny of the human species.

Practical intelligence in the lifeworld appears to involve abduction, that is, the rapid, effortless shuttling up and down this ladder. The distinction between topic and relationship hints at this larger system: the topic is at level 2, since it involves sentences, the relationship, at level 5. However all levels are implied in the actual understanding and practice of discourse. The process is awkward to describe in explicit language, but it takes place constantly, effortlessly, and instantaneously In discourse

This discussion suggests an exact definition of reflexivity; the traversing of complete part / whole structures. *To the extent that thought and creative effort travels the entire part / whole ladder, it is freed of its purely local dependence and becomes optimally useful and stimulating.* However.... it also runs the risk of antagonising the conventional structures of context, and in this way becoming puzzling and opaque.  
(T.Scheff, 1997: 54-55,58 italics added)”

This seems very useful and would seem to be completely in line with Goodison’s demand previously cited for an adequate theory of context.

### ***Brief ‘expansion’ of Scheff***

I would, however, argue that

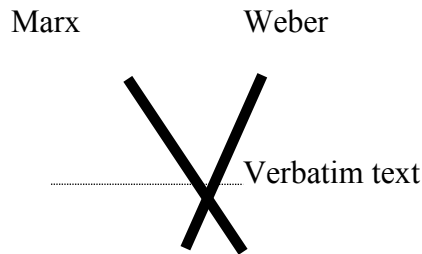
- the ‘life histories of the two parties [in the interview]’ should be expanded to *include their present perspectives on the ‘history and future’ trajectories of*



*themselves and of linked lives* (families, friends, associates, imagined communities) - like Bertaux's bakers

- this is just one part / whole ladder starting from the verbatim text, and one can construct alternative part / whole ladders starting perhaps with one similar rung but going off in a different direction. Just to illustrate, in the diagram below, Freud might provide one theory, Marx or Weber another, for the illumination of one piece of verbatim interview text.

Different disciplines or collections of disciplines can be defined by their conceptualisation of their different part / whole ladder or ladders. *What we take as the natural empirically-given concrete entry-level realities are probably a mixture of species-specific assumptions and constraints plus historico-cultural assumptions and constraints of a specific general and disciplinary culture at a specific time within a civilization and a (natural language/research) socio-linguistic community.* We cannot evade our specific inheritances and our training, but we can avoid giving them a false ontological inevitability which blocks any critical self-review. There is more than one ladder!



**Figure 1 Two part/whole ladders with a verbatim text**

Despite the above points, I think Scheff's contribution to making us think about part / whole relations and making us articulate the part / whole ladders we need to bear in mind and use meticulously in our analysis is invaluable.

### ***Implications***

How does this relate to BIM and to Sostris?

I think this should suggest that the study of single cases *in context and as a source of knowledge about life-in-contexts* should not be decried as strongly as Bertaux would seem to have recommended. However it strongly supports Bertaux in his insistence that *individual cases will be understood better as each of them as a whole, and all the particulars of the lived life and the told story, are related to the whole contexts of which they are a part*. Certainly, there is no warranty here for a restricted textualism. Certainly any segment of text must be related to the previous and subsequent elements of co-text; but all of the text and its parts must be understood in social, historical, and structural-institutional contexts at the micro, meso and the macro level.

Hence the importance of *the stock of knowledge of the researchers in the BIM-analytical panel* as they multiply and verify hypotheses and hypotheticals about the lived life and the told story, and as they attempt to relate different cases to each other and develop more general knowledge.

Scheff's argument gives us *initial questions* for evaluating description and discussion, whether on individual cases or in a comparison of cases. What largest wholes do the Sostris case-studies get related to, how small are the parts that are treated as microcosms and so subjected to microscopic Part-whole analysis?

We know the answer in principle to some of these questions by recalling the description of the BIM procedures.

- We know that, just as Scheff would wish, there is an *intense development of hypotheticals around each datum of the biographical data* at each moment in the chronology, and these are rejected or verified by subsequent biographical data ('factuals').
- We know that there is a similar *intense development of hypotheticals around each moment of the text sequentialisation* as the interviewee develops or changes theme

and / or text-sort . These,too, are rejected or verified by intense falsificationist-corroborationist attention to subsequent (sequentialisation) ‘factuals’.

- Shortage of space prevents us from showing an example of BIM microanalysis, in which a small text segment of perhaps two or three lines is subjected to intense scrutiny, but this is done on exactly the same model of multiplying hypotheticals and testing against factuals.

What is the extent to which, in Sostris analyses, large wholes (and which ones) *are* involved in the analysis of those admittedly small parts? Given the context of this chapter, the answer can be brief.

### **National and European society as context for Sostris case reports**

The reports in this Working Paper and previous ones typically take the ‘national society in context’ as the larger whole to which the cases are related, and the combination of reports produces an emergent larger context, namely that of the European Union . In the case of the category of Europeans in this particular report, ex-traditional workers, the context is specified by global changes in production over a considerable period of time, generating specific patterns of de-industrialisation in Europe.

In the final section of this paper, I wish to answer the question of ‘how’ understanding is produced and conveyed from a slightly different angle.

## **3. How is understanding conveyed?**

### ***How is understanding advanced?***

Does understanding move from particular cases to (grounded) general theory, from ‘ideographic’ to ‘nomothetic’ understanding (Allport, 1962)? There are two positions:

- Theorists including grounded theorists, tend to argue that we start (reluctantly or enthusiastically) from the idiographic (specimen) case-study and move ‘with all due dispatch’ to the nomothetic general theorising . The idiographic detail about cases becomes less relevant once the achieved (grounded) transcendence/assimilation of the myriad of details has been achieved. This is a direction-of-progression-towards-saturation in grounded theory.
- The counter-movement is that, as far as applicable knowledge is concerned, the important feature of any body of general knowledge [theory] is that it can be applied to a particular case, a form of anthropological or sociological clinical understanding. The movement is from applying generalities to the understanding of particular new cases<sup>9</sup>.

Without taking sides in this debate at this point in the text, it may be useful to consider the form in which understanding of past cases and their theorisation is communicated.

### ***Polkinghorne on conveying understanding by ‘paradigmatic’ or ‘narrative’ exposition***

Polkinghorne (1996) argues that ‘narrative’ is the natural way in which we construe ourselves. He relies on the work of Bruner, which he summarises as follows:

- “Bruner (1986) holds that there are two major kinds of cognitive structuring —paradigmatic and narrative
- paradigmatic structuring is a mode of comprehension which produces knowledge about the kind of thing something is. In the paradigmatic mode, knowledge about something involves recognition of the category or concept of which it is an instance
  - narrative structuring produces knowledge of something by showing how it interacts with other parts in contributing to a whole. Thus narrative understanding is a type of systemic or gestalt knowledge. Its operation requires the to and fro movement from part to whole to part, described by the term *hermeneutic circle*.... While gestalt understanding of visual objects is derived from relations in space, narrative understanding concerns the temporal relations between happenings and actions in human lives.....

Narrative biographies and case studies provide a different type of knowledge that more closely relates to the actual performance of practitioners than the [paradigmatic] type of knowledge... (Polkinghorne, 1996: 735-727)”

Polkinghorne discusses the use of applicable knowledge by novice and expert practitioners, relying on Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and Benner (1984).

He says that the novice just treats individual cases as areas for “the application of ‘context-free rules’” whereas the expert practitioner applies knowledge in the form of “grasping unique gestalts or configurations , making use of narrative understanding in which decisions flow from an integrated understanding of the historical and situational dimensions of their interactions with a client” (729,731).

From the point of view of the development of the researcher, I follow the above formulation and propose that the novice ‘ *just treats individual cases as areas for the generation of context-free general theorisations*’ whereas the expert practitioner

generates knowledge in the process of grasping and presenting unique gestalts or configurations , making use of narrative understanding in which decisions flow from an integrated understanding of the historical and situational dimensions of part/whole interaction in contexts.

Elsewhere (Polkinghorne,1995), he evokes the way in which narrative cognition works:

“While paradigmatic knowledge is maintained in individual words that name a concept, narrative knowledge is maintained in emplotted stories. Storied

memories retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it....

Narrative cognition configures the diverse elements of a particular action into a unified whole in which each element is connected to the central purpose of the action... Narrative cognition produces a series of anecdotal descriptions of particular incidents. Narrative reasoning does not reduce itself to rules and generalities across stories but maintains itself at the level of the specific episode. Nor does it translate its emplotted story into a step of propositions whereby its dramatic and integrative features are forfeited.... The cumulative effect of narrative reasoning is a collection of individual cases in which thought moves from case to case instead of from case to generalization.

This collection of storied experiences provides a basis for understanding new action episodes by means of analogy. The collection of stories is searched to find one that is similar in some respects to the old one. The concern is not to identify the new episode as an instance of a general type but as similar to a specific remembered episode.. The episode is noted as similar to, but not the same as, the previously selected episode. Thus, the understanding of the new action can draw on previous understandings while being open to the specific and unique elements that make the new episode different from all that have gone before. The analogical understanding recognizes the improvisation and change that make up the flexible variability of human behaviour (Lave, 1988). The more varied and extensive one's collection of storied explanatory descriptions of previous actions, the more likely that *one can draw upon a similar remembered episode for an initial understanding of the new situation and the more likely that one will appreciate and search for the elements that make the new different from the remembered instance...* [Paradigmatic] analysis of narratives moves from stories to common elements, and narrative analysis moves from elements to stories (Polkinghorne, 1995: 11,12, italics added)

The above distinction between narrative and paradigmatic forms of knowledge-inducing text-forms seems to me to be of great importance in helping us see research reports as artfully-contrived constructions<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Sostris practice in the Working Papers***

Sostris's practice in these Working Papers has been varied, but in general has combined both narrative and non-narrative forms in a variety of ways. Not only have case-histories of individuals been typically presented in a historical-narrative fashion but quite often the 'national context' has also been presented in a historical-narrative fashion. On the other hand, Sostris presentations have also included formal types, typologies and theorisations .

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<sup>111</sup>This is a revised version of part of an earlier paper (Wengraf 1998). The argument will be developed further in a chapter in a book provisionally entitled *The Biographical Turn in the Social Sciences* (eds. Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat and Tom Wengraf) to be published in 1999/2000 by Taylor and Francis/Routledge.

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<sup>2</sup> The theoretical and methodological frame for this type of work is briefly described in Breckner (1998: 91-93) at the end of Sostris WP2, where references can also be found.

<sup>3</sup> Though BIM's biographical data on the lived life could, of course, be used by those with an 'epiphenomenist' understanding of subjective meanings.

<sup>4</sup> That there is a danger to social research from a delirious social constructionism I would agree. I don't detect any signs of this in the BIM tradition, but North-American social constructionism provides ample examples of such silliness: much of the writing in *Qualitative Inquiry* for example seems liable to such criticism.

<sup>5</sup> This relates to Eric Hobsbawm's critique of identity politics, or what Gramsci called 'corporative consciousness'.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally if a single life story is *devoid* of sociological value, how can a number [and how do you justify any particular number?] of things of no value in themselves be of value? A relational theory knowledge can in fact handle this counter-argument, but it is worth considering nonetheless. I am indebted to Jeff Evans for this point about the relational nature of knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> Scheff argues that analysing one case in very great detail can be more valuable than analysing many cases superficially.

<sup>8</sup> This support BIM's research strategy of the micro-analysis of text segments

<sup>9</sup> Herdt and Stoller (1990) have argued eloquently and persuasively for a 'clinical anthropology'.

<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to distinguish between *the forms of the raw materials* of the BIM interview, and the *forms of knowledge-inducing reports*. One can collect narrative interviews and write a theorizing report on the basis of it. One can collect theorising, attitude-taking, argumentative interviews, and write up the report in the form of a narrative.