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Publication date: 2006

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):

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IACR Annual Conference 2006, University of Tromsø, August 11-13

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Biographical Interviews in a Critical Realist Perspective.

Abstract: The article argues that today there is a need for biographical research in order to complement and modify the results of large-scale quantitative research. However, it is also argued that biographical sociology needs to clarify its ontological as well as epistemological position in order not to be reduced to being the harmless human face of the “evidence based” current. The author points to the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer as sociologists working in this line, acknowledging at the same time that a range of sociologists could be included as “tacit” critical realists. However, time has come for making this position explicit e.g. by clarifying more in detail what is meant by the concept of context.

Introduction

Today much research within sociology as well as other disciplines works according to the post-modern and constructivist paradigm. However, there is also growing opposition to this trend. This is one of the reasons why there has been a growing interest in “critical realism”, an ontological and epistemological position which theoretically as well as methodologically asks questions about the world, why it looks as it does. The fundamental issue is that the world is assumed to be out there somewhere, the world in itself is not only a construction of our minds. Critical realism acknowledges, however, that knowledge of the world is created through the work of the actor / the researcher. Radical constructivists as well as inter-actionists have thus caused the question of ontology to come to the surface, making this issue relevant to discussions on biography in sociology. Another reason for the increasing interest in ”critical realism” is that it presents a more comprehensive sociological framework which might offer a counter position to the recent upsurge of more pure positivism in the form of ”evidence” based research, which at present is haunting e.g. the fields of education, nursing and social work with a strong political bias. Therefore it becomes relevant to discuss issues of biography within this framework in order to ensure that this area of research is not reduced to an appendix which may function as a nice harmless small scale correction to large scale evidence based research.

Fundamentally it is an ontological question which divides critical realism from post-modern- poststructuralist constructionists, the main question being whether the individual is to be understood as a free, rational human being who enters social relations only voluntarily. In a post-modern perspective a person only does what he thinks makes sense to him, and he is led by a transparent consciousness that can only be understood by him, because it has been created consciously, and the researcher can only understand the interviewee, from the interviewees´ point of view. Quite to the contrary the critical realist asks whether the individual as a human being is also part of nature and develops his existence together with other human beings without becoming his own identity object, but instead positioned in a dialectic relation, conscious-unconscious, free-bound, individual-collective etc. The latter point of view implies that human beings have also objective sides that can be studied from an outside perspective. In addition to this ontological issue we have the epistemological question whether we can really know something about this human reality or whether we just project our
perspective on a reality which remains unknown. The important message of critical realism is that we should take care not to conflate these two questions.
IACR Annual Conference 2006, University of Tromsø, August 11-13

Archer, Bourdieu and Critical Realism.

The British sociologist Margaret Archer has long been one of the more prominent critical realists whereas Bourdieu has been less explicit on the issue, but his work which he himself designated as “praxeological” sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992 p.139) clearly demonstrates that he (as well as many others) might be included in the ontological and epistemological framework of critical realism. Bourdieu as well as Archer have all their lives defended a sociological approach that requires the researcher to have substantial knowledge about the context; in the present as well as in the past tense, in order for important explanations not to be left out through a narrow focus on the immediate moment. Both sociologists think each in their way that the interviewer as well as the interviewee should be allowed to present his/her own interpretation of the situation, one perspective being the subjective point of view of the interviewee, the other the objectivating point of view of the researcher, however, Bourdieu also adds that the interviewer himself must be objectivated. Thus it is this movement back and forth between these perspectives that will lead to science, although always subject to adjustment.

Contrary to pure existentialism (Østerberg 1993), Archer and Bourdieu, critical realism and praxeological sociology assume that human beings are more than what the individual makes out of himself. They feel that individual thoughts and actions are also results of an accumulated process that takes place in groups where goods, relations and capacities are exchanged, and these procedures thus form the framework for present thoughts, speech and actions. Human beings are also part of a history that is already there when the individual human being is born, and the process of accumulation then develops at different levels. Human beings develop as part of nature, in subconscious structures, in anonymous as well as by inter-subjective interaction processes, taking the internal conversation as a starting point, I might add according to Archer.

Archer and Bourdieu assume that sociology as a science must comprise structure as well as agency. Here it is important to stress that when speaking of structures they do not refer to any fixed set of ideas or material circumstances determining whatever human beings think and do without their conscious knowledge. Quite to the contrary they assume that each individual has his/her unique combination of environment and history that is accumulated over time. Each individual starts off with this inheritance, at the same time the structure is also being produced and reproduced and modified continuously. This has nothing to do with determinism, but it is a theory of a practice that has roots. The point is that each life has a history that was present long before the individual actor began to act on his own, and this fact also has effects. Structures are made by human beings and can be changed, but not just immediately by each individual at will, rather they form the framework around our thoughts and actions and as time goes by, they become so ”natural” that we do not reflect upon them, unless something new happens which brings them to the surface as a contrasting way of looking at things. Critical realism illustrates this by making an analytical assumption about reality to the

1 Notice that the concept of objectivating is not the same as objective. Objectivating signals a proces that the interviewer is trying to accomplish by understanding and explaining the “location” of the interviewee, of course never being able to reach any pure objectivity.
effect that it consists of the level of the empirical, the level of events and the level of the structures as well as interaction between these levels.

Archer as well as Bourdieu have worked with the classical large scale sociological instruments in the form of questionnaires, their point of view being not to outright dismiss questionnaires for being too coarse instruments but instead defending a position stating that questionnaires might be useful in the hands of theoretically well-informed analysts, innovation stemming from theoretical analysis and not from sophisticated statistical analysis in itself. However, Bourdieu’s studies of Kabylia, his native birth region of Bearn as well many of his other studies in France have been ethnographical based on direct observation and interviews. He carried out these studies even though he was somewhat distrustful of mainstream anthropology which he thought often claimed to have immediate intuitive access to and understanding of native life, an idea which he found too naive. Instead he developed his method which combines the intimate knowledge with the perspective of the outsider depending on the situation, in his own words ” participant objectivation ” (Bourdieu 2003) These issues become relevant for discussion when considering differences within an anthropological and qualitative sociological point of view.

All this has consequences for the sociological biography. When questions are asked, the biographical interview has a certain similarity to an autobiography. The questions and the answers try to trace the origin of the interviewee to find out more about the conditions that have made life possible to the extent that the interviewee herself sees and describes them. Although the aim is to be able to present an objective sociological description and explanation, the results look like a subjective autobiographical life story. This means that the sociologist faces a problem. Firstly because narratives tend to be located in the hermeneutic field, and secondly because the fact that interviewees tell their own life story tend to emphasize the subjective experience. However, based in critical realism I assume that subjective experience is not sufficient to reach a more complete explanation on its own, in that the interviewees cannot be consciously aware of all the historical and environmental factors that contribute to the framing of his/her actions and points of view. This idea has never been questioned by neither Archer nor Bourdieu, although there are differences between the two on this issue, but to my mind it is a question of perspective rather than substance, because the dialectics between objectivity and subjectivity, structure and agency have been the fundamental issue for both, and their methods have been designed to take the interaction between these dimensions into account. Today this might seem dubious to some researchers, and very often we see claims that these two perspectives are absolutely opposed to each other, often described as hermeneutics or phenomenology against positivism or objectivism, and even more often resulting in a conflation of hermeneutics and qualitative methods and positivism and quantitative methods. This way of contrasting things is very simplified, but it has its origin in a discussion which started when social and human sciences broke away from natural science, the basic issue being whether the object of the former requires quite another type of science than the latter, since human beings cannot only be sort of measured from the outside through quantitative methods and statistical analysis. They must also be understood from within i.e. through their meanings and intentions. Already the classical sociologists like Marx, Durkheim and Weber have rejected this dichotomy and tried to include both aspects, but in the course
of time e.g. Weber has often been used as the human sociologist, because of his emphasis on understanding ("verstehen") whereas Durkheim has been interpreted in quite the opposite direction. In reality the distance between the two was not that big, and as mentioned they tried to include both perspectives. After structuralism social science has been influenced by the so-called "linguistic turn" which emphasizes meaning, language, text and discourse, this turn has led to perspectives which focus on individuality, subjectivity, construction and relativism, and these movements have tend to push modernity and more dialectic perspectives away.

Today ethnomethodologists (Goffman), symbolic interactionists (Blumer), phenomenologists (Merleau-Ponty, Schutz and Berger Luckman) are reintroduced alongside postmodernism and constructivism to legitimize more extreme forms of relativistic subjectivist positions. (For biographical and bibliographical data on these authors: Andersen, H. & Kaspersen, L.B. (eds)(2000)). It seems to have become fashionable to view social conditions and actions as decided by the intentions of the participants mainly or only, and to emphasize research which studies these intentions as texts and discourses thus turning social structure into culture which can be studied and interpreted through intra-individual and inter-subjective methods within a hermeneutic framework. However, in this instance the interpretation is a circular movement where the “I” from his/her point of view try to understand other people in an effort to reach a fusion of horizons. The main problem in this is that the social world is not first and foremost a text, but rather a materialized reality which consists of power relations and different distributions of resources. Bourdieu adds that this material reality is also inscribed in the body (Bourdieu 1977:p.93-94). Human beings live with these power relationships and they are not just expressions of culture.

Alongside the linguistic turn, parts of social sciences including psychology in the USA and Sweden, more so than in Denmark, have, however, continued to work with large scale quantitative surveys or so-called controlled experiments and they have been rather dominant, although not always epistemologically or theoretically underpinned. Some researchers within this line of research do, however, realise the limitations of this position, and they have instead turned to critical realism. (cf. Lund 2005), but in general unreflective positivism and subjective poststructuralism and constructionism seems to keep each other alive. In addition to this, both extreme positions are today nourished by current political forces. Neo-conservative movements dominate the scene in e.g. education and require all research to be "positivist" in the sense that it should consist of quantitative surveys and controlled experiments which are supposed to deliver causal explanations which can demonstrate "best practice” and "evidence”, and this line of thought is combined with the neo-liberal belief that human actions are only based on free choice in a free market. For these reasons it is imperative that an important movement like biography in qualitative sociology takes these political currents into account.

Archer, Bourdieu and critical realism continue the track laid in the classical perspective, however, they have developed along these lines, and because they have not been blind to new perspectives, they have also tried to include points of view from the later abovementioned positions of phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, ethnology and constructivism. Their voice has, however, had difficulty in being heard in the
subjectivist stream, and they have often been rejected as pure determinists (especially Bourdieu) which they obviously are not. Like many other sociologists Bourdieu and Archer have serious doubts whether we are all so completely unique specimens who just create and recreate ourselves in always new and unique circumstances. As Bourdieu has shown in “Distinction” (Bourdieu 1984) human beings may rather be understood as unique crossing points in an endless series of possible courses of life within a certain framework made by history and material circumstances and life conditions. The big question is, however, how the social world is produced and reproduced through the individual. This is the pivotal issue for Archer and Bourdieu who react against pure objectivism and structuralism, and this issue should also be at the heart of sociological interest today. Biography seen within the framework of critical realism can help shedding light on individual life trajectories, maintaining however, the more fundamental perspectives.

Biography and Context
Thus it becomes very important to reflect upon the exact meaning of situating the individual biography within a context. Extreme constructivist and subjective approaches might not even ask for contextualisation, but many of the more reflective biographers have of course been aware of the necessity of doing this. The question is, however, what exactly is meant by context, and how it can be brought into the analysis. This issue has been discussed thoroughly in a reader called “Rethinking Context” (Duranti & Goodwin 1992).

Two opposing views on this issue are demonstrated very clearly in this book. Although both are inspired by ethno methodology focusing on micro interaction and personal communication of meaning, they have chosen different solutions. One point of view is represented by Emanuel A. Schegloff who is a sociologist specialising in the analysis of conversation. For Schegloff a key aspect of context is the sequence of talk within which a particular utterance occurs. He focuses on analysing a range of different types of conversational phenomena and demonstrates the multiplicity of ways in which participants take into account the particulars of who they are talking to, and the events they are engaged in. He maintains that the researcher should demonstrate in the very events being examined that the participants themselves are organizing their behaviour in terms of the features being described by the analyst. Schegloff’s position is that the more traditional invocation of the context is often problematic, because the situations in which some interaction are inscribed might be virtually indefinite and too dependent on the researchers’ perspective thus distorting the results of “pure” research.

“Our access to these particular contextual orientations as social science analysts is, in principle, the same as those of real-world co-participants: they infiltrate and permeate and enter constitutively into the talk and other conduct of each participant and are thereby made accessible for uptake(...)because the evidence of relevance of any order or type of context will be found “on the scene” so to speak, - in the talk and conduct”(Schegloff in Duranti & Goodwin, ibidem, p.215)(my emphasis JS)

Thus although Schegloff admits that it is not possible to understand verbal interaction between individuals unless one takes a larger context into consideration, he maintains that such broader context should only be taken into consideration to the extent that it is
Aron Cicourel on the other hand states his position explicitly as a critique of conversation analysis, and he uses instead the concept of “encounters” which signifies more than just verbal talk, thus permitting the inclusion of the body and the history of the individual as well as the broader context of the institutional setting, and he stresses the importance of ethnographic fieldwork which can help in situating the analysis of talk.

“The focus of this chapter, therefore, differs from but also builds on conversation and discourse theorists concerned primarily with the structural features of conversation as turn-taking (…) It is important to locate the analysis of language and social interaction in a wide variety of social activities that are implicitly and explicitly known to the participants and the investigator “(Cicourel in Duranti & Goodwin, ibidem, p.296)

Cicourel is of course aware of the difficulty in delimiting the contextual analysis, but contrary to Schegloff’s solution which only allows for the information that participants themselves make available in the talk, Cicourel wants to solve the problem by urging the researcher not to hide his or her sources of information and research choices but instead make them into a common source to be shared with the readers in an attempt to unveil the hidden processes. Pierre Bourdieu became aquainted with Cicourel’s work and for several reasons he was very enthusiastic about it because that, although coming from quite another corner of the world( American cognitive sociology) he felt he had a certain affinity with him, because he wanted to trace the structural effects on the micro level of interactions. In a preface to the French translation of Cicourel’s book “The Raisonnement Médical”(Cicourel 2002) he writes:

Contrary to macro sociology which rejects conversation analysis without understanding it, Cicourel criticizes CA from within, because he wants the discipline to get out of the ghetto surrounding it. According to him this is also how the integration between the “micro” and the “macro” level of the sociological analysis can be made, or in other words, the sociologist can empirically try to understand the effect of the structures in the interaction at one and the same time contrasting the social structures of macro sociology with the conversational structures of micro sociology”

( Bourdieu in Cicourel ibidem p.15-16)(my translation JS)

And he continues by quoting Cicourel:

“ We have to study how the way decisions are made in micro situations contribute to the creation of macro-structures through the necessary routine solutions or the realisation of the basic organisational objectives.”(Cicourel in Knorr Cetina & Cicourel 1981, quoted by Bourdieu ibidem)(my translation JS)

This is exactly the programme that unites Cicourel, Bourdieu, Archer and critical realism, because in their view the explanation of what is happening on the spot and understood by the actors and speakers on the spot is not to be found on the spot alone, because contextual frames do not only make an impact when they are perceived and expressed by the actors in a conversation. They also work as, and contribute in turn...
Bourdieu and Archer both base their work on understanding and interpreting contexts. They have conducted research based on surveys and macro analysis, but also interviews which makes their position highly relevant to present discussions on biographical methods.

**Bourdieu’s work on biography: The Weight of the World**

Bourdieu’s work on biography has been fully developed in this major work “The Weight of the World – Suffering in Contemporary Society”. The main objective of the work was to draw attention to the drastic changes in the conditions of life for people who became marginalized during the 80s and 90s when the welfare state was retracting, leaving more space open to market forces.

One of Bourdieu’s aims in this work was to reach the general public and document suffering in an exemplary way giving voice to the people affected, however, carefully situating their testimony within a thoroughly researched framework of more objective data on the situation. A range of themes and cases are documented through these interviews combined with analysis of the location or platform from where the interviewees speak, the location having a historical, geographical as well as social dimension.

This means that the book tries to show that the point of view of marginalized people who are not used to giving voice in public to their experience and feelings is combined with the researcher’s more objectivating description of the situation and its background, the point being that these two points of view are two sides of the same coin. The originality of Bourdieu’s method was that he and his co-researchers worked on the assumption that people are not waiting for sociologists to come and collect the truth to be published. Instead they assumed that in everyday life “the truth” is not said nor understood neither by the marginalized nor by the researchers, so the preparations for the interviews had to be very careful, and the team of researchers worked for months in order to minimize symbolic violence, so a space would be created where the interviewees could utter their voice without having their point of view distorted. Bourdieu has reflected more intensively on the procedure in the final chapter called ”Understanding” (Bourdieu ibidem: pp 607-626)

**Archers Work on Biography: the Internal Conversation**

Where ”The Weight of the World” was intended for the larger public, Archer’s book on the internal conversation (Archer 2004) is partly theoretical and partly empirical. She has concentrated on the use of interviews to track the so-called ”internal conversation” of the interviewees which she thinks is a decisive mediating factor between structure and agency, i.e. her intentions are quite similar to that of Lahire (1998). As Archer is one of the leading sociologists within ”critical realism” with a body of works which deal intensively with the question of the relation between social structure, culture and agency, the ”internal conversation” should not be understood as a purely voluntary and individual task which the individual undertakes only on his own, rather the ”internal conversation” is supposed to show how the mediation between structure and agency takes place in the last instance, in the sense that the individual acknowledges and reflects upon the real possibilities provided by birth or opened up through incidences of
life, at the same time accepting these circumstances as the frame around the solutions we choose.

Archer’s book is not really intended as a biography, it is more an attempt to ask questions to the biography trying to find out what patterns arise when people construct their lives when they meet the structures and limitations of the real world and reconstruct these considerations during the interview. As a preliminary conclusion she distinguishes between 4 different types of reflexives, the communicative reflexive who needs the affirmation of the surroundings to continue her life projects and thus chooses to remain in the local area, as far as circumstances permit, the autonomous reflexive who in the first instance chooses to ignore impeding structures and set out to achieve his ideas, until either his life project has been fulfilled or he has been knocked back to the starting point by societal changes, the meta-reflexive who has seen and experienced a lot of different settings and therefore has difficulty in finding a place to rest, always seeking fulfilment of his innermost ideals, and then finally the fragmented reflexive who has sort of given up finding his own way and is being tossed around by circumstance.

Bourdieu’s auto-socio-analysis

In many of his books Bourdieu has insisted that his own auto-socio-analysis is to be understood as different from auto-biographies, and it can be understood as a very radical and thorough extension of Cicourel’s recommendation to the researcher of disclosing as much as possible of his sources of information “make them into a common source to be shared with the readers in an attempt to unveil the hidden processes” (Cicourel ibidem). In his last Book (Bourdieu 2002/2004), he alludes to a painting by the surrealist French painter Magritte “Ceci n’est pas un pipe” when he writes “This is not an autobiography”, and in the text he says that he does not intend to make concessions to the auto-biographical genre which he has often called conventional and illusionary. (Bourdieu 1986). However, if Bourdieu does not want to write his own autobiography what did he then suppose it to be? In earlier works (Bourdieu 1992) Bourdieu has said that it is important that the social scientist works reflexively, but to Bourdieu reflexivity entails something more than just thinking about what one does, he has far more radical ideas. He wants the scientist to apply his own methods on himself, in Bourdieu’s perspective this means that the scientist should take his own social and educational background into account as well as the scholastic perspective which he points out is the usual accompaniment to academic life, because he feels that these aspects influence the research done, and must be accounted for. Of course the researcher cannot interview himself and probably there are many pages documenting his/her work, however, what Bourdieu wants the researcher to do is to contrast his own life and his scientific work in the same way as the researcher working with biographical methods in social science.

Of course, to look at oneself in this way might be a complicated job. Bourdieu has always talked about this issue, because to him it is important to know the location or space from which one speaks, and the consequences this has especially in the interview situation. To him this reflexivity must deal with the researcher’s own background and in a way so that becomes a habitus which does not require much thought in the moment. It will be an incorporated way of dealing with one’s own background as a limitation but at the same time also a resource. Bourdieu’s point is that in this way the
researcher can facilitate the space for the voice of the interviewee and minimise his own domination, however, this must be done reflexively and thus it will be the result of many years practising on the part of the researcher, it is not a trick to be learned in the last moment or as some formal recipe. The challenge and risk in assuming this position is that one exposes oneself to the criticism of being subjective, non-scientific and the like. Bourdieu was well aware of this risk, in the introduction to the book his editor writes (Bourdieu 2002:8.):

"he knew that if he made an object of himself he would run the risk of being accused of being pompous at the same time he would also give arms to all those who had just waited to reject this sociology as being unscientific precisely because of his life and trajectory"

Bourdieu’s point was exactly the opposite, he would emphasize that it would be a mark of true scientific behaviour to reflect upon one’s own background trying to adjust for it rather than believe it can be eliminated.

All this is emphasized because Bourdieu is trying to reach a sociological explanation, and he wants to make sure that his method is not included among various well-established autobiographic approaches within literature and the humanities which often aim at portraying the individual as a unique creature, the combined result of fate and psychodynamics. In an article Bourdieu has tried to point to the fact that most biographers know but often tend to forget that biography or autobiography is not the same as lived life as might be observed by outsiders, but the lived life reconstructed by the interviewee in a story she tells for herself and others. And in recent years story telling has become a genre within the humanities often today called “narratives”. It is obvious that a life story can not be told unless it has a beginning, a process and an end, therefore events and actions are constructed as having a certain meaning, the reasons why are, however, left out. This is where Bourdieu would insist that the stories must be understood as well as explained.

Tacit Critical Realists in Biographical sociology

Critical realists positions are not really a new thing within biography, many sociologists have more or worked along these assumptions without making their stand explicit mainly because they took it for granted. Already Daniel Bertaux (1977, 1980…) used biography with the aim of reflecting more closely on the interaction between individual and collective mobility, inspired among other by Bourdieu’s sociology, and he has tried to follow the trajectory of individual actors from parents to children or within the span of a life time by means of autobiographical material e.g. interviews. That is why Bertaux has remained one of the leading figures within this tradition till today. Within the area of educational research the British sociologist Ivor Goodson has in recent years published many studies focusing on the life histories of teachers (Goodson 1981,1992, 2003) with the explicit aim of using this method in order to throw light upon the interaction between structure and agency during a time when this type of sociology goes against the grain. In the abovementioned studies reflection about the advantages and disadvantages of the method has been developed. They do not just take it for granted that you can just ask people about their lives and just take the answer at face value. Also the French sociologist Bernard Lahire has developed the biographical methodology. His research has been based on Bourdieu’s work, at the same time with
the ambition of adjusting it. Lahire’s main point is that society has continued to develop since Bourdieu started, and it is today characterized by a greater individual variation, and therefore he thinks there is a need for sociological methods which can explain these individual differences and variations, how they arise and how they work. His main work:” the Culture of the individuals, cultural dissonance and distinction” (my translation) (Lahire 2003) is a research project consisting of a large number of interviews which documents the method as well as the results.

The Necessity and Risk of Biographical Sociology

The point of the article has been to show how critical realism today becomes necessary as a framework around biographical sociology in order to defend a position that life story and biographical research should be carried out not just to document how people’s lives evolve in the subjective sense, but also in order to explain life trajectories as they take place in modern societies accounting for underlying social structures and present day societal restructuring and change.

All the above authors use life histories or biographies in this way. But it is imperative to stress that in this sense the life story cannot be read as a subjective snapshot, but rather as a narrative which also indicates how it is in itself conditioned by the underlying social reality. Bourdieu expresses this very strongly in the following way:

“To understand means first to understand the field within which and against which one has created one’s self” (Bourdieu 1993:15).

Bourdieu points out that in reality, our lives are not constructed in the meaningful way which we are often led to believe through the life stories, often things and events happen completely at random or the connection is made behind our backs. It is the more objective life conditions which decide whether there is space for coherence, meaning and life projects to be accounted for in a narrative. It might be that many people have not really had a meaningful life, or a life to tell, because they have been pushed around from one meaningless event to the next, and they might not very much want to neither remember nor tell.

Sociology today needs biographical interviews, as a forceful reaction to large quantitative macro investigations and ”evidence” based research, but we will only produce half truths or even lies if we assume that we can say anything about social reality by asking people what they think and feel about their life only through hermeneutical and phenomenological perspectives which put reality into brackets in order to follow the subjective point of view - backwards so to say. This is the inherent risk in the increasing interest in biographies. In order to be taken seriously we need a framework that explicitly acknowledges the reality of structures behind stories and can engage in analyses of the interaction between agency and structure. Knowledge is to understand as well as explain meaning.
IACR Annual Conference 2006, University of Tromsø, August 11-13

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