INTRODUCTION

The mission of this article is almost impossible. We seek to examine together, under the same title, two approaches usually understood to be distinct from each other. The biographical approach has been regarded as an ‘ideographical’ and local method, while life course studies are considered ‘nomothetic’, and based on a positivist position. In modern parlance, the former represents the emic and the latter the etic point of view. What legitimates our examination is the work of Habermas (1971; 1987). In his theory of knowledge and human interests, Habermas distinguishes between technical and hermeneutic interests, and in his communicative theory, a distinction is carried out between the ‘system’ and the ‘life-world’. We argue that any analysis of social reality is insufficient unless both sides - the ‘outsider’s’ and the ‘insider’s’ point of view - are taken into account.

In the field of sociology, “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America”, by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) is the classic biographical study. Florian Znaniecki also published a two-volume textbook on the sociology of education. The first volume of his work deals with “educative society” and the second with “forming the educand” (Znaniecki 1928-30; Wlodarek 1994). Unfortunately the text is available only in Polish. Znaniecki’s work is located in an interesting way in the border area between G.H. Mead’s symbolic interactionism and the Parsonsian sociology. His concept of the ‘humanistic coefficient’ refers to what was later called the double hermeneutic nature of sociological phenomena: they are first interpreted by participants and then by researchers (Giddens 1976, 162). In educational research, the investigation of life experiences offers a way to study the very foundations of educative processes.

The work of the members of the Chicago school was influenced by the European humanistic tradition. Their ‘case studies’, theoretically grounded in G. H. Mead’s social psychology, and led by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Everett C. Hughes, used personal documents in versatile ways. Howard Becker’s study on teacher careers with its use of unstructured interviews represents the approach very well as late as the early 1950s (Becker 1970, 165-176). In his introduction to a new edition of Clifford Shaw’s “The Jack Roller”, Becker (1970, 73) expresses a wish that was realized to some extent in the 1980s and later:

“We can perhaps hope that a fuller understanding of the complexity of the scientific enterprise will restore sociologists’ sense of the versatility and worth of the life history. A new series of personal documents, like those produced by the Chicago School more than a generation ago, might help us in all the ways I have earlier suggested and in ways, too, that we do not now anticipate.”

The concept and perspective of the life course was developed in an approach which Karabel and Halsey (1977) call ‘methodological empiricism’ as recently as in the 1970s and 1980s. The aging population and the increasing demand for comparative studies in the globalizing world have accelerated the adoption of the interdisciplinary life course perspective.
How can we define the life course perspective and the biographical method? The subject of a life course study is an individual life or its trajectory. The intention is to describe and explain the social processes in which life-courses are constructed, and also to link them to each other. On the macro level, the interplay between social changes and aging in successive cohorts is a central theme (Riley 1986, 154). In a biographical study, at least one of its data—known as ‘life documents’—is collected in the form of a story or narrative in order to understand the lives and actions of these people (Denzin 1989).

**Sociological study of the life course**

Instead of developmental tasks, the conceptual points of departure in sociological life course studies may include the stages or phases of the life course, transitions, life trajectories, sequences of social roles, and internal and external turning points generating change (Elder 1985, 17-18). However, the life course itself also resembles sequences of life following each other: different areas and spheres of life can indeed be analysed as path-like trajectories where important life events function as turning points, and often signify transition from one disposition or role to another (O’Rand & Krecker 1990, 241-244).

Transitions during the life course have been referred to as turning points or key experiences in life. They are parts of trajectories and provide them with meaning. A transition may happen either according to norms or in an unpredictable manner. In the former case, we are dealing with norm-related transition, i.e., with transitions that can be expected to happen at a certain age. Such transitions include transition from primary to secondary education, from education to work life, marriage, and retirement. They are periods of change and growth when the person’s conceptions of self and one’s life change; some transitions become turning points in the individual’s life and may redirect her life course and strengthen her identity. While transition into certain central roles can be compared to the fulfillment of developmental tasks, sociological life course theories do not expect that certain roles should follow each other in a fixed order. (Clausen 1986; Elder 1985, 35; Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997, 39; Sikes, Measor & Woods 1985, 57-58.)

Life course studies examine life as the combined effects of a number of factors. The life course is not only about increasing chronological age. As a personal and social chain of events it is a temporal and historical phenomenon that can be conceived of as a process in which the trends of an era, belonging to a particular generation, and the related age-related differentiation are combined together. In addition to the choices of the individual, her life course is governed by different social, and cultural factors, in particular by social institutions, economic structures, and the educational system (Clausen 1986, 8; Heinz 1992, 9; Giele & Elder 1998, 23).

Life course studies often use the concept of trajectory to refer to an individual’s life-long path in a certain sphere of life. The life course may then be divided into a work or a family trajectory. As well, the development of an individual’s life course is conceptualized using the idea of career, which refers to one’s progress in professional life or in a particular organizational hierarchy. From a sociological point of view, the notion of career may also refer to a lifelong sequence of tasks to be completed in work life, regardless of the level and type of the profession or the tasks. Although this concept usually concentrates on an individual’s progress in one area of life, as an analytical tool it can be used in a much wider sense in referring to the different sequences of education and work, and transitions from one position to another in the different phases of an individual’s life course. (Elder 1985; Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997, 3; Kerckhoff 1993, 13.)
In a slightly similar way, many career theories also understand the phases of career development as being normative and based on a human being’s developmental stages. Seldom do they pay attention to social change or the whole life course of an individual. In the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, we can to question the applicability of the metaphors of trajectory and career, both of which were widely used in the 1980s to describe the transitions experienced by young people. More recently, researchers suggest that traditional careers are in the process of being replaced with different routes, paths, and bridges that are more individualized, more reflexive, more processual, and transformable by the individual. Also, the role of work, learning, and educational biographies has been emphasised. The metaphors of navigation and negotiation are used to emphasise both the individual’s opportunities to choose from a wider variety of options, and the risk of drifting when going through a period of transition. (Watts & McNair 1995, 163.)

The quantitative approach to life history has been developed under the name of event history analysis. Mayer and Tuma (1990) describe this approach as a mode of research using statistical methods with the aim of clarifying the exact timing, duration, and location in the life course of events that have taken place within a certain period of time.

The life course perspective is, however, characterized by theoretical and methodological pluralism. A partial reason for theoretical pluralism is the interdisciplinary mode of research. Multi-level analyses, in which the action of the individual is examined in light of historical, social, and economic change also contributes to theoretical pluralism. Methodological pluralism exists for similar reasons. Life course studies have used and benefitted from, for instance, biographical approaches, follow-up studies, historical demography, prospective panel research, and event history analysis. (O’Rand 1998, 66-67.)

Schooling and the change of the modern life course

Modernization has meant the institutionalization of the life course (Kohli 1985a; Meyer 1986). The self and the life course have become more individualized, while the definitions of transitions and age stages have become more unified. The whole life course is more homogenized and comprises four phases: childhood, education, work life, and retirement. As childhood and adulthood have distanced from each other, the period of youth inbetween has expanded and changed together with changes in society and mass education.

The effects of the increase in education can be seen in the life of an individual in a variety of ways. Although schooling locates the educated in the labour market, in different social strata, and influences social participation as well as the opportunity structure of welfare (Pallas 2000), it has not been able to transform the structural inequalities of race, class, and gender. European educational reforms have opened up social space and modernized social structures. Nonetheless, recent unemployment, today’s labour markets, the inflation of educational credentials, and the fact that habitus distinctions have not disappeared, have generated a kind of backlash (Alheit 1999). Thus, in addition to their economic resources, middle-class families’ symbolic, or cultural and social resources, assist them in maintaining their privileged position (Bourdieu 1984; Power 1999). According to Chisholm and Hurrelmann (1995), the consequences of increased educational competition for the life situation of contemporary youth can be divided into three major groups. First, difficulty in coping with transitions successfully has led to the experience of personal inadequacy. Second, in hard competition practically all young persons face the risk of failure. Third, the sphere of activities and competence where one searches for “currency” to be used in the markets of the transition goes through expansion and inflation. Cote (1996) has indeed pointed out
that identity capital is about to surpass the role of human and cultural capital as the most central mobility resource.

Pluralization and postmodernization are the central contemporary social trends, not equalization. The same pluralization and fragmentation also concerns the youth’s transition into adulthood and work life (Chisholm and Hurrelmann 1995).

The ups and downs of biographical research

The attraction and reward of biographical research are in its ability to reach the life world of the subject who defines her own reality in her everyday life. Biographical research may open up new perspectives onto the making of meaning taking place at the level of symbolic processes and questions dealing with social action and cultural experiences. What is characteristic of biographical research is that it combines humanistic values with scientific aims. Also, it has been seen to provide the silenced with a voice. (Bertaux & Kohli 1984, 233; Denzin 1989, 82.)

The Chicago School’s studies used various combinations of different methods, including observation, personal documents, and informal interviews. “The Polish Peasant” by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20) started this tradition. It draws on diaries, letters, and other personal documents. “The Polish Peasant” claims that in a process of change such as immigration, the individual, her family, and her community are all dependent on each other. This study was the first major sociological work to combine “the individual” with “the social”. According to Thomas and Znaniecki, subjective life histories allow researchers to make generalizations concerning a particular social group. Their reflections on the relationship between the subjective and the objective led to the classic social psychological statement: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas 1938, 571).

Another early study analyzing the methodological foundations of the life history method is John Dollard’s “Criteria for the Life History” (1949). For Dollard, life history offered a way to examine the relationship between the individual, culture, and social structures. In Dollard’s view, the narrating subject must be seen as an exemplar of the more general cultural condition: “detailed studies of the lives of individuals will reveal new perspectives on the culture as a whole which are not accessible when one remains on the formal cross sectional place of observation” (ibid., 4).

From the end of the Second World War to the mid-1960s, interest in the use of the biographical method decreased, mainly because of the emergence and popularity of quantitative survey-methods. In this period, theoretical models of the life course were developed, and a number of follow-up studies were conducted. The life course of an individual was understood to be connected with social change. It was thought that social development affects people of different ages in different ways, so the concepts of cohort, social age, and trajectory were introduced.

Since the 1970s, interest in the biographical method and its use has increased significantly. “Biography and Society”, based on the presentations by Bertaux’s new ISA group “Biography and Society”, was published in 1981. Thompson’s “The Voice of the Past: Oral History” saw the light of day in 1978. In general, the critique of positivism increased the popularity of qualitative research. The topics covered by biographical research have expanded, including now such varying fields as elite groups, migration and class formation, intergroup relations, the poor and their living conditions, and cultural and social change.
Biographies are not only methodological tools and objects of study. Their role has been highlighted in studies based on theories of reflective modernization where questions of constructing and maintaining one’s own life have become topical. Anthony Giddens (1991, 7-8) discusses the increase of self-reflexivity and the related increase in the autonomy of the biography, and Ulrich Beck (1992, 135) stresses the current transition from a standard to a do-it-yourself biography. They are not talking about the biographical method, however, but rather participating in a more metaphorical discussion concerning individualization and modernization. Indeed, Giddens (1991, 76) argued that a coherent self-identity requires a narrative since the self is made visible in narrative.

Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf (2000) talk about the biographical turn, a term they employ to refer to the subjective or cultural turn in late modern society where the personal meanings the individual attributes to her action gain increasingly more weight. The attempt to give voice to marginalized groups, or those left outside dominant research paradigms in modern society, occupies a central place in today’s biographical research.

The recent emphasis on the importance of biographies is part of a more general paradigmatic change. This change can be understood, in part, as an attempt to combine the analysis of the microlevel with that of the macrolevel, and in part as a sign that the issues of individualization, reflexivity, individuality, and identity have entered the centre of research (Alheit 1999; Rustin 2000, 34-39). In an individualizing world, many social identities, including class, gender, generation, and race, appear to be less clear than before. Consequently, it has been argued that the production and reproduction of social identities takes place at the personal, subjective level, which forces the researchers to study society through the individual, her biography, and her world of experience. Thus biographies rooted in both social history and analysis of the individual personality, have offered a possibility to discuss experiences and processes amidst social change. The biographical method is understood to be able to link the personal with the social. At the same time, as Erben (1998, 16) points out, researchers have discovered how difficult, and in the end impossible, it is to distinguish between the two in a straightforward manner.

Defining the biographical approach

The terms life story and biographical narrative usually refer to an individual’s freely told, either written or spoken, story of her own life (Alheit 1994, 13; Denzin 1997). When the historical nature of the object under study is emphasised, researchers use the terms oral history (Thompson 1978), life history (Goodson 1981), or personal history. Although the terms life story and life history are often used as synonyms, there is a slight difference between them. While the former term refers to the individual’s own subjective and often retrospective narrative of past events and their meaning, the latter is a more objective description of the individual’s life course. In other words, life stories are connected to life history when the analysis locates them in their social, historical, economic, and situational context. Here the person’s own story is often combined with other materials, including interviews with family members and official documents. (Bogdan & Taylor 1975, 7; Goodson 1981, 67) As Titon (1980, 278) puts it, “a story is made, but history is found out.”

The centre of the biographical research interview is the individual. In discussing her life events, she is primarily expressing herself and her experiences, and secondarily is she commenting on society surrounding her. Thus, the objective world gains its meaning in and through the individual’s interpretation. The life story expresses those meaningful parts the narrator has selected as the content of her narrative, for instance, what she remembers, wants to tell, and finds important. The selection of the narrated is dependent on the hearer and the interview situation, too. Since, in this
process, certain issues are chosen to be told and presented in a certain manner, it is not possible to
tell a life story in exactly the same manner more than once, but there exists a possible narrative of
past events for each occasion. The life story is varied both in content and narrative style: the
individual has several stories to tell. Hence, the narrator who describes what has happened has an
authorizing role: what to tell and what to leave out. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 5)

When a person tells her life story, she also explains her choices and expresses her subjectivity.
Identity can be composed of the significant parts of the life story. When the individual narrates her
life story, she provides an answer to the question: “Who am I?” (Gergen & Gergen 1983; Riessman
1993, 15). From a phenomenological perspective, the narratives of the individuals do not so much
reflect reality as they create it by allowing individuals to give meanings to their past events and
experiences, both collective and individual. Therefore, the meanings produced in life stories are not
stable and universal, but changing and contextual.

The central problematic of biographical research deals with the relationship between the individual
and the collective. How can we discuss the unique and the individual, and the shared and the
cultural at the same time? In what ways are individual experiences and socio-historical contexts
related to each other? Voices critical of biographical research have claimed that the emphasis on
the individual and the specific means that too little attention is given to the social. However,
Plummer (1996, 224) argues that in biographical research the polarization between the individual
and the social is often artificial since in life stories the two are always found intertwined.
According to the view of interactionism, the individual and society are unified in collective
behaviour, and the self also expresses an idea of the other who is always present in all spheres of
life.

Thus, the social context is not something separate from the story, but it is realized in the
individual’s narrative. A story about the self is also a story about the world surrounding the self.

Events also need be located in two frameworks, the original chronological one and the narrative
one. Since narrativity is connected with language and its actual use, the student of biography has to
reflect on the role and meaning of language as a medium of human understanding. Meanings are
produced in cultural discourse, in fixed ways of speaking about particular issues. In this sense no
meaning is private and subjective, but rather, public and shared. According to this line of thinking,
different cultural discourses “speak” in the life stories of individuals, and images produced in
biographies are in many ways images of a particular society. That society and culture are always
present in narratives can be seen in another way too. Life is always narrated in a particular way,
guided by certain discourses, cultural and social rules, norms, and ideals. In addition, an individual
tells about her life both in the framework of her own individual experiences and as a representative
of a certain cohort, generation, class, and culture (Gergen & Gergen 1983; Randall 1996, 236-237).

If the narration of the life story is thought of as interaction between the interviewer and the
interviewee, it can also be explored from this perspective. The interview setting always provides
the teller with certain conditions that the researcher should seek to analyse.

In this sense, stories are delicate, and they are always told to someone with a certain purpose.
Denzin (1989) argues on the basis of interpretive interactionism the interviewer should try to
identify in her own way with the world of the people she is studying, and to experience the
problems of that world in the manner of those under study. She should seek elements that are
renewable, structural, interactional, and meaningful in the social world of her subjects. The closer
the contact between the researcher and the interviewer, the more difficult it is for her to hold on to
theoretical premises that cannot be applied when studying the social reality of the individual or group being examined.

Traditionally, social scientific biographical research has defined autobiography as a socio-historical document. Thus, life has been examined with the help of a narrative considered as real history, as an **objective biography**. Today’s researcher is not content to read biographies as mere life histories, as records of lived life, however, but seeks to pay increasingly more attention to the ways and conventions in which life is narrated, and the experienced and the lived described. The act of narrating one’s biography can be considered as a type of discourse: when an individual narrates her biography using language actively, she constructs her version of the events in her life and their meaning. From this perspective, a biography is a text and a cultural product, the same as a fictionalized biography. Life stories can be approached from a phenomenological point of view as subjective life stories. In this approach, the focus is on both **life as lived** and the experiential dimension of past events, **life as experienced**, or the subjective interpretation of objective experiences, and the way in which the individual understands and gives meanings to her own history (Bruner 1986, 6).

On the basis of these approaches, we can argue that there are two separate analytical ways to study life stories, **narrative analysis** and **the analysis of narratives** (Polkinghore 1995, 12). The former refers to the application of methods that examine language and its use in a detailed manner, such as discourse analysis, to the analysis of narratives as stories with meanings. The latter refers to approaches where narratives are gathered together and used as materials enabling one to explore the phenomenon under study.

**Biographies return to the sociology of education**

Before the 1990s, the use of biographical methods in the sociology of education was surprisingly rare. Philip Jackson’s “Life in Classroom” (1968) and Peter Woods’s “Sociology and the School: Interactionist Viewpoint” (1983) were excellent ethnographies of school life, but they do not use biographical approaches at all. Becker’s articles, based on his dissertation dealing with teacher careers in Chicago, and his co-authored ethnographical study of the culture of students of medicine are pioneering texts in the field (Becker1970, 151-176). Becker studied topics considered important by the people he studied. He was informed by his subjects, yet not defined by them. In addition to observations, he used the open interview technique. In this approach, the informants define their situation and problems themselves, and the interviewer’s questions shape the agenda of the interview. On the basis of Becker’s writings, a number of concepts have entered the toolkit of sociologists: perspective, situational adjustment, and the ideal pupil, among others (Burgess 1995).

Goodson (1981) is one of the researchers who returned the biographical method to the sociology of education. Through his work, Goodson (1988; 1992) shows that commonly-held views of the timelessness and interchangeability of teachers are not valid. Goodson’s work links the teacher’s personal biography with the history of society; for him, life history is a form of biography, but one located in its historical and social context. In his study, he talks about teachers, but he also talks to teachers as one speaks to active agents. The relationship between the researcher and those whom he researches is a mode of bargaining where both partners have something to give and take (Sikes and Measor 1992). The discussion between the researcher and those who provide her with biographies is particularly illuminating if the latter are also researchers. It can be even more so if they are critical researchers aiming at changing reality, whose biographies, if scratched, might also show a theory (Torres 1998).
In the study of adult education, the biography studies group of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) has been particularly active (Alheit, Bron-Wojciechowska, Brugger & Dominicé 1995). Its activities have demonstrated the national traditions of biographical research. Such traditions existed in Europe long before the return of the renewed sociological biographical methods. The question of the meaning of biography has become a challenge to adult education. Many recent developments have led to the recognition of the capacity for learning and education offered by biographicity, biographical knowledge and qualifications. These include the aim of lifelong learning, recognition of the significance of informal educational processes, and the centrality of the questions of identity and otherness. While the social has become biographised in late modern society, environments of learning have changed in at least three ways: traditional life worlds have eroded, class-based milieux have broken down, and ‘normal’ scripts for life have disappeared (Alheit 1999).

As far as we know, one of the few studies concerning the educational and learning biographies of people from different generations, with varying social and cultural backgrounds, was conducted in Finland, a society of particularly rapid change (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin & Kauppila 1995; Antikainen, Houtsonen, Kauppila, Komonen, Koski & Käyhkö 1999). While Finland’s neighbour, Sweden, made the transition from an agricultural society to industrial capitalism over about 100 years, Finland went through the same changes between 1960 and 1975. While the structures of the welfare state were shaken in the early 1990s, they did not entirely disappear even though the economic depression was relatively deeper than that of the 1930s. In this socio-historical context, the inter-generational differences are quite clear (Huotelin & Kauppila 1995) and education is a strong maker of identity. Learning biographies show significant learning experiences, even if they occur outside formal education, function as turning points, keeping lifelong learning going (Antikainen 1998). It has been pointed out, as well, that the teacher support is particularly important for the construction of educational paths of working-class children, especially girls (Käyhkö & Tuupanen 1997. The research group claims that education has a plethora of meanings depending on the socio-historical context and the life situation of the individual. These meanings are something that the technocratic evaluation of education characteristic of neoliberalist education policy is not able to achieve.

Life as lived vs. life as told

Recent debates in sociological biography studies consider the relationship between life as lived, and life as told. What is the relationship between one’s life story and life course? Does such a thing as a true story really exist? These questions stem from the basic conflict involved in interview data: while it is the aim of the interview to detect the individual’s own subjective world of experience, the researcher still hopes that the person’s own voice is able to give a detailed description of what has really happened.
Usher (1998, 21) points out that the relationship between the lived and the told life is that of referentiality and constructivity. Attempts to deal with life stories as “real life” have been found to be problematic. A narrative explanation is always retroactive. Past events are explained retrospectively from the present, the end result of action. Since human memory is dynamic, the same person can interpret the same experience in different ways at different points in time. Neisser (1994, 1-2) states that while the remembering self is always an embodied social actor and thus, a part of real everyday life, the remembered self is always an interpretation and a construct.

Since biographies are deemed to be stories constructed from the present, Bourdieu (1987) criticizes their treatment as “life as lived”. He talks about the ‘biographical illusion’, referring to the idea that a coherent story does not correspond to a reality that is lacking in coherence and continuity. The narrator of a written biography in particular, faces the problematic task of transforming the discontinuous into the continuous, and the fragmentary into the coherent, so that the text has a form. As a result, the point can be made that the more literary the story is, the less true it is likely to be.

In response to Bourdieu’s critique, Denzin’s (1989, 62) argues:

“The point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or a reality. Rather, what must be established is how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies. The sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered."

Constructivists, for their part, emphasise the construction of life in language. They turn the focus onto the present, and argue that the past is always built and remembered in the terms of the present. From the perspective of the discursive character of life stories, narrativity, and the stories’ relation to language, narration is seen primarily as a social and pragmatic act. After tellings and retellings, the story starts to live its own life, and the self becomes a changing audience, created in stories, to whom the story about the self is told (Bruner 1986, 11-12; van Langenhove & Harré 1993, 96-97).

If an objective approach, embodied in the attempt to treat narrated life as real, and the related way of reading life stories as referential narratives of what has really happened, is not unproblematic, the same applies to the discussion life stories as texts that do not have any counterparts in real life. To break the bond between life and narrativity appears to lead to a problematic situation. It is as if the story told by an individual of her own life had no relationship to her own life; this would also abolish the relationship between the individual’s identity and the life stories she has told.

How then to find a balance between the forms of life, lived and told? How to abandon the idea of life stories as facts without hitting the rocks of relativism? One can approach the truthfulness of life stories from an interpretative perspective, a perspective claiming that life stories are basically stories aiming at reality and truth. Here, truth is understood to stem from the unique perspective of the narrator. According to Roos (1994), the core of the life story cannot be found in the way in which it catalogues facts and events. What is more important is how these past events have been experienced, and how they have been constructed in consciousness. What matters is what is remembered, not what is forgotten. The truth is found in the experiences of the individual. Since people act according to what they believe to be true, their beliefs and experiences have a real meaning in their lives.

In the examination and assessment of life stories, one has to pay attention to their complexity as social and historical facts, as well as to their subjective representations and interpretations. When subjective experiences are chosen as the starting point of the analysis and the organization of materials, one has to realize the problem of the subjective document. A life story is not a direct
reflection of what has happened, but a combination of what has been lived (the subjective) and what has happened (the objective). It has its conditions of production that limit and guide its genesis. Since a life story is some kind of a construction in the human mind, dependent on cultural rules and the use of language, it could be said to reflect theories of potential lives. Life stories are always constructions built in the interview setting, whose relationship with actual life events is mediated through the individual and the way in which she interprets and gives meanings to them. Thus, it is not possible for anyone to recapture one’s own life course as such, with its all phases, events, and experiences—all later interpretations of the meanings of events have shaped it into a different type of reality (Bruner 1986; McAdams 1996, 145).

Despite the fact that life as lived and life as told are not the same thing, the gap between them is not too wide. Yet, frequently, methodical debates concerning biographical research forget that life as action and life story as a narrative have their own rules and structures. They are not, and should not, be considered one and the same.

Towards a new synthesis?

The shared context of both life course and biography research traditions is contemporary social change. The traditional conception of the life course has been challenged in a variety of ways. Researchers, who rely on such terms as individualization, choice, and risk, or biographisation of social have emphasised the diminishing linearity of the life course and its transformation into the complex model prevalent in late modern societies. At the level of education, this can be seen in at least two ways: in the lengthening and expansion of education, and in the shift from formerly stable careers into fragmentary, episodic, and experimenting educational paths, characterized by different transitions and ruptures related to educational and labour markets. The biography appears both as long-term plans and as a field of learning where the life project and identity have to be reshaped flexibly on the basis of transitions in the life course.

Thus, it can be concluded that social transformation is, once again, writing the history of the methods of the social sciences. Change in the life course and in everyday life, though slower than the change of social structure, cannot remain invisible regardless of the different approaches used to study it. This fact creates a possibility for dialogue, especially between those who conduct research into turning points, and those who study transitions.
Bibliography


