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**Gabriele Rosenthal**

## **Reconstruction of Life Stories**

### **Principles of selection in generating stories for narrative biographical interviews**

#### **1. Introductory Remarks**

„What can be done with life stories?“ This question was posed by Daniel Bertaux (1981) in the introduction to his „Biography and Society“. At that time, research interest in life stories was largely concerned with using them as sources of information about a reality existing outside the text. Meanwhile, however, especially in West Germany, this question has taken on another meaning: the life story itself, seen as a social construct in its own right, has increasingly become the focus of social-scientific research. Empirically founded concepts and programmatic outlines of biographical theory have been put up for discussion by sociologists like Martin Kohli, Fritz Schütze, and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal<sup>1</sup> to name a few. Methodology and methods of reconstructing life histories out of oral biographical presentations have been developed continuously; the method of obtaining narrative interviews as presented by Fritz Schütze (1977; 1983) is meanwhile established in sociological methods. A conclusive argument was presented to find a way out of the dead-end street of the subject-society dualism by means of the concept „biography“. „Researching the biographical as social entity“ implies both, the question of the social function of biographies as well as the question of the social processes that constitute biographies (Fischer-Rosenthal 1991:253).

Conceiving of biography as a social construct comprising both social reality and the subject's experiential world raises the next question, which is, how can one set about re-constructing a social structure that is constantly being reaffirmed and transformed in the interaction between biographical experience and socially defined schemata? Or, more simply, how does one proceed from a given autobiographical text to life itself? To what extent is one receiving an account of an 'actual' life history<sup>2</sup> and to what extent is one being presented with the autobiographer's present construction of his or her past, present, and future life? With its emphasis on methodological and procedural aspects of reconstructing narrated life stories, the following contribution attempts to answer some of these questions.

Before we can make assumptions about the social reality to which a text is referring, we must first of all gain some understanding of the structure of the text, or data base, itself.

In the following, the data base consists of the transcribed texts of a series of biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze 1977; 1992). In all of these interviews, the autobiographical narrators - so-called biographers<sup>3</sup> -, were asked, by means of an initial opening question, to give a full extempore narration (as opposed to an argument or a theoretical exposition) of events and experiences from their own lives. The ensuing story, or 'main narrative', is not interrupted by further questions but is encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention, such as 'mhm'. In the second part of the interview - the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Kohli 1986a, 1986b; Schütze 1983, 1984; Fischer-Rosenthal 1989, 1991

<sup>2</sup> By life history we mean the lived through life; by life story we mean the narrated life as related in a conversation or written in an actual present-time.

<sup>3</sup> We prefer the term biographer instead of autobiographer; the latter does not account for the social constitution of the subject and the social construction of his or her life history.

‘period of questioning’ - the interviewer initiated, with narrative questions<sup>4</sup>, more elaborate narrations on topics and biographical events already mentioned. In addition, blocked-out issues were addressed.

Analyzing such narrated life stories we distinguish two levels: the analysis of the lived through, the experienced life history (the genetical analysis) and the analysis of the narrated life story. Purpose of the genetical analysis is the reconstruction of the biographical meaning of experiences at the time they happened and further the reconstruction of the chronological sequence of experiences in which they occurred. The purpose of the analysis of the narrated life story, mainly based on the procedure of thematic field analysis, is the reconstruction of the present meanings of experiences and the reconstruction of the temporal order of the life story in the present time of narrating or writing. The thematic field analysis is particularly concerned with discovering the mechanisms of selection guiding the biographer’s choice and production of textual elements (or stories) in relation to the general thematic orientation of the interview. The objective of this analytical step is to reconstruct the form and structure of the narrated life story, i.e. the way in which it is temporally and thematically ordered in the interview.

Goal of a hermeneutical case reconstruction is on one hand the reconstruction of the life history, i.e. the experienced, lived through life history, and on the other hand the reconstruction of the life story, i.e. the narrated life story. Life story and life history always come together, they are continuously dialectically linked and produce each other; this is the reason why we are forced as sociologists to reconstruct **both** levels no matter if our main target is either the life history or the life story.

The focus of this article is on the thematic field analysis. This stage of analysis is largely founded on the methodological approach of Fritz Schütze (1976a; 1983) as well as upon suggestions put forward by Wolfram Fischer (1982) on thematic field analysis; these in turn refer to the theoretical works on Aron Gurwitsch (1964). The method developed by the author is an attempt at a practical application of a structuralist variant of the phenomenological sociology of knowledge. It involves reconstructing the subjects’ system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives, their classification of experiences in thematic fields, but not in the sense of just reconstructing their intentional meaning. Our aim is rather to reconstruct the interactional significance of the subject’s actions, the underlying structure of the biographers interpretations of her or his life, which may go beyond the subject’s own intentions.

Since it is easier to understand a method such as this by following it as a dynamic process using a practical example, we shall demonstrate this step of analysis by means of a simplified interpretation of a real interview (cf. Section 5). It is the life story of a German witness of National Socialism, who became a member of the Hitler-Youth in 1933 and participated in World War II as a soldier.

But before embarking on the actual thematic field analysis of this case, some theoretical remarks about the structure of life stories in general (cf. section 2), about the complete procedure of a hermeneutic case reconstruction (cf. section 3), and especially about the thematic field analysis (cf. section 4) will be presented.

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<sup>4</sup> The goal of narrative questions is to elicit further narrations. They must not be put in such a way that they trigger argumentations or legitimizing account. The biographer is asked to elaborate in greater detail on a previously mentioned experience, event, or period of her or his life.

## 2. The structure of narrated life stories

One of the major objectives of biographical research is to encompass the total life of an individual (Kohli 1986a). A naive understanding of this could, theoretically, lead to the expectation that a person's whole biographical experience should be reconstructed and analyzed in its entirety<sup>5</sup>. This of course would have overwhelming consequences both for subject and researcher even in the phase of data collection, ideally requiring ongoing interviewing throughout the subject's lifetime. So the term 'total life' clearly cannot be taken as meaning simply a review of every single event that ever took place in a person's life but must rather be interpreted in the Gestalt sense of biography as a comprehensive, general pattern of orientation, that is nevertheless selective to the extent to which it separates the relevant from the irrelevant. In practice, this means that the oral account has to be even more selective; as Martin Kohli (1986a:93) points out, „with reference to the total 'material' of life, any life story is highly selective and aggregating“. The narrated life story thus represents the biographer's overall construction of his or her past and anticipated life, in which biographically relevant experiences are linked up in a temporally and thematically consistent pattern (Fischer 1982). It is this biographical overall construct that ultimately determines the way in which the biographer re-constructs the past and makes decisions as to which individual experiences are relevant, which should or may be included and which he or she would rather omit.

The stories which are selected by the biographer to present his life history cannot be regarded as a series of isolated experiences, laid down in chronological order like so many strata of sedimentary rock; individual experiences are always embedded in a coherent, meaningful context, a biographical construct. They are a part of the overall pattern of thematic and temporal relationships that make up the experience of a lifetime. Reconstructing his or her own life history, the subject connects and relates single events, actions and experiences with other events, actions and experiences according to substantive and temporal patterns that do not necessarily follow the linear sequence of the 'objective time' but rather conform to a perspectivist time model of 'subjective' or 'phenomenal' time (Fischer 1982:138-215). The present perspective determines what the subject considers biographically relevant, how he or she develops thematic and temporal links between his or her various experiences and how past, present or anticipated future realities influence his or her personal interpretation of the meaning of his or her life.

We can thus assume that the process of selection being carried out by the biographer whilst presenting his or her life story is no haphazard or arbitrary, merely reflecting possible interactive influences of the interview situation or a passing mood. A life story does not consist of an atomistic chain of experiences, whose meaning is created at the moment of their articulation, but is rather a process taking place simultaneously against the backdrop of a biographical structure of meaning, which determines the selection of the individual episodes presented, and within the context of the interaction with a listener or imaginary audience. This texture of meaning is constantly reaffirmed and transformed in the 'flux of life'. It is constituted by the interweaving of socially prefabricated and given patterns of planning and interpretation the 'normal' life, together with the biographically relevant events and experiences and their ongoing reinterpretations. These reinterpretations are usually hidden from the conscious access of the biographer; they are constituted by the biographical overall construction - sometimes manifest in the narration as global evaluation, molding the past,

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<sup>5</sup> This was in fact postulated by W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1958, II: 1832), who claimed that „life records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material“.

present and anticipated future (Fischer 1982)<sup>6</sup>. The order we can discover in a life story is neither caused by subjective achievements of the individual, nor a simple product of objective social pre-given patterns, neither by ideas, nor by facts, but this order is brought about by the 'world-experiencing life' (welterfahrendes Leben) to take Edmund Husserl's term. It is the order of the primordial interrelation of 'world' and 'I'.

The narrated life story thus represents a sequence of mutually inter-related themes which, between them, form a dense network of interconnected cross-references (Fischer 1982:168). In Aron Gurwitsch's terminology (1964), the individual themes are 'elements of a thematic field'. The thematic field is defined as the sum of events or situations copresented in connection with the theme, which are perceived as being objectively related to the theme, and which form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus. According to Wolfram Fischer's method of thematic field analysis (1982), which is based on Gurwitsch's conception, these fields are reconstructed in the thematic field analysis.

Returning to the central objective of biographical research mentioned above, that it should ideally comprehend the total life of an individual, we can now express this in different terms: what we are in fact attempting is a reconstruction of both the narrator's biographical overall construct and the biographically relevant experiences. The relationship between the overall construct and the relevant experiences must be conceived of as reciprocal: the construct determines the relevancy of an experience and the cumulative relevant experiences form the construct. When reconstructing a life history, the first step is to analyze this interaction between construct and narrated experiences; only then can one embark on the analysis of the accumulated experiences themselves. Only when some insight has been acquired into the structure and form of the data base, the life story, can general propositions be made as to the importance of the separate episodes and their meaning for the narrator and the further course of his or her life.

Reconstructing the narrated life story we have to take into account another phenomenon. Each interview is a product of the mutual interaction between speaker and listener. The narrator does not simply reproduce pre-fabricated stories from her or his life regardless of the interactional situation, but rather creates his or her story within the social process of mutual orientation according to his or her definition of the interview situation. The neopositivist research tradition would regard this aspect as an irritant which must be eliminated, reduced or at least controlled. In our view, trying to eliminate a 'problem' such as this amounts to a quixotic fight against imagined giants, giants which in the final analysis are revealed to be not even windmills but rather the 'winds' of the everyday world. The 'wind' driving the mill that is creating biographical constructs cannot be eliminated without eliminating the constructs themselves, since this wind is in fact the ongoing interaction between the biographer and his or her social world. Life stories, taken as constructs, are inseparable from these interactional processes; they themselves evolve out of the genetic process of interaction, just as their presentation in the biographical research interview is a product of the interaction between narrator and listener.

Withing the interactional framework of the interview the biographer relates his or her life story in a thematically focussed context based on negotiations about what the interactants consider relevant. Life stories are not finished products ready to be 'served up' on demand.

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<sup>6</sup> Biographical overall construct is the term for that context of meaning which is consciously not at the disposal of the biographer; by biographical global evaluation we mean his conscious interpretations.

The story evolves around a thematic topic, usually established by the interviewer, in a manner judged by the narrator to be of interest to the listener<sup>7</sup>. The topics can center on a certain period of the biographer's life, on experiences arising in connection with certain historical or social events, or on a single biographical strand such as the person's occupational career. By putting forward such topics the interviewer is providing the biographer with a framework for selecting the stories to be included. How the interviewee actually interprets the topic suggested, whether he or she keeps to it or whether he or she orients his or her narration primarily towards what he or she supposes to be of interest to the interviewer or to himself/herself - these are all empirical questions which can only be answered in the individual case analysis.

To sum up, one could say that the narrated life story, as it evolves around a specified thematic focus, represents a general construct of biographical experiences which is a coagulate derived from past interactional episodes and future expectations, and is simultaneously a product of the biographer's present situation. This biographical overall construct, a coagulate of the past and future and a creation of the lived present, determines the selective principles guiding the narrator's choice of stories to be related in the interview.

This construct which is not at the biographers conscious disposal, not only constitutes the selection of experiences out of one's memory. It also constitutes how the biographer perceives these experiences today. In Gurwitsch's terms: as what topics they offer themselves and in which thematic fields they are embedded.

The methodological consequence of this is that, before embarking on an analysis of the stratified biographical experiences themselves (the genetic analysis), one must reconstruct these selective principles, the underlying structure of the text.

### 3. Hermeneutic Case Reconstruction

Before starting on the thematic field analysis itself, a few general comments on the method of hermeneutic case reconstruction are necessary (cf. Rosenthal 1987; 1990). The procedure is based on Ulrich Oevermann's objective hermeneutics (Oevermann et. all. 1979; 1980), on the method of narrative and text analysis developed by Fritz Schütze (1979a; 1983) and on the thematic field analysis of Wolfram Fischer (1982).

Two principles are of fundamental importance in the hermeneutic reconstruction of texts: the principle of reconstructive analysis and the principle of *sequentiality*. In contrast to a logically subsuming, classificatory approach, reconstructive analysis avoids confronting the text with pre-defined systems of variables and classifications. Instead, the researcher progresses „reconstructively from the explication of the structuring of a given concrete social sequence to the general structural type“ (Oevermann 1983:246). Following Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of abduction, theoretical knowledge is applied as a heuristic: „Abduction makes its start from the facts, without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motivated by the feeling that a theory is needed to explain the surprising facts“ (Peirce 1979:7.219).

The principle of *sequentiality* makes allowance for the process aspect of social activity. It starts from the assumption that every action represents a choice between the alternatives

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<sup>7</sup> If the interviewer does not set a specific topic but asks the biographer in a general way to tell his or her life story the narrator him- or herself will select those topics, which are relevant for him or her. This method has the advantage to learn, how the biographer - if at all - is embedding the topic of our interest in the presentation of his/her life story.

potentially available in a certain situation. Action sequences which are manifested in texts as reported activities, are thus processes of selection which, independently of the narrator's perspective, result in certain subsequent actions whilst at the same time eliminating certain other possibilities. Translated into practical terms, a methodological approach therefore requires a procedure of analysis that takes into account such aspects as the range of possibilities open to the subject in a certain situation, the selection he or she makes, the possibilities he or she ignores and the consequences of his or her decision. It was on the basis of these theoretical considerations that the method of sequential analysis was developed: Interpretation is thus the reconstruction of the meaning of the text following the sequence of events. In terms of the method of abductive reasoning, sequential analysis involves generating hypotheses on the possibilities contained in a given unit of empirical data, deducing to hypotheses as to possible further developments (follow-up hypotheses) and, in a third step, contrasting these with the actual outcome (empirical testing).

The aim of this process is to reconstruct the structure of the case. The leads on to questions such as whether the case, or biographer, in opting for a particular course of action, systematically eliminates other possible interpretations or actions, i.e. whether there are certain underlying rules to be discovered which are influencing his or her decisions. For this reason, we begin our case analysis with trying to imagine which options are potentially open to the case in a particular situation. We then look at his or her actual choice and so try to determine to what extent, in different situations, he or she tends systematically and irrevocably to exclude certain potential options.

In the biographical analysis of life stories, sequential analysis is carried out at two levels: genetic analysis; i.e. the analysis of the reproduction and transformation processes in the narrator's life history, and thematic field analysis, which is the analysis of the biographer's biographical overall construction in the narrational present.

In genetic analysis the attempt is made to reconstruct as far as possible the actual sequence of events in the course of the biographer's life. Thematic field analysis is concerned with the sequences as they are presented in the text. In order to avoid false interpretations the social researcher is forced to reconstruct both levels, regardless of whether the primary research interest is to reconstruct a life history or to determine the narrator's present perspective and biographical construction.

The genetic analysis of a text that has evolved in the spoken or written present and refers to an experienced past requires a previous analysis of the form and structure of this data base. The first question to be put when analyzing a text is not, what really happened at that time or how accurately is the contemporary witness reporting events but, what is the biographer's present perspective and which selective principles are guiding his or her choice of stories. And vice versa, before one can draw conclusions about the biographical overall construct, about the biographer's present perspective, one must be in possession of certain information about his or her life. For example, one cannot make assumptions about displacement in time (such as that the biographer is displacing an unpleasant memory out of a period generally considered to have been pleasant into an earlier, less pleasant phase) if the actual chronological sequence has not been reconstructed beforehand in a separate analytical step.

**Procedure.** The analysis of such biographical self presentations, which are selected for single case analysis after a global analysis of all interviews, according to the model of theoretical sampling (Glaser/Strauss 1967: 45-78) is based on a full transcription of the audio-tape according to its audible Gestalt. The steps of analysis are:

1. analysis of the biographical data
2. thematic field analysis (reconstruction of the life *story*)

3. reconstruction of the life *history*
4. micro-analysis of individual text segments
5. contrastive comparison of life history and life story.

**Analysis of the biographical data.** Before embarking upon thematic field analysis, the 'objective' biographical data are interpreted in the manner suggested by Ulrich Oevermann et al. (1980). All data which can stand more or less independently of the narrator's own interpretation are extracted from the interview and interpreted with respect to the sedimentation of their possible meaning for the narrator. In contrast to thematic field analysis, which analyzes the material in the order in which it was presented during the interview, this first step attempts to reconstruct the actual chronology of the life history itself.

This analytical step is done in preparation of the reconstruction of the life history, in which our analysis is compared with such narrations of the autobiographer that match the single biographical data. Further we obtain by this step a contrasting backdrop for the thematic field analysis, which allows us to see, which biographical data are blown up narratively and in which sequence they are presented.

**Reconstruction of the life history.** After the thematic field analysis, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the paper, reconstructing the life history takes into account - according to the logic of the analysis of biographical objective data - all other biographical experiences and puts them into the chronology of the experienced life history. At this point of the analysis biographical data or experiences are contrasted with the narrations and self interpretations of the biographer. The preceded thematic field analysis provides important hints on the present perspective of the autobiographers, on their biographical overall construct and on biographical evaluations in the present time of the interview. But now the task is, to reconstruct the perspective of the past, to reconstruct the biographical meaning which the experiences had at that time when they happened.

In the step of thematic field analysis single sequences are interpreted in their functional meaning for the total biographical self presentation. In the reconstruction of the case history the Gestalt of the lived through life history is deciphered. One has to reconstruct in the latter step the functional meaning of a biographical experience for the total Gestalt of the lived life history and thus one has to avoid consequently to atomise single biographical experiences.

Whereas in thematic field analysis we reconstruct e.g. at which point in his biographical self presentation (i.e. the interview) the autobiographer tells about his/her experiences in the Hitler-Youth and in which thematic field these sequences are embedded, we look now how these experiences are embedded in his/her lived life history, ask when he/she joined the organization in his/her life and what other things happened at that time in his/her life, in which phase of life he/she was highly identified and when he/she started to detach himself.

In other words, we thus try to depict as well the shaping of the the narrated life story as well as the shaping of the lived life history - not forgetting their mutual dependence. The two separate analytical steps just focus on the two sides of the one coin.

**Micro-analysis of individual text segments.** In this part of the analysis all hypothesis - those on the meaning of experiences in the lived life history and those on the biographical overall concepts and evaluations of the life story - developed in the steps before are checked in detailed analyses of single text segments.

What segments are chosen? One line are the hypotheses and the other line is what we did not understand so far. Along the line of one hypothesis we choose a segment that seems to be



likely to falsify this particular hypothesis. But when actually analyzing this piece of text, we exclude the former hypothesis systematically till the completion of the analysis. Excluding former interpretations is already implied in the process of decontextualization of the piece under consideration; the segment is just analyzed sequentially, without looking at the interview context. Interpreting one utterance all kinds of possible contexts are put up in phantasy in a mind-experimental manner, contexts that would make this utterance meaningful according to our normalcy expectations. Following step by step line by line the inner context is unfolding. Having completed this step of analysis one can return to the former results and can compare these last findings with the total context of the biographical self-presentation (narrative) and with the total Gestalt of the lived through life history.

**Contrastive comparison of life history and life story.** This last analytical step provides us with insight in mechanisms of selecting experiences for the life story, the way they are presented and the differences between past and present perspective, in general insights in the differences of the temporality of narrated and lived life. Let me give a short example. We have found out in thematic field analysis that a biographer presents his life under the biographical global evaluation: „Since Stalingrad I opposed National Socialism“. Consequently he had all relevant experiences ordered and put in a way as if they all would have happened before Stalingrad (1943). However, the micro-analysis of a textsegment lead to the interpretation that he still identified himself with the German Wehrmacht after the capitulation in 1945. Further the reconstruction brought forth his turning point and distancing from National Socialism only later in his time of prisoner of war. At this point of the analysis we are able to ask, which function for the biographer this kind of presentation has and further ask, which biographical experiences fostered this kind of self-presentation.

#### 4. Thematic field analysis

As was explained above, the object of this analytical step is to reconstruct the form and structure of the narrated life story, i.e. the way in which it is temporally and thematically ordered in the interview.

In preparation for the analysis the interview text is first sequentialized, i.e. briefly summarized in the form of a list of separate units which are divided up according to the following criteria: turn-taking (changes of speaker, textual sorts (changes in style of presentation, such as argumentation, describing or narration<sup>8</sup>, cf. Kallmeyer/Schuetze 1977) and thematic shifts<sup>9</sup>. According to a theory of narration (cf. Schuetze 1976) narrations transmit former experiences, whereas argumentations represent the perspective of the present. The sequences, themes, or stages of the life story at which the biographer argues, describes, or narrated are noted. The narrative segments are also categorized according to the various styles of narration, such as whether they are reported (sequences of events are chained together without expanding upon

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<sup>8</sup> **Narrations** refer to single sequences of events from the past. Sequences of actual or fictitious occurrences, which are related to one another through a series of temporal or causal links. **Descriptions:** „... the decisive feature distinguishing them from narrative is that descriptions present static structures“ (Kallmeyer & Schuetze 1977:201). **Argumentations:** abstracted elements occurring outside the story-telling sequence - theorizing: declarations of general idea. They show the narrator's general orientation at the moment.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. sequentialization in the appendix.

individual situations) or whether the biographer picks out individual situations to elaborate in detail and tells a story. The analysis of the sequentialization thus necessarily follows the structure of the text, each individual sequence being interpreted as it arises. The possible significance of each sequence to be interpreted is then considered without reference to or knowledge of subsequent units.

The following questions guide the hypotheses that are developed:

1. Is the biographer generating a narrative or is he/she carried along by a narrative flow in his or her story-telling?
2. How much is the interviewee oriented to the relevance system of the interviewer and how much at his/her own?
3. In which thematic field are the single sequence embedded: what is the hidden agenda?
4. Why is the autobiographer using this specific sort of text to present his/her experience or theme?
5. Which topics are addressed? Which biographical experiences, events and periods are covered, and what is left out? What comes up in the second part of the interview (after further questioning by the interviewer) that had been omitted in the first part, the 'main narration' (after the initial opening question)?
5. In which details are the single experiences or themes presented and why?

All possible hypotheses to each sequence are formulated: to each hypothesis a follow-up hypothesis is considered according to 'what comes next in the text, if this reading proves to be plausible'. These hypotheses are then contrasted with the following text sequences: Some of them gain plausibility whereas others will be falsified.

What we are aiming to interpret at this stage is the nature and function of the presentation in the interview and not the biographical experiences themselves. For this reason, certain questions will inevitably arise at the beginning of analysis such as, for example, why does one biographer begin with the death of her father in her infancy, although she had actually been asked to relate her wartime experiences? To explain her choice of an introduction to her story, various possible modes of selection are suggested. In the course of further analysis certain of these gain plausibility whereas others have to be eliminated.

### **5. Thematic field analysis of the Interview with 'Hans Lohs'<sup>10</sup>**

The interview with 'Hans Lohs' is taken from a research project on 'Coming to terms with the National-Socialist past' carried out at the 'Freie Universität' in West Berlin under the supervision of the author (cf. Rosenthal 1986; 1987; 1989). In this project, completed in 1984, 24 biographical-narrative interviews were conducted with former members of the Hitler-Youth organization, 'Hitler Jugend' ('HJ'), all of whom were born between 1923 and 1929. Two interviewers were present at each interview.

In conducting the actual interview the interviewer followed the narrative interview method developed by Fritz Schütze (1977 1992)<sup>11</sup>. The biographers were asked to tell the interviewers about their experiences in the Hitler-Youth, as well as about their life in general during the

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<sup>10</sup> For more details of this narrated life story see the discussion of Hans Lohs' interview in Rosenthal (1987)

<sup>11</sup> The aim of this interview method is to elicit and maintain a full narration by the interviewee, with the help of a set of non-interfering techniques applied by the trained interviewer. The method is based on the assumption that the narration of an experience comes closest to the experience itself. Narration of biographical events gives the chance to glimpse some of the motives and interpretations guiding the actions of the biographer.

war, their experiences during the collapse of the 'Third Reich' and about how their everyday life settled down to normal afterwards. We indicated at the beginning of the interview that we would not interrupt while they were talking, but would take notes in order to be able to ask some questions later.

The main narration following the initial question generally lasted between 90 minutes and three hours. The biographers talked in great detail - usually without any additional questions by the interviewers - about their lives within the suggested temporal framework and sometimes beyond. Most narratives were not confined to the Hitler-Youth or wartime experiences but were extended to many different aspects of daily life during the entire period. When the main narration was finished, we asked for more details about themes and events that had only been touched upon so far. Towards the end of the interview we regularly asked about particular historical events, such as the death of Adolf Hitler, assuming that such events could potentially be of special biographical relevance.

The recorded interviews were transcribed in their entirety, word for word as spoken i.e. with no respect for the rules of written language.

The interview presented in the following was conducted by myself and a student. 'Hans Lohs' is a pseudonym. Before the discussion of the thematic field analysis of this interview, I give a short survey of the biographical data that could be extracted from the whole interview, for the moment leaving out any closer interpretation on the part of the researcher<sup>12</sup>. Such a preliminary review of the basic data is - besides the sequential analysis of the biographical data also necessary for the thematic field analysis in order to be able to establish which important events of his or her life the narrator told or failed to tell in this first part, the 'main narration' of the interview.

Hans Lohs was born in Berlin in 1923, the second son of a working-class family. His brother was nine years older. His father was originally a member of the German Communist Party but joined the SA, the militarylike fighting organisation of the Nazis in 1933, when the Nazis came to power. In the same year Hans, aged ten, became a member of the 'Jungvolk', the section of the Hitler-Youth for 10 to 14 year-olds. However, he stopped to join the meetings and activities of the Jungvolk after one year.

Towards the end of 1937 he started an apprenticeship as toolmaker, which was finished in 1940, the second year of the war. In 1941 he was called up and opted to join the paratroopers. After a period of basic training he was sent to join the armed forces (Wehrmacht) in Italy in 1942, first to Salerno, Sicily, and then to Monte Cassino, where he stayed until the autumn of 1944. He was then posted to the Front, serving in Poland, Litvania and finally in East Prussia. Trapped behind the Soviet lines, he was one of a small group which fought its way through to Silesia, where he remained on active service until his dismissal from the army on May 5th 1945. He managed to avoid being captured by the Allies and to make his way back to Berlin, where he was taken on in the auxiliary police force. A year later he took up a career as racketeer on the black market, which was brought to an end on 12th May 1949, with the end of the Berlin blockade. In 1956 he emigrated with his future wife to Canada, but returned to Germany in 1962. At the time of the interview, in the spring of 1982, he was living in early retirement in West Berlin, aged 59.

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<sup>12</sup> With only these data in the first step of analysis - the analysis of the biographical data - we developed first hypotheses which we then use as leading questions in further case reconstruction. In the present discussion - we skip this step on account of limited space.

Looking only at these data we can assume, that asked by the interviewer to talk about his Hitler-Youth time, war- and post-war times Hans Lohs will be able to present a lot. Merely his war experiences at different frontiers should do to generate a flow of narrations. However, the difficulty arising during the actual interview with Hans Lohs was that, during the main narration phase, in contrast to all other informants of the sample, he seemed unable to let himself go and be carried along by an easy flow of story-telling, the result being that he was finished within 30 minutes, less than a third of the time taken by most of the others. During this phase he also repeatedly asked the interviewer for questions to help him on his way. Only during the second part of the interview, when we asked for details about specific topics and events, was the biographer motivated to produce more elaborate stories, which continued for another three hours.

Working on the assumption that there must be some explanation for the interviewee's difficulties in producing the expected form or Gestalt of his life story, we did in fact come upon just such an explanation whilst reconstructing the selective principles underlying his text production. In other words, by applying the methodological principle explained above, that the style or structure of self-presentation in such an interview must be related to the narrator's biographical global construction, we were able to achieve a most fruitful analysis of this at first glance apparently unsatisfactory interview. The following analysis will show, that the difficulties of Hans Lohs to let himself go into the flow of easy narrating are by no means accidental. His difficulties to narrate are manifestations of his biographical construction referring to the entanglement of his life history in National-Socialism.

**The thematic field analysis.** We shall confine ourselves here to analyzing the first part of the interview, the 'main narration', which lasted 30 minutes. (cf. the sequences at the end of the article).

In response to the standard opening question Hans Lohs begins, not with a narrative, but with an argument. He points out that in metropolitan Berlin the initial reception of the National-Socialist movement was at first not as exaggerated as, say, in many small provincial towns.

What does Herr Lohs want to convey to the interviewers with this claim that in Berlin the response to National Socialism was not so intense as elsewhere?

Two hypotheses were put forward:

1. Lohs wants to explain that he has little to say about National Socialism, i.e. the argument is related to the issue of his competence as an informant; or,
2. he wants to convey that as a 'Berliner' he was not a fanatical Nazi, i.e. he wants to legitimize his own and his environment's behaviour and is trying to establish a certain image of himself.

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Let's see how Herr Lohs continues and which of the two hypotheses can be verified.

There follows a short narration (11 lines) about a situation soon after Hitler came to power, in which his father was pressurized by neighbours to join the Nazi party. It was after this that his father did in fact join the SA-Reserves. In the transition from the initial argument to this narration Herr Lohs uses the word 'but', thereby indicating a connection between the two statements, his meaning being: National Socialism was not so extreme in metropolitan Berlin 'but' there was still a certain amount of pressure.

Whereas he is arguing in the first sequence, he is narrating his father's joining the Nazi party. One can put forward the hypothesis:

**3.** Herr Lohs tries argumentatively to play down the influence of the Nazis, but his narrations discover another reality. For the following presentation we assume: He will try to convey of little influence of the Nazis by means of biographical global evaluations, but his narrated stories will put up a contrast to this. In other words: as of today he tries to present his life having been independent from National-Socialism, but the experienced entanglements will nevertheless determine the thematic field of his narrated life story.

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After this narration Lohs switches to a brief report (13 lines) on his time in the Jungvolk, which he introduces with the utterance, „*well then, so naturally I joined the Jungvolk*“. His joining is directly linked with his father's membership of the SA, the expression 'naturally' conveying how self-evident this step was and that it requires no further legitimation. However, far from being self-evident this was in fact quite an exceptional move at that time; it was not at all common for a ten year-old boy to join the Jungvolk as early as 1933, the year when it came into being.

How is this presentation of a self-evident joining the Jungvolk to be interpreted?

The following hypotheses were set up:

- 4.** That he is expressing his perspective at that time (past perspective), which was that it was 'natural' for him to follow his father's examples and do what was expected of him, or
- 5.** seen from his present perspective, the narrator feels the need to present a problematical move as unproblematical and so to legitimize it; today and in the context of the interview Herr Lohs wants to play down his membership in the Nazi-youth organisation vis-a-vis the interviewer or, indeed, to himself. In the same way as he belittled in the first sequence the influence of the Nazis in Berlin, he now tries to minimize his own entanglement in National-Socialism.

The hypotheses should have made it quite clear by now what this step of thematic field analysis is aiming at. It is not an interpretation of the event of his joining the Jungvolk - this is the task of the genetic analysis - but it is concerned with how this piece of information is presented in the context of the interview.

The next step is to interpret why his presentation of his career in the Hitler-Youth, which apparently lasted one year, is so very brief.

- 6.** Herr Lohs reports so little because there is little to tell; this period was unproblematical and had no further relevance for the rest of his biography, making greater elaboration unnecessary;
  - 7.** he does not wish to talk about this period because of unpleasant associations which he would rather forget;
  - 8.** he chooses to reveal so little because his actions and experiences at that time do not match his present perspective and the self-image he is trying to put over to the interviewer (cf. Hypothesis 5).
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Lohs follows up his report on his experiences in the Jungvolk with another report on the time of Hitler's assumption of power. He describes how his father was unemployed before 1933, offering this as a different explanation for his father's political change than the one he had used before.

Here we can formulate the hypothesis:

- 9.** Hans Lohs is put under legitimizing pressure with respect to the entanglement of his family in National-Socialism (cf. 2). He is also quite conscious that his father was to a certain extent

convicted by the Nazis and did not just join the SA-Reserves on account the neighbours' pressure.

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He closes this report with an argumentation: „*if you kept your mouth shut, nothing happend to you*“ and finishes with the statement that his dropping out of the Hitler-Youth - after one year - had no negative consequences for him.

This argument probably pinpoints the decisive global evaluation that determines the way in which the biographer wishes his stories to be understood.

Hypotheses on the meaning of this line of argument:

**10.** Herr Lohs wants to show that Germany under National Socialism was not as restrictive as is usually claimed. In a way this argumentation serves to demonstrate the innocence of the NS-State and has to be seen in relation to his initial argument on the limited impact of Nazi politics on everyday life in 'metropolitan Berlin'. The latent biographical overall construction underlying this presentation is the attempt to construct a life history detached from National-Socialism (cf. hypotheses 2; 5).

**11.** He is explaining that one was not forced to join the Hitler-Youth, thus repudiating the argument frequently put forward nowadays that 'one was forced to participate' in the movement. Thus he also expresses, that he is not able to set himself free from his life-historical entanglements.

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Having made this point, Herr Lohs introduces the topic 'Jews'. The content of this sequence reveals that what follows is a theme located in the same latent thematic field as well as in the same manifest global evaluation as what went before. Hans Lohs begins with, „*well, we had-, oh yes, as I was saying, about Jews, we didn't know about that either ...*“ The expression „*as I was saying*“ indicates that his previous argument had also intended somehow to include the claim that 'they' - probably his family - were unaware of what was going on.

From this follows **Hypothesis 12**, that the general legitimation 'we didn't know about it' was also intended to apply to his father's and his own membership of Nazi organizations - thus placing both arguments in the same thematic field containing the themes of national-socialist entanglement. If this hypothesis is right, we can expect from one of the next sequences some evidence of his biographical entanglement in the persecution of the Jews.

His introduction is followed by an exemplifying narrative<sup>13</sup> about „*the chess-game with the Jews*“ which shall demonstrate that, at that time at least (i.e. probably before the Nuremberg laws were passed in 1935), the narrator himself had nothing against Jews. This whole theme is dealt with in three lines.

Hypotheses on the short presentation of this topic:

**13.** For the narrator antisemitism and the persecution of the Jews are not problematical subjects which demand more extensive discussion. Hans Lohs does not see himself as having been involved in any way with this aspect of the Nazi past and feels no sense of collective and personal guilt.

**14.** The biographer tries to avoid this topic, because some further elaboration would disclose his biographical entanglement in this part of the Nazi-past. The theme „chess game with Jews“ is appresenting - to use a phenomenological term - the theme „what happened with these peaceful and civilized Jews later“. This is a theme which Herr Lohs as well as most other German witnesses of the Nazi-period trys to avoid.

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<sup>13</sup> Exemplifying narrative: adds plausibility to a line of argument.

After this very brief exemplifying narrative Lohs offers a general evaluation of what he has said so far: „Well, so that was the average, is that what you wanted to know, with that about the average?“. He is obviously referring to the introduction to the interview, when one of the interviewers somehow mentioned this word „average“. Lohs now wants to check whether he „was doing it right“ in his role as interviewee; he is not quite sure whether he is fulfilling the interviewers' expectations. Further we may assume that this question at that point in the interview dealing with the topic „Jews“ is not accidental, but supporting the hypothesis that he tries to avoid the topic.

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Having put this question he goes straight on, without a pause, to give a 15-line narrative (the longest narration so far in the ) account of how he was summoned to attend an obligatory Hitler-Youth event in 1940, which he did. We can assume that the interviewer gave some sort of nonverbal response, such as a nod, to his question, making it unnecessary for him to wait for an answer. Further the quick connection indicates the rhetoric meaning of the question and its function to evade the topic „Jews“.

Lohs continues with an argument that even after this summons, his further avoidance of Hitler-youth activities still had no negative consequences for him. He closes with „you didn't have to go anywhere, no uniform, nothing..“.

By this time the dialectics of his general global evaluation regarding National-Socialism and of the thematic field of his life story becomes quite evident. His evaluation could be paraphrased as follows: One was not forced to join the Nazi-Movement and, whatever crimes were committed at that time, he and his environment did not know about them. Again one may ask whether Lohs is trying to refute the common argument that claims 'participation through coercion', or whether his intention is to play down the restrictive aspects of the Nazi-State (cf. hypotheses 10 and 11).

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His account of the summons is followed by a 3-second pause, then he asks, „so, now you're looking at me like that ((laughing)), what else do you have, what else shall I tell you? About before, before the war?“.

Hypotheses on his questions and lack of narational flow:

**15.** Hans Lohs still has not quite understood what is required of him, that he is meant to give an account of his biographically relevant experiences up to the post-war period. The interviewers may not have given him the right instructions or support at the outset.

**16.** Lohs is not able to enter into a full narrative account as required because, he does not know what is relevant and what is not; he is trying to orient himself to the interviewers' relevances;

**17.** Hans Lohs does not wish to get involved in a full-scale narration, because he does not want to present his experiences of this time; this would disclose his involvement in the NS-regime, and with this phase of his life are experiences connected which he does not want to thematize.

**18.** Lohs is not able to enter into a full narrative account as required because, the set topic as he understands it is irrelevant to him personally. Whereas he supposes the interviewers' interest in National-Socialism, he believes himself, his life would be independent of it.

**19.** Hans Lohs wants to evade the topic National-Socialism, but feeling himself under a legitimizing pressure he is not capable to develop another thematic field different from his biographical experiences not related to NS.

The interviewer now asks Lohs to relate his own experiences, to talk about what was important to him personally. After a pause of four seconds Herr Lohs says, „well, yes, for me it was actually (3 sec. pause). I got an apprenticeship, did a training...“.

His education and training for a job are now presented as biographically relevant, although neither area have been mentioned so far. The hypotheses (18) - suggesting that Hans Lohs was not able to narrate fluently because he had been orienting himself to the relevances of the interviewers and the topic held no direct biographical relevance for himself or he wants to avoid it (cf. 17) - receives some support from this reaction. Now that he has been asked explicitly to talk about his own personal experiences, he would - if the hypothesis hits - finally enter into an easier flow of narration.

Another **hypothesis (20)** at this point is that Herr Lohs sees no connection between his own occupational training and National-Socialism.

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After another short argumentation claiming that, in spite of his continued lack of interest in the Hitler-Youth, he had no difficulties as an apprentice either, he briefly refers to his leisure activities apart from the Hitler-Youth (2 lines). He then goes on to report about a friend of his who was in the Hitler-Youth and later joined the SS. This leads on to a somewhat more detailed narration (23 lines!) of the events of the so-called 'Reichskristallnacht' - the pogrom against the Jews in November 1938 -, in which this friend was directly involved. He begins with the same evaluation that he used before to introduce the topic of the persecution of the Jews: „we didn't know that“. However, he then narrates what he experienced himself during this pogrom. He remembers for example, that in front of a shop where he had bought a wristwatch shortly before, there were watches scattered in the street.

With this sequence Hans Lohs still is staying in the thematic field „**my experiences with National-Socialism**“ and narrates extendedly on that. By this the hypothesis (19) that he cannot evade the topic, because he feels a legitimizing pressure, is supported. The hypothesis (13) that the topic „persecution of the Jews“ is irrelevant to him, is falsified by this.

Again in this sequence - as before - is he producing a contradiction to his biographical global evaluation. On one side it becomes obvious that his life - at least via the friendship with somebody who actively took part in the persecution of the Jews - is connected with the National-Socialist politics and practice of persecution. Talking about what he experienced of the persecution is also in contradiction to the statement to have known nothing. One is curious, if he himself realizes this contradiction. Lets see, how he continues.

Rounding off this part of his narration, Herr Lohs concludes that „you had to keep your mouth shut“ because „if you spoke out against it then it could happen that - uh - (2 sec. pause) you somehow got locked up“. But then he goes on to describe a series of situations which in fact demonstrate just the opposite: that in his firm, for example, nobody used the greeting 'Heil Hitler' and that a colleague of his, who had previously been in the SPD (Social Democrats), agitated openly against the Nazis without getting into trouble. Once, he himself got into an argument with a member of the 'Werkschutz', the Nazi organization in industry, and nothing happened to him.

This is obviously a contradiction: first he takes up the typical standpoint, „you had to keep your mouth shut“, and then goes straight on to prove from his personal experience that this was not true.

**Hypothesis (21)** on this contradiction:

In situations that impinged upon him personally, Herr Lohs was ready to defend himself, but as long as the persecution of the Jews did not affect him directly, he felt no need to respond to it one way or the other. In other words, his references to antisemitism are a product of his



present perspective and not related to what was important to him at the time. The legitimations he produces are part of a present attitude and would have been irrelevant to him at the time.

This clarifies, why Hans Lohs stresses again and again the lack of coercion. His problem as of today is, he cannot free himself from his biographical entanglement in the National-Socialist politics of persecution by the argument of coercion, because one was not forced to go along, as he experienced himself when he simply stopped to follow the Hitler-Youth meetings. But what for does he feel guilty? Are there onerous experiences, which he does not relate?

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His narration of all these various situations is drawn to a close with the same argumentation with which he had opened the interview: that metropolitan Berlin was different, that things there were more anonymous and that nobody was forced to join the movement. Then he adds, „before the war practically nothing happend“.

So Hans Lohs is still in the global evaluation „there was no coercion to join and I didn't have much to do with National-Socialism“. Again Hypothesis 10, postulating that he wishes to play down the repressive element of the Nazi state, gains support. The further hypothesis (11), suggesting that he wants to invalidate the common claim about „coercion to join“, can also be maintained. Furthermore, Hypothesis 1, set up right at the beginning of the analysis, proposing quite simple that he thinks he had little to tell, is also confirmed: at least until the beginning of the war nothing important happened to him personally in connection with his chosen theme of „NS and coercion to join“. This leads on to the next **hypothesis (22)**, which is that he may have experienced something during the war which bears a closer relation to the topic and which he feels is worth recounting in more detail.

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After the last argument Herr Lohs pauses for eight seconds and then asks, „anything else? do you have anything else ((clearing his throat)), don't hesitate to ask“.

He is indicating that he wants to cooperate but still expects definite individual questions. This utterance also implies that he has a feeling that the interviewer might not dare to ask.

Now the interviewer asks him to continue his narration from the point where he was summoned to the Hitler-Youth event. She is trying to encourage him to produce a biographical story in chronological order.

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There follows a lengthy biographical narrative, uninterrupted by further questions, depicting his life throughout the period established at the outset as the framework for the interview. After a very brief summary of these sequences we shall select certain details for closer analysis.

Lohs begins, „and then, yes, I completed my apprenticeship..“. He remembers his final exam and expands upon this in more detail than has been the case so far (23 lines). He did badly because his hair was too long. He describes joining the army and then comes out rather suddenly with: „yes, then I was-, in Italy they locked me up“. There follows a long dramatic narrative<sup>14</sup> about how he was court-martialled for „wehrkraftzersetzende Aussagen“ (seditious statements). After three months of imprisonment on remand he was acquitted. The whole story is concluded with the evaluation, „so und those were my war experiences, that was all there was that was to do with Hitler“. He continues with a short report on his National-Socialist commanding officers. Then, opening with the temporal marker, „well, in '45 the

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<sup>14</sup> In 'dramatic narratives' a number of main chains of events are drawn together in common situations (cf. Kallmeyer/Schuetze 1977:187).

war was over“ and beginning with his discharge from the army on 5th May 1945, he plunges into a full-length epic narrative<sup>15</sup>, containing a whole series of dramatic stories covering no less than six pages of transcript, in which he narrates how he found his way back to Berlin and tells about his experiences and career during the post-war period. He gives a detailed account of his year in the auxiliary police and subsequent career as a racketeer, closing rather abruptly with the short argument, „at the beginning of the 'fifties things got better economically'. Without mentioning how he made a living after that, he goes on to report briefly on his emigration to Canada and his return to Berlin and, after a pause lasting six seconds, asks the interviewer, „so, now (7 seconds pause) you are reasonably satisfied with that, I suppose“.

The interviewer's last question clearly had the effect on enabling Hans Lohs to enter into a narrative flow and keep to it, without further encouragement, right up to the end of the period set by the interviewer at the outset of the interview, when he had been asked to relate his experiences up to the time „when his everyday life settled back to normal“. With this, the first part of the interview, the main narration, came to an end.

It is important to note that the narrative flow released after the interviewer's last question cannot be explained purely as an interactive product of the interview situation, but was clearly related to the development of the theme itself. As had been prognosed beforehand in hypothesis 22, Hans Lohs did in fact experience something during the war that was - in his interpretation - directly related to the issue of National-Socialism; an experience where he personally was brought up against the repressive pressure exercised by the system upon the individual. The story of his court-martial was the first of such length (2 pages); the charge brought against him stands out as his global evaluation of „NS and coercion“. Beyond this, he says nothing about his experiences as a soldier but talks instead about Nazi commanding officers, i.e. he again turns to a subject directly related to National-Socialism. This is extraordinary in view of the fact that he experienced three years of active service at the front, taking part in campaigns both in Italy and the East. The hypothesis gains plausibility that the stock of the thematical field of this life story is „my experiences with National-Socialism“.

Hypotheses on his failure to describe his own war experiences:

**23.** For Lohs there is no connection between his time in the army and the topic of National Socialism. The army and Germany's role in the war have - in his opinion - nothing to do with the Nazi State. Hence his own wartime experiences are not relevant to the topic in hand as he has understood it. Hans Lohs puts important phases of his life - as he did with his apprenticeship aside of the National-Socialism and thus tries to understand his life as independent from National-Socialism.

A different hypothesis would be:

**24.** He does not want to talk about his life as a soldier because his experiences were so upsetting that he would rather not mention them. There are also other onerous experiences, which he attempts to evade.

Only when he reaches the period following his discharge, i.e. after the collapse of the National-Socialist regime, does he again enter into an elaborate epic narrative. As long as he

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<sup>15</sup> 'Epic narratives' are „narratives containing much descriptive elaboration, in which sequences of events are skimmed over in summarized form (e.g. by means of abbreviated repetitive formulae such as 'there we were, driving along ... from one village to the next .. always trying to ask, me jumping out the whole time..') in order to keep to one main narrative strand“. (Kallmeyer / Schütze 1977:187)

was talking about wartime, Hans Lohs kept strictly to the thematic field: „**my experiences with National-Socialism**“; only when he got beyond this period in his biography was he able to give rein to his reminiscences and draw from personal experience without given limits. Only from this point could he orient his story towards himself and rid himself of the pressure to move in a thematic field which he rather would evade. The fact that he was not able to leave the set thematic field till the narration of the end of the war demonstrates and expresses a need of legitimation. Hans Lohs tries hard to present a life story independently from NS, but this attempt fails, because he feels guilty for something about which he probably ‘kept his mouth shut’.

Here we come to the end of our analysis of the main narration. Some of the hypotheses have become more plausible whereas others can be excluded altogether. However, a good many have still not been clarified one way or the other. For example, the question of why Hans Lohs tells so little about his experiences in the ‘Jungvolk’ or to what extent he feels personally involved in the issues of antisemitism and the Holocaust, remain unanswered. The analysis of the second part of the interview provided material for a great many further interpretations. For example, it came out later that his time in the Hitler-Youth was associated with an unpleasant experience (cf. 7): his Group Leader committed suicide upon discovering that he was of Jewish origin. Furthermore, in the micro-analysis of individual passage from the text, hypotheses could be tested yet again. Thus, on the subject of the Holocaust, the micro-analysis of a reference to prisoners in a concentration camp revealed how very concerned the narrator is to deny any personal involvement in this chapter of German history. As a soldier Hans Lohs had to guard KZ-prisoners and he witnessed how they were brutally mistreated by SS-guards and he refused to keep the guard. His superior accepted. Again he experienced that one was not forced to do such things. But obviously this refusal did not take the burden from him; up till today he has to ask himself what he could have done against the maltreatment of the prisoners.

In summary, one could say that what has become clear during analysis is that Hans Lohs does not wish to see, his own life during the Nazi period as being in any way connected with the National-Socialist system as a political phenomenon. He perceives himself as somebody who went his own way, more or less independently of social conditions. However, being under legitimizing pressure he cannot achieve - unlike as many others of his generation - to evade the thematic field „my experiences with National-Socialism“ and narrate instead those experiences which are not related to this. In his opinion such stories do not belong to the subject.

This interpretation finds further confirmation in the analysis of the second, inquiring part of the interview, which lasted for another three hours. It could be demonstrated that Hans Lohs not only rejects all personal responsibility for the German Nazi past but also denies having consciously ‘suffered’ under the conditions of the time. He does not feel the need to justify himself with such common collective explanations as „that was the way we were brought up“ or „we were too young“; neither does he come out with typical collective interpretations of his own suffering along the line of, „they tricked us out of our youth“ or „the Nazis used us as cannon fodder“.

Similarly, the interruption to his working career and his experiences as a soldier had nothing to do with National Socialism. When asked directly about his years at the Front, he did in fact narrate in great detail dreadful experiences that give him nightmares to this day. But he still did not relate these experiences to the ‘subject in hand’; even in the face of such extremities,

he failed to perceive a connection between what happened to him and social conditions in general.

The attitude demonstrated so very clearly in the interview with Hans Lohs explains why, in such interviews, the interviewer's opening question cannot trigger off an easy narrative flow with this type of interviewee. Such 'failures' cannot be accounted for as 'bad interviewing' or a lack of narrational competence on the part of the biographer. It is rather a manifestation of the biographical overall construct and the structure of meaning underlying the biographer's understanding of social reality and his life story. If a person does not conceive of their life as being related to social conditions, and try to dissociate themselves from everything 'political' during the 'Third Reich', they are simply not able to talk about it under such heading.

Lohs presentation of a life detached from the political context of the Nazi period cannot be interpreted as a random interpretation or, worse still, as cognitive incompetence on his part. It has a particular function in coping with the Nazi past. It has been demonstrated in a more recent study (Rosenthal 1990), in which various strategies for normalizing the Nazi past were reconstructed by means of comparisons between generations, that de-politicizing the Nazi period is a common strategy employed particularly by Germans older than the Hitler-Youth generation to avoid facing up to the whole issue of National Socialism. In this study we chose a different opening question ('Please tell us your life story - concentrated on your war memories') that avoided mentioning National Socialism as such. We found that especially the older generation (those who had already experienced World War I in their youth) frequently told their life stories without a single reference to the 'Third Reich'. Whereas these very old people tend in this way to depoliticize the Nazi past implicitly, Hans Lohs does it quite explicitly with his repeated assertions that he had little to do with the Nazis. The generation comparison reveals clearly that where members of the Hitler-Youth generation attempt to de-politicize the past, they usually do it in this explicit way.

## 6. Summary

In general, we may assume that how biographers react to the opening question, how they interpret the set topic and which thematic field they develop as framework for their narrative is dependent on their biographical overall construct. This was obvious in the case cited here but can be generalized to apply to all biographical interviews. For example, in interviews concentrating on the subjects' working lives, the question would also arise as to which parts of their everyday lives are connected with the thematic field in question. One would also have to ask whether the narrator talks about the influence of his or her work on other biographical areas and which connections he or she sees or fails to see between the various spheres on his or her life. It is possible to reconstruct all of these aspects in such a study. Generally, the reconstruction of a life history requires first of all an analysis of the data upon which it is based, i.e., before reconstructing the biographical meaning of single experiences and events it is necessary to find out how the narrator or biographer has understood the given topic, how he or she uses it as an orientation and in which thematic field he or she locates individual experiences and events. Only if one has gained an insight into whether the informant is orienting towards his or her own or the interviewer's relevances can the analyst make propositions on the intersubjective meaning of the narrated events and experiences. In other words, it is not possible to interpret a text naively on the assumption that everything the biographer relates is of biographical significance for him or her.

The intersubjective meaning of individual stories cannot be reconstructed by subsuming the stories presented by the narrator under the categories set up by the interviewer nor by interpreting single text passages independently from the narrative context. Hermeneutic analysis requires that contextual interpretation take into account the entire interview; in the case of biographical analysis this means that each narrated experience must be identified and localized within the framework of the biographers overall construction, as defined through the biographical strands and thematic field presented in the interview. However, at first glance it is not possible to determine to which thematic field a particular story belongs; this can only be done in a painstaking step-by-step analysis.

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### Sequentialization of the interview with Hans Lohs

page/line	
1/4 - 1/8	Argumentation: NS in Berlin not so exaggerated
1/8 - 1/17	Narration: Father joined the SA
1/17-1/30	Report: The time in the 'Jungvolk'
1/30 - 2/3	Report: Father was unemployed before 1933
2/3 - 2/25	Argumentation: „If you kept your mouth shut, nothing happend to you“
2/25 - 2/28	Argumentation: „we didn't know about that either...“ Exemplifying narrative: The chess-game with the Jews
2/28 - 2/30	General Evaluation: „That was the average, is that what you wanted to know?“
2/39 - 3/8	Narration: Summons to attend a Hitler-Youth event
3/8	Question to the Interviewer: „What else shall I tell?“ Answer of the Interviews: What is important for you Interviewee: Apprenticeship, training
3/28 - 3/30	Argumentation : No difficulties because of absenteeism from the Hitler-Youth
3/30-3/32	Report: Leisure activities
3/32 - 4/1	Report: My friend who joined the SS
4/1 - 4/29	Narration: The Reichskristallnacht Argumentation: „you had to keep your mouth shut“
4/29 -5/1	Report: Heil-Hitler
5/1 - 5/16	Narration: Problems with the 'Werkschutz'
5/16 - 5/29	Argumentation: NS in Berlin not so exaggerated General Evaluation: „before the war practically nothing happend“