

AROUND 'BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES'

AN INTRODUCTION

by Marcin Kafar

Institutional Background of the Project

Scientific Biographies: Between the 'Professional' and 'Non-Professional' Dimensions of Humanistic Experiences is the first book in the series 'Biographical Perspectives' developed for the English-language release. We wish this series to be treated as a global forum for the exchange of ideas meant for researchers who are willing to assign themselves to the auto/biographical thought collective in its various forms. 'Biographical Perspectives' is not only a publishing venture in the strict sense, but also and perhaps above all, a socio-scientific initiative aimed at **promoting the widely understood concept of science 'humanization' with the intention of creating an auto-formative and dialogical space.**

Such was the assumption underlying the organization, in October 2009, of the first 'biographical encounter.' It was made possible by a project Centrum Upowszechniania Innowacji w Edukacji¹ (CUIwE), implemented at that time by the Department of Educational Studies—one of the units constituting the Faculty of Educational Sciences (University of Łódź). The main theme of the said biographical colloquium (held in Łódź, at the university campus) became scientific biographies seen through the prism of the experiences of young academics rising from disciplines such as pedagogy, history, cultural anthropology, sociology, theater studies,

¹ Center for Dissemination of Innovation in Education.

and philosophy. Importantly, our biographical seminar resulted in a collection of texts titled *W obliczu nowych wyzwań: Dylematy młodej kadry akademickiej* (*In the Face of New Challenges: Dilemmas of the Young Faculty* (Kafar & Kulesza, 2010)).

Eighteen months later, in the same place, again appeared an interdisciplinary group of researchers. This time we discussed an important issue of the relationship between the **'professional'** and **'non-professional'** sphere of the practice of the humanities. As the thought keystone we chose multi-dimensional associations emerging at the border of biographical **personal experience** and **academic experience**. The tangible effect of this conference was Volume I of the series *'Perspektywy Biograficzne'* published in Polish, *Biografie naukowe: Perspektywa transdyscyplinarna* (*Scientific Biographies: A Transdisciplinary Perspective*) (Kafar, 2011). We decided to treat this monograph, since it was highly appreciated in official reviews and the feedback of the academic circles, as a base to develop a publication intended for the supralocal recipients. This task was successfully finalized two years later by completing the work on the book presented here.

The year 2012 brought another significant event in the form of a conference *'Autobiography—Biography—Narration: Biographical Perspectives in Research Practice.'* The preparation of the content of the conference was participated by the representatives of the University of Łódź (including Jacek Piekarski and Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac (from the Department of Educational Studies) and Andrzej P. Wejland (Insitute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology)) as well as globally recognizable scholars, such as Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, both affiliated at the Department of Communication (University of South Florida)—a leading academic center in the United States, fully focused on qualitative research.² The participants of the conference (over 100 persons) explored two main areas, which make essential reference planes for building up theories, drafting methodological fields, conducting analyses, making interpretations, and—last but not least—composing stories taking their origin in auto/biographical motifs. The first of these areas comprised the space of research practices applied under the humanities and social sciences, and more specifically those territories within them, which a) are distinguished by the narrated or written auto/biographies of the Other; b) concern—increasingly exposed in recent times and found especially in the layer of methodological research practices—the auto/reflexivity theme, in the extreme form manifested by a researcher referring to himself/herself as the study area (today researcher became a subject,

² Department of Communication is the only institution in the United States implementing a curriculum entirely subordinated to the qualitative paradigm (source: *Autoethnography* course led by Carolyn Ellis, academic year 2010-2011).

as we would say paraphrasing a passage from a well-known manifesto (cf. Ellis & Bochner, 2000)). To characterize the second of these areas, the most appropriate expression seems to be 'scientific auto/biographies.' This little explored issue (excluding the paths of popular science and those related to them) shows a huge heuristic potential. Located on the fringes of classic trends in the history of science, sociology of knowledge, anthropology and philosophy it points to the weighty, though usually ignored or strongly marginalized personal, cultural, social, moral and axiological issues underlying the construction of the given domains of knowledge.



'Biographical Perspectives,' in the opinion expressed from the position of the initiator of this project, had a chance to appear and then develop into its present form thanks to several circumstances that combine bipartite synergistic values. These are, on the one hand, specific biographical experiences (both 'professional' and 'non-professional') of a certain group of researchers, and on the other hand, a particular institutional climate, favorable for manifesting these experiences in the formula provided for in academic practice. What I mean here is fairly well illustrated by the situation in which I found myself some time ago in Kazimierz upon the Vistula River, where a nationwide Transdisciplinary Qualitative Research Seminar was held. It was there that one of my newly met colleagues made an observation that the University of Łódź is, in his view, the Mecca of qualitative research.³ For someone who, like me, has led his whole academic life at the University of Łódź such observation was intriguing. It reminded me of the old anthropological truth—translated into the reality of scientific worlds and well exposed by Robert K. Merton (1972)—stating that an "outsider" sees more than an "insider." Perhaps, I wondered, a colleague working on a daily basis at another academic center noticed something I, remaining in the eye of the 'cyclone' of qualitative way of practicing science, was not in a position to see? Eventually, I came to the conclusion that the distinguishing feature of the University of Łódź, and more precisely—several departments of this institution cooperating in the interpersonal dimension—is in fact its openness to theoretical and methodological qualitative solutions. In this case, the faculty potential assisted by properly selected organizational tools leads to the emergence of a number of initiatives that—taken together—make for external observers a clear, multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary design. For example, at the Faculty of Economics and Sociology there is a very active

³ The remark was made by Sławomir Krzychała, assistant professor at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław. The Transdisciplinary Qualitative Research Seminar was held in June 2012.

group of young researchers (including Piotr Chomczyński, Dominika Byczkowska, Anna Kacperczyk, Łukasz T. Marciniak, Jakub Niedbalski, Izabela Ślęzak-Niedbalska and Magdalena Wojciechowska), who, thanks to continuous enthusiasm and sustained determination enhanced by the strong support of their mentor, professor Krzysztof Konecki, were able to create in a relatively short time, a renowned bilingual magazine with an international reach, *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej/Qualitative Sociology Review*. The same group of people organized The First Qualitative Research Symposium (Łódź, 10-12 June 2013). PSJ/QSR is also closely related to the Faculty of Educational Sciences, whose representatives (including Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac, Marcin Kafar) sit on the Board of Reviewers of the journal and provide reciprocal conceptual help in the implementation of individual projects. The qualitative dimension of the activities undertaken within the Department of Educational Sciences comprises as well the first handbook of qualitative research in the field of Polish pedagogy prepared by Jacek Piekarski and Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac (cf. Piekarski & Urbaniak-Zajac, 2003). Qualitative research falls also within the domain of the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Łódź, and especially of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. Since the early nineties of the last century (the period of implementation of recent trends in the current anthropology and ethnology into syllabi valid in Poland), this facility has been focusing on research referring only to a small extent to classic (positivist) theoretical and methodological approaches, which is clearly revealed even in the undergraduate, graduate and doctoral theses of its graduates.



A kind of ‘social glue’ essential for scientific communities to last are defined biographical and institutional traits. They can be distinguished also in relation to the project ‘Biographical Perspectives.’ Among such traits I would enumerate intergenerational and interdisciplinary continuity, which in this context seems extraordinary as it is lined with interdepartmental ‘excursions’ of the researchers cultivating long-term relationships. Exemplifications of mechanisms of similar provenance emerge from the biographical background of Andrzej P. Wejland and Jacek Piekarski, in connection with my own scientific biography. Fate had it that when in 2008 I completed my Ph.D. work at the Faculty of Philosophy and History I was offered a job at the Faculty of Educational Sciences. The institution that wanted to hire a cultural anthropologist (my Ph.D. thesis was rooted in that field), was the Department of Educational Studies—a unit managed by professor Jacek Piekarski, a widely known in Poland methodologist and theorist of social pedagogy. In my scientific portfolio, in addition to the standard information

presenting my person, I included a certain text, which, coincidentally, was devoted to the topic of scientific biography. The article *O przełomie autoetnograficznym w humanistyce* (*On Autoethnographic Shift in the Humanities*) (Kafar, 2010) arouse such vivid interest in my future boss that he stated during the job interview that, to use the direct quote, "he actually could give footnotes to it." As it turned out, Jacek Piekarski, which I previously had not known about, breaking the patterns of traditional thinking about the research process, wrote a piece close also to my intuitions entitled (*sic!*) *O drugoplanowych warunkach poprawności badawczej w pedagogice: Perspektywa biografii* (*On the Background Conditions of Research Correctness in Pedagogy: Biography Perspective*) (Piekarski, 2006). What is more, it also appeared that professor Piekarski many years before had been a student of my intellectual mentor, professor Andrzej P. Wejland. Both formerly explored the ins and outs of 'hard' sociology, to then go, respectively, toward the critical mainstream of anthropology of knowledge (Piekarski) and anthropology marked by 'humanistic' traits (anthropology putting man in the spotlight—Wejland). The standpoint of 'Perspektywy Biograficzne' gave us all a chance of fruitful cooperation within the same field, in the space 'between' (separate departments, disciplines, currents of thought, etc.).

Auto/Biographical Sources of the Project

Trying to determine the initial point of my biographical interests, I cast my mind back to mid-1990s. At that time, earning my first stripes in Ethnology and Anthropology (preparing to obtain a Master's degree), I came across (somewhat accidentally) Victor Turner's theory of liminality. This concept was then almost entirely unknown in Poland. It had been mentioned by a few anthropological theoreticians (cf. Burszta & Buchowski, 1992), selectively used by folklorists and ethnologists receptive to innovative interpretive solutions (cf. Wasilewski, 1989; Sulima, 1995), and only sporadically recognized by sociologists (cf. Czyżewski, 1997). The focus was predominantly put on the content of the works considered classic: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) and *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1978). In my case, the dialogue with Turner took on a slightly different form. Indeed, the erudite and conceptually catchy discoveries of the Scottish thinker were very useful for scientific writing about marginalization of people suffering from AIDS, about Polish naïve painter Nikifor Krynicki as a cultural outsider, or *Techno Culture*—marked by 'threshold' attributes (I dedicated my Master's thesis, entitled *Tematy, których mi nie odradzano: Szkice z antropologii współczesności* (*The Topics I was not Discouraged from: Sketches from Current Anthropology* (Łódź, 1997)), to

the above-mentioned topics), but at the same time those discoveries were something more. Looking back, I would use phrases like the 'retrospective method,' 'treating the researcher as an object of a study,' 'observing oneself and looking at one's reflection in oneself,' 'I—the anthropologist as The Other,' etc., to describe what I attempted to do. In short, as a maturing anthropologist, I undertook an arduous and precarious task of introducing into academic discourse a strongly subjective content, revealed at different levels of experience (both *pre-* and *intratextual*). The aim of this effort was to unveil the previously hidden 'anthropological'⁴ dimension of anthropology; in other words, I desired to restore a human face to the science concerning man. In *my* anthropology, I strived to deal with mechanisms underlying the functioning of social worlds, but I wanted even more to use this science to reach people of 'flesh and blood.'

Anthropology with a human face (I was strongly encouraged by my supervisor—professor Andrzej P. Wejland to practice this kind of reflection) seemed to me equally alluring and tricky. Without conceptual models at hand, I was forced to act to a large extent intuitively. I was guided by forebodings and seized every opportunity to confirm their accuracy. I experienced one of my enlightenments while reading the *Foreword* to the Aldine Edition of *The Ritual Process*. Prepared by Roger D. Abrahams it pointed out, *inter alia*, Turner's acting skills. Abrahams (1995, p. v) calls the creator of the theory of liminality a "star performer," who during his lectures impersonated with equal ease a sage, a master of ceremonies or a clown: "Espousing ideas that made newcomers expect a charismatic presentation, [Turner] insistently played the joker or the clown when he felt that his self-presentation was being taken too seriously. An academic showman, then—but one who had the ability to draw strong friendship from equally complicated people without insisting on being treated as a prophet or a star. He was so entertained, himself, by ideas arising from the actualities of group experiences, that he would rather play as master of the revels than as guru." The same author seeks the origin—and this is the key issue here—of the unique personality of the founder of symbolic anthropology in the creative atmosphere of Turner's family home. This illuminating observation⁵ triggered in my mind

⁴ The words 'anthropological' and 'humanistic' in the discourse created by me gain identical tone; both—originating from Greek (*anthropos*) and Latin (*homo*)—point to the living man who cast into the world is forced to find himself in the midst of things and other humans.

⁵ Interestingly, this observation is confirmed by the opinion of Turner himself, who, in the *Introduction* to *From Ritual to Theatre*, published posthumously, distinctly points to close connections between his scientific discoveries and his childhood experience. These connections are well-illustrated by the autobiographical passages devoted to,

a chain of associations worth noticing here. I realized that Turner fascinated by theatre, Turner taking the role of a self-appointed actor, Turner dealing with exegesis of rituals, Turner involved in social dramas, and Turner describing those dramas in a scientific manner make up the same, inwardly *indivisible* figure. The experienced epiphany of 'life as a unity'⁶ gained considerable importance. It allowed me to extract from Turner's thought the tone that greatly explains the choice of peculiar research paths followed by Victor Witter, but it also became a valuable impulse to address the problem of the place of **a personal 'I' in science**; the 'I' that manifests itself and is possible to be grasped in the variety of forms of biographism and autobiographism.

Scientific Auto/Biographies as an Emerging Field of Interest

"Why are we talking? Is it because a thinking being has something to say? But why would it utter that? Why is it not enough for it to think what it thinks? Does it not say what it thinks just because it goes beyond what is enough for this being and because language carries this profound movement?" reasonably asks Emmanuel Lévinas (2008, p. 252). Undoubtedly, the discourses begin to germinate and proliferate in times of our gaining the awareness about the 'lack' of something. Auto/biographical discourse

e.g. the birth of the anthropological imagination (reportedly awakened by a magnificent view of the sea and sharpened by the smell of pine trees in New Forest) or to the source of specific approach to social dramas (set in emotional substratum—handed down to Victor by his mother (acknowledged actress and a founder of the National Theatre of Scotland), and analytical substratum—instilled by his father (an engineer by profession). In *The Human Seriousness of Play* Turner (1982, p. 9) writes, "My training for the fieldwork roused the scientist in me—the paternal heritage. My field experience revitalized the maternal gift of theatre. I compromised by inventing a unit of description and analysis which I called 'social drama.' [...] For the scientist in me, such social dramas revealed the 'taxonomic' relations among actors (their kinship ties, structural positions, social class, political status, and so forth), and their contemporary bonds and oppositions of interest and friendship, their personal network ties, and informal relationships. For the artist in me, the drama revealed individual character, personal style, rhetorical skill, moral and aesthetic differences, and choices proffered and made." Further on he says, "Perhaps if I had not had early exposure to theatre—my first clear memory of performance was Sir Frank Benson's version of *The Tempest* when I was five years old—I would not have been alerted to the 'theatrical' potential of social life, especially in such coherent communities as African villages. But no one could fail to note the analogy, indeed the homology, between those sequences of supposedly 'spontaneous' events which made fully evident the tension existing in those villages, and the characteristic 'processual form' of Western drama, from Aristotle onwards, or Western epic and saga, albeit on limited or miniature scale" (ibid.).

⁶ To paraphrase the wording used by Andrzej P. Wejland (cf. Kafar, 2011, p. 202).

in the proposed scenario is then—*per analogiam* to other emerging discourses—an effect of feeling the lack of something. But the lack of what?

Tracking auto/biographical themes in Turner and commentators of his works (cf. Deflem, 1991; E. Turner, 1985) gradually affirmed me in the conviction that the correlations between *the experience of an individual* and *the plane of knowledge construction* are relevant. At the same time, what I found puzzling was the persistent tendency of ignoring or belittling the role of such relationships in cases where they appeared to be all too clear. In Turner's work it is possible to extract both the text fields of open looking for the sources of his own cognitive exploration and passages in which he secretly smuggled personally important themes into the official scientific works.⁷ Presumably, therefore, the author of *Structure and Anti-Structure* should say what he thought (in the Lévinas-like sense), but for some reason it did not happen. Just like it did not happen in Michel Foucault (he did not manage to realize the project "hermeneutics of the subject," the core of which was to be the idea of caring for oneself derived from Plato),⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss (who wrote *The Sad Tropics* in a moment of abandoning the pursuit of an academic career),⁹ Emile Durkheim (treating his flagship work *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* in terms of an additional autobiographical

⁷ The singularity of Turner as a researcher cultivating a kind of a 'crypto-autobiography' has been linked to his conversion to Catholicism. Viewed through the prism of the biography, the essays such as *Religious Paradigm and Political Action: Thomas Becket at the Council of Northampton* (Turner, 1978), or *Experience and Performance: Towards a New Processual Anthropology* (V. Turner, 1985), can lead to as much surprising as radical proposals. A good example of the latter are the following conclusions drawn by Mathew Deflem (1991, p. 19): "It seems that for Turner, as a pious Catholic, *communitas* in his later works became more a matter of faith than fact, and that he wanted to see *communitas* and religion everywhere leading to the day when, as Turner's former collaborator Richard Schechner explained, 'each individual will love his/her neighbor as him/herself, and when abused, will be able to turn the other cheek.' Turner's own religious experiences even led him to search for psychological basis of *communitas* and religion in the structure of the human brain. Thus, there was a shift in Turner's work from anthropological analysis *sensu stricto* to philosophical belief, to an attempt to look for a new synthesis 'not mainly between two scientific viewpoints [anthropology and physiology], but between science and faith.'"

⁸ Cf. Eribon (2005, p. 399).

⁹ Reading *The Sad Tropics* with a biographical sense was attempted by a Polish anthropologist, Waldemar Kuligowski. He writes, among other things, "The apostasy of the work of Lévi-Strauss, its 'truth,' is distinctly marked by the shallows of the biography. They gave the ultimate tone to his literary heresy, they clothed the rebellion in the robes of an escape from the positivist models to wide horizons of the possibility to choose style and find the formula that will be most suitable for one's own intentions" (Kuligowski, 2001, pp. 39-40).

utterance)¹⁰ and Bronisław Malinowski (rightly feeling on the opposite sides of the diaries (!) that an autobiography can be transformed into a valid method of ethnographic research),¹¹ to name just a few of the long list of researchers 'encrypting' themselves in their scientific output.

Thus, 'Biographical Perspectives' face a very challenging task of **arousing previously 'muted' voices**; by the interpretation of the past events we want to **explore the subcutaneous meanings of texts** and to strive to show that **science is not practiced by beings abstracted from the world, but living persona—people situated culturally and socially**. Within such horizon, we will try to implement an integrated program for extracting the 'in-depth stream' of thought, the thought that can be most adequately merged by a metaphor of *the rhizome*. This metaphor probably captures best the seed status of the idea "to be hollowed," "to be deepened," "to be tested," while allowing us escape from the tyranny of general passwords, flattening the traditional scientific discourse (which was convincingly suggested by Gabriel Marcel (1952) in his *Metaphysical Journal*; cf. also, Lévinas, 1999, p. 14).

The first attempt we make is tied around the phrase '«professional» and «non-professional» dimensions of humanistic experiences.' The wording 'professional' and 'non-professional' is taken from the theory and methodology of social pedagogy coined by Jacek Piekarski (2009). As the editor of the volume, I have decided to make them central to our discussion of concepts, since they reflect well the weighty aspect of *the tension* appearing at the junction of the private sphere of our life and the scientific one. These concepts provoke us to pose questions about the relationships between scientific knowledge and the worldview of a specific researcher, the system of values professed by him/her, the field of individual experiences or personal predispositions. Personal experience of each of us ('non-professional' part of our biography) continuously—consciously or unconsciously—gets imprinted in everything that is located in the area of 'professional' actions; from the choice of research areas to the ways of their theoretical and methodological conceptualization. The process of drawing from the 'professional' experience (scientific, research) affects the 'extra-professional' life, and so we often deal with a sort of inverse feedback situation transforming me-researcher as a human being with all the resulting consequences.

¹⁰ Speaking from the position of the sociologist of knowledge, Łukasz Dominiak (2008) presents an excellent analysis of *Suicide* from the perspective of Durkheim's auto/biography.

¹¹ The theme of Malinowski creating the foundations of autobiography as ethnography can be found in the monumental work of Michael W. Young *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist, 1884-1920* (2004; cf. particularly *Melbourne maladies*). To read more on the analysis of the Trobriand diaries in terms of a dialogue between the public 'I' with the private 'I' cf. Kafar (2010).

From the pages of the presented book we learn how complex, difficult to predict, and simply interesting can be the fate of thoughts, entangled activities and people 'involved' in them.



The way to read a work is influenced by various factors. Our texts prepared for their publication in English have undergone a gradual metamorphosis, slowly gaining the color they did not have in the original Polish version. The translation process always poses a considerable risk; translation may well 'uplift' a text or 'choke' it. The texts that make up *Scientific Biographies*, in my opinion, belong to the first of these categories. In spite of the changes that have been introduced into them, they still remain faithful to the authors who see them as their own words, despite the fact that these are the words uttered in a language 'foreign' to them.

An English-speaking reader, sooner or later, will probably realize that the work has been translated. This can be seen for instance in the bibliography, in which there have been preserved titles of works in the original language editions (mainly Polish, but also, in some cases, French, Russian and German). The same literature items appearing in the main parts of each chapter have been translated where it seemed necessary. This has been done on purpose in order to maintain the transparency of the argument. At the same time—assuming the specific competencies of potential readers of the book—we have tried to stick to the consistent use of English-language sources of citations and regular bibliographic references. The whole book has been standardized also in terms of inverted commas; we have used two types of quotation marks, single one for words and phrases that do not come directly from other authors, double one—in all other cases.



This monograph would probably have not come into being without the support I have received from many people. Firstly, it seems appropriate to thank the Authors who yielded to my persuasions and spent their precious time working on their input into this publication even in moments of my, sometimes maybe a bit exaggerated, editorial scrupulosity. Special thanks go to Michał Rydlewski for his friendly support and many hours of discussions about 'science' and 'life.' My deep gratitude dating back for more than a decade goes to Professor Andrzej P. Wejland who has continued to approach my scientific-biographical ideas with patience and academic professionalism. I would also like to thank Professor Jacek Piekarski for his thorough understanding of my autobiographical texts and strong institutional support I enjoy working at the Department of Educational Studies of the University of Łódź. My gratitude in this matter

also goes to Professor Danuta Urbaniak-Zajac, the present Dean of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, for her trust in me during the phase of transforming this project into a supralocal undertaking. I would also like to thank Professor Grzegorz Michalski, the former Dean of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, whose supportive attitude has made it possible for the initial effects of the research on biographical perspectives to be successfully translated into the reality of the text. I thank Professors Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner for profound talks and gestures expanding my auto/biographical self-awareness as well as intellectual and organizational commitment to our project. The momentum taken on by the English edition of *Scientific Biographies* has also been greatly facilitated by Tomasz Włodarczyk (the Director of the University of Łódź Press whose visionary idea enabled this monograph to exist abroad), Magdalena Machcińska-Szczepaniak (translating the Polish texts with great language expertise and poetic sensitivity), and also Agnieszka Oklińska (taking care, with brilliant artistic touch, of the graphic design of the publication); these persons deserve special praise for their work, whose quality goes far beyond our formal commitment. Finally, special thanks go to Marta Kozłowska for her intellectual contribution in refining my scientific thoughts and for her 'forbearing understanding' that she has granted me as the one most intensely experiencing on a daily basis what it means to deal with someone who constantly travels between 'professional' and 'non-professional' dimension of the humanities.

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