Victoria Semenova

Teaching and learning: Students' perspective on their socialization practice in the field of biography

Lehren und Lernen: Perspektiven Studierender auf ihre Einzelsoziolisation in die Biographieforschung

Abstract:
The paper addresses the problem of professional socialization into sociology, more strictly into the field of biography on the university level. The author develops the idea of a pragmatic and paradigmatic approach towards biographical research which is seen as consisting of different stages of entering the field of biography during the education process on BA, MA and specialization levels. The socialization process itself is seen as a long-term process connected with students' personal and professional development and formation of their identity. The analysis is based on a small research project with different groups of students and their perspectives on their socialization process. As a result the notion of a qualitative researcher's identity is proposed as a specific type of professional sociological identity.

Keywords: biographical research, pragmatic and paradigmatic approach, professional sociological identity, professional and personal identity

Zusammenfassung:
Der Aufsatz behandelt das Problem der professionellen Sozialisation in der Soziologie, insbesondere im Bereich der Biographieforschung in Universitäten. Die Autorin entwickelt die Idee eines pragmatischen und paradigmatischen Ansatzes im Hinblick auf Biographieforschung, wobei unterschiedliche Phasen der Einsozialisation in die Biographieanalyse auf der Ebene von Bachelor-, Master- und Spezialisierungsstudiengängen unterschieden werden. Der Sozialisationsprozess selbst wird als ein langfristiger Ablauf verstanden, der mit der persönlichen und professionellen Entwicklung von Studierenden und ihrer Identitätsbildung verbunden ist. Die Analyse gründet auf einem kleinen Forschungsprojekt zu unterschiedlichen Gruppen von Studierenden und ihren Perspektiven auf den Sozialisationsprozess. Als Ergebnis wird die Vorstellung einer qualitativen Forscheridentität entwickelt (als eines Sondertyps der professionellen soziologischen Identität).

Schlagworte: Biographieforschung, pragmatischer und paradigmatischer Ansatz, professionelle soziologische Identität, professionelle und persönliche Identität

1. Introduction

This paper is based mainly on my experience of teaching the biographical ap-
proach to students of sociology at different levels, and on my reflections about
this practice. In times of "Bologna", the whole university teaching process un-
dergoes significant changes and one of the results is a shortage of hours re-
served for the qualitative paradigm, at least in my own teaching environment in
Russia.

   Just some short remarks about the context of this small research project: I
teach the biographical method in a small university in Moscow which is oriented
mainly at preparing future researchers and teachers in the field of humanitar-
ian knowledge (mainly sociology). For sure, not all of the students become re-
searchers or teachers, some enter different practical fields. But our aim is that
they develop mainly their analytic skills and methodological competencies and
certainly some practical skills and abilities in order to apply them to different
research situations in various social milieus. In my courses on the biographical
method I introduce students to methodological and theoretical knowledge and to
some skills on how to choose and develop a research design of a biographical
project, in order to develop their competence to use methodological knowledge in
a concrete research situation. Student research takes place on two levels: The
first level are second year students (BA), the second level are MA students. And
there are also some small groups of students who are more specialized in this
field and who intend to apply biographical methods in their future professional
activity, practically or theoretically, e.g., in their Ph. D. research. Here I will fo-
cus on the question of students' practical skills and their ability to do empirical
student research and the level of involvement in such an activity as a source for
their professional socialization in the field of biography. Naturally, the theoreti-
cal and methodological knowledge transfer is a most important part of student
education: familiarizing them with theoretical traditions and main assumptions
for research designs based on phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnogra-
phy (such as the work of Moustakas 1994; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Hammer-
sley and Atkinson 1995; and Denzin 1989). But here I will focus on the situation
of practical student research to explore in which ways it may raise a set of phi-
losophical assumptions related to an interpretive theoretical tradition. I will
look at how these assumptions guide the study and also how they influence stu-
dents' reflection about their professional identity.

2. On professional socialization and identity in sociology

In my contacts with students of different levels I am more and more aware about
the dilemma between a pragmatic and a paradigmatic approach while applying
qualitative methods. Breuer and Schreier stress this difference as follows: a
pragmatic approach is considered as a strict technique to be taught as a set of
recipes and specific steps to be carried out in order to do qualitative research,

while in the paradigmatic approach qualitative methodology is conceptualized as a craft to be practiced together by "master" and "apprentice", which is strongly inspired methodologically by constructivism (Breuer/Schreier 2007). Generally speaking, a paradigmatic approach means reflection on what our specific knowledge is: that knowledge is within the meanings people make of it, knowledge is gained through people talking about their meanings; and it is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied (Creswell 1998, p. 19). These core assumptions serve as background for choosing the topic for further research, a research issue and problem, for carefully listening to respondents in open-ended research interviews and for examining the data working inductively from particular to more general perspectives. In general, nowadays more and more students are inspired by qualitative approaches in their student research, but they use it mainly as a ready made instrument. In means that they are ready to collect and use biographical data to investigate different social problems without much reflection on the paradigmatic background of the data. That leads to a simplification of the paradigm and minimizes its intellectual meaning for social science as well. For example, they use long citations from some text only as an illustration of their previous postulate and do not analyze it profoundly as a first-hand text source of information to be reconstructed and analyzed further step by step.

One of the additional reasons of an instrumental approach towards biography research among students is that as young people they do not have enough personal resources (their own practical life experience) in order to reflect and interpret the life experiences of "other" individuals or groups in unfamiliar social contexts. Nevertheless, interpretation as a process starts from some common sense conceptions about "common", "typical", "untypical" social situations in that or another context (Schütze 2003). And in this situation one should have some "interpretive competence" to compare "me" and "others" in order to search for differences and similarities which are rooted in one's own life experiences. While analyzing a biographical text we start with questions like: What could other persons do in such a situation? What could be other strategies? What is specific and what is normal? In other words, in order to do a deep social scientific interpretation and to use methodological knowledge one first needs to have some practical life experience (at least, on typical social normative patterns of "being young", "being married", "having children", etc.).

The student age in Russia is between 17 and 23 years old and their first contact with the qualitative approach would be at the age of 18 (during the second year of their BA studies). A lack of life experience for comparing "typical" or common knowledge of biographical experiences in different social contexts makes it difficult for them to use their own "interpretive competence". The students usually do not have broad life and social experiences and thus for them it is more complicated to understand situations unknown to them personally on the level of common shared knowledge. It is much more interesting for them to learn about phenomena they are already familiar with, which are close to their student experience (Wagner 2009). That makes the process of learning the approach of biographical analysis more complicated for them and it needs more time and long-term training experience for them to become socialized in the field of biography research as future professionals. So the central question of professional skills is strongly related to the problem of personal qualities of the researcher, the relationship between the self-identity of students and the formation of their professional identity.

There is a wide discussion in social science about professions, professionalization and professional identity in different fields like medicine, teaching or law and their social criteria. But there is a conspicuous absence of sociological self-reflection concerning the socialization and professional identity of sociologists. As Adler and Adler put it, apart from a few exceptions sociologists have rarely thrown light on themselves to analyze how neophyte practitioners turn into seasoned professionals (Adler/Adler 2006).

The problem of professional socialization is a separate and complicated topic which cannot be discussed here in depth. I will rather refer to it here only in order to start the discussion about developing professional skills in qualitative research and the connected values to be accepted by students on the level of a university education. How do students enter the field of biographical or other qualitative research? Are there any specific prerequisites for acquiring skills in biographical research? How can a beginning professionalization as a qualitatively oriented scholar come about?

In general, professional identity is seen firstly as a set of skills, abilities, values and knowledge received through the process of formal education, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and practical training.

All scholars agree that sociological education could not be successful without sociological practical training in the course of which students receive the skills necessary for future professional practice. I would like to recall here Clifford Geertz' famous remark: if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theory or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what its practitioners do (Geertz 1973). So it seems that professional practice is the most interesting moment in order to understand the whole process of professional socialization.

The second important element of developing a professional identity is the collective interaction within a community which promotes self-reflection and a professional type of thinking and behavior (Weidman/Twale/Stein 2001). Student research entails the opportunity to develop such informal student communication. And the third important element in this dimension is the ability to solve professional practical problems: the "problem-solving ability" as a key element of the term "professional" (Schnarr 2009).

This orientation on the problem-solving ability should be considered as an important aspect of preparing future professionals which could be developed only through student practice.

Looking from such a perspective informed by the sociology of knowledge, students in sociology as future practical professionals should be prepared for the situation of dealing with mistakes and solutions in their research activity in order to overcome such mistakes in their future activity; this should form their future professional identity (Eitzen/Zinn/Gold 1999; Ferrales/Fine 2005).

3. Training in biographical research as a process

The methodological perspective in biography research is marked by specific criteria with regard to professional and individual qualities of scholars doing such research which could be referred to as the ability to interpret the "other", or as "interpretive skills" both on the level of field research and on the level of interpretation. It also includes the qualities of interviewers dealing with some individual cases: the skills to cope with others' stress and trauma; to develop an attitude of patience and understanding towards others' pain; to listen and hear the other's voice, to be silent. On the level of interpretation one needs a professional eye to see a detailed world, the ability to concentrate on locality, a sense of following the analytical strategy, to be aware of different layers of meanings (akin to the perceptiveness of a psychoanalyst). So there are some practical researcher's skills and ethical sensibilities which are not mentioned in the more general "codex" of sociologists in the positivist tradition.

Socialization into biographical research would thus imply knowledge of the qualitative-interpretive paradigm as well as personal skills to do practical research, towards developing the position of understanding the other. We could summarize here that the practical skills to do biographical research and the development of professionality in this sphere are based on three criteria:

– the interpretive competence concerning the experience of others,
– the ability to reflect on oneself as a researcher (making mistakes, failing etc.), and
– the familiarity with the interpretative paradigm as a specific professional eye with regard to the relationship between the social world and individual worlds on the level of "micro" interactions.

This is the general overview of the problem. The following remarks will be based mainly on students' own perspectives in trying to find more concrete descriptions of the process of professionalization in the field of qualitative-interpretive research.

As I had the opportunity to trace these aspects in my teaching-learning practice with my students, after the end of each course I gave my students a short task in the way of an open question to reflect on their experience of doing student research: Please, write a short essay about your own biographical research experience. What do you think about your ability to do such research? What do you consider your strenghts and weaknesses in this process?

The three student groups (second year students, MA students and advanced students) could be seen as having different levels of involvement in biographical methods. Each group consists of twelve to fifteen students. In the following, I will quote examples of student answers on each level with the aim to trace the development of their interest towards this method and the ability to use it in their future professional activity.

My first concept in organizing such a research was stimulated by my pedagogical experience in the field. I presume that the acquisition of a biographical perspective and undergoing professional training is a long term process connected with individual socialization as a student and as a young person which consequently developes in several stages.

4. First step of turning to one's own biographical experience

My lecturing concept as the focus of practical knowledge with the second-year students is based mainly on the concept of "sameness", thus on their ability to understand and interpret the experience of those who are close to the students in a social sense: "my family", "my ancestors", "our city", "my friends and class-mates", "my childhood" and so on. This gives them the opportunity to compare their own situation and first hand experience with others with the same background. For example, I give them the task to trace their family history and make an interview with somebody from their own family who could give them information about their own "family past".

The main aims of such research is to give them the opportunity to compare "myself" and "others" in the frame of "similarity" and to stimulate their interest in the formation of their own identity. To my mind, this is very important not only for their professional socialization but also for their socialization as individuals as well.

An additional aim of this first step is to foster the skill of observing as a focus-oriented sociological approach and to stimulate their interest towards everyday life details and seemingly 'banal' situations.

My general impression is that while taking this first step research the students are most interested in the new approach and are very enthusiastic about it.

In their answers which can be found in their short essays the students focus mainly on the positive side of experience of working with biographical material. Here I quote some typical answers:

"I like most in the research situation that one is focused <u>on a much more detailed world</u> and begins <u>to note details</u> that one had <u>never seen previously, in everyday life,</u> in the same situation and you begin <u>to explore those detail"</u> (O.K.)

"Turning to the past you put yourself in a very curious mood, as like going into the fairy tale world" (Sh.I.)

– *"detailed world", "details", "everyday life"* – These notions, which can be found in different essays in different combinations, signalize students' interest towards "micro" information, both visual and textual, that they had not been aware of before. They changed "the focus" of their interest towards the "social" from a 'wide' and abstract vision to a 'narrow' focus and face-to-face situation, from "regularity" and social normativity to "specifics" and locality.
– *"never seen before", "noting", "curious"* – These notions make it more evident that there is a situation of some "change" or change "of angle of vision". It is evident also that they are moved mainly by a simple curiosity "to look at" previously neglected sides and aspects of reality.
– *"Past as fairy tale"* – Here the students start to wonder about the fact that they were not oriented towards "the past" previously. To my mind students are more interested in the "present" or "future" time than in the "past". I noticed this in different contexts. For example, while teaching in Germany I tried to give my students the task to write an essay about their family history in previous generations. As they didn't show much enthusiasm about it (there were many students with an immigrant background, and it might have underlined their social minority status), I decided not to insist on it. My Russian students usually do

such research with great interest, but they do not have much knowledge about the past, even their own family past[1]; the "past" comes for them not as a world of rationality and reality, but as an "unreal" world, full of imagination and mystery. They need much effort in order to activate their sociological imagination and go deeply into the history of earlier generations and sociohistorical contexts of former times. While working with family history they often find it difficult even to name different types of social institutions in the past or other facts in individual stories of relatives.

Nevertheless, students' answers at this stage do not mention any mistakes or difficulties on their way of entering the new field. They are most positive in their attitude towards biographical research.

Another important aspect of this step of "entering" is the choice of biographical material for their individual project. Sometimes the students prefer to choose their *own* individual past (instead of their family past) as an object for their own research and turn back to their early years of childhood within their parent family. For sure, this happens only in very few cases.

I remember the case of my student L. When selecting the topic for her family research she chose the topic of her own childhood experience of her parents' divorce, her individual early-childhood crisis. For her such a project had a personal practical meaning. It was an attempt to reconstruct her own biographical project in the past and her plans on her future family life. For her, such a project helped her to re-think and re-interpret her previous life-experience and present individual identity. So it had some individual meaning as an instrument for constructing her personal identity.

I could summarize that for those eighteen to nineteen year old students who are at this specific stage of their individual socialization entering the biographical field serves not so much as a step of professional development in the field, but mainly as a step of constructing and reconstructing their personal identity. They learn how to cope with their own (individual or family) history in the frame of "sameness". To interpret their family history and compare "me" with the more encompassing 'we' is more interesting for them because it is firmly connected with their personal development and personal experience.

In a professional sense most important for them is the change of their "focus of looking" at social life: to find new fields and objects of their professional curiosity – their everyday-life experience instead of abstract agencies and "complicated classical theories on faraway societies which has nothing in common with our present life", as one student put it. Moreover, it's interesting for them to discover new information sources: albums, texts, artefacts from family history and to develop their sociological imagination about the "past".

5. On the way towards professional socialization: step 2

While teaching MA students when they are taking their second step of learning to do biographical research I try to concentrate in my course on the concept of otherness: i.e., I encourage them to enter the worlds of those whose experience

does not coincide with their own practice. The skill to understand "otherness", combining knowledge, empathy and imagination seems to be the most important feature for professionalization in the field of biography. By giving students the task to choose the object for their research I try to turn them in a direction far away from their own individual lives: to other cultures, to the experience of "sexual minorities" or to migrant experience, to situations of trauma and alike.

Student answers about this step demonstrate that here the question of professional competence comes in and they begin to reflect on how to act as a sociologist. They reflect about general skills and criteria needed for professional practice: How to cope with "otherness" in the situation of field research.

5.1 Understanding otherness

Here are typical examples:

> *"To contact the person and to talk with her or him is not always successful for me, as mostly it's hard to succeed in going away from your 'I' and looking at the situation with professional eyes. I think it needs a long experience to learn how to change your role. I like to listen to people, but as 'me', not as a professional". (B.V.)*

> *"I'm most puzzled what to do when you come across the experience of suffering. That's what one couldn't learn as professional. We are not doing psychoanalysis, we are sociologists. I once heard such an argumentation from my respondent that "I could tell it in full to my psychoanalyst – that is his profession to listen to people, but you are a sociologist, and they use people only like experimental animals". I'll better escape from such trauma research." (S.A).*

– *"away from your 'I'"; "professional eyes"; "as 'me', not as a professional", "couldn't learn as professional", "not doing psychoanalysis, we are sociologists"* – There are two roles and the division between them: "me" as individual and "they" as professionals. We follow the division between "me" as individual and "me" as a "professional", which is not me, but some external role to be followed by those who pretend to be professionals (sociologists). The students even pretend "to try out on themselves" that possibility to be a professional researcher, but still their identify "as an individual" is out of that field. Here we find also a more concrete description of the professional qualitative researcher. The student realizes that "sociology" as professional competence is only relatively close to a "psychoanalytic" role: if one should act as a traditional sociologist she/he should communicate on another level of individual interaction than a biographical researcher who should act and talk as in a psychoanalytic-therapeutical and sociological discourse.
– *"How to change your role"; how "to contact the person and talk with him or her", "the experience of suffering"* – these are descriptions of different aspects of practical skills needed in situations of field research ("interview situation"). Students demonstrate here only normative knowledge about some definite aspects of communication and interaction in practical situations as aims to be achieved during their further professionalization. They only name these features as necessary skills to be developed in the field situation if one wants to become professional.
– *"Not always successful for me", "it's hard to succeed", "I'm most puzzled", "I'll better escape"* – These are more vivid signs of personal reflexivity about their ability to act professionally: it is alright to commit mistakes as a professional.

This could be considered as individual attempts "to try out on themselves" the new role of biographical researcher. They mentioned their personal problems and difficulties in constructing their ability to act like professionals. This may be considered as a first turn to develop a professional identity.

In general, we see here personal reflections about professional skills which are needed to enter the world of the 'other' in practical professional situations and about interaction competencies in such situations as a basis for professional qualities.

5.2 Fear of lacking personal experience

Another aspect of professional socialization at this step is the fear about lacking personal experience. I mentioned earlier that the young age of the students (and at this step they are twenty-one or twenty-two years old) make it difficult for them to utilize enough of their own life experience in order to analyze what is typical and untypical in other people's biographies.

> *"To contact a person is a very complicated task as one should be aware onf a more general level about the (historical and social, VS) events that will be talked about. And I <u>sometimes feel that I do not have enough common sense knowledge</u> to speak about such events (for example, about the 2nd World War) in order to catch some important details." (N.M.)*
> *"I could trace a lot of detailed information but couldn't choose the specific details for analysis as there are a lot of details and I'm afraid to miss something of importance. It <u>needs a lot of everyday life experience or imagination,</u> maybe I miss that. I guess that interpretation is very interesting, but if you miss something in the previous stage it would be hard to reconstruct it in the stage of analysis". (S.I.)*

These and alike remarks mean that the students, even the older students, feel the deficit of "common knowledge" (based on everyday life experience) in order to develop analytical categories while working on some biographical material or to achieve some analytical distance in an interview situation.

At this step the students show their problem-oriented attitude towards biographical research. They mainly focus 'on problems' and "fears" in dealing with the research situation and reflect on their personal and professional abilities.

This could be named as a "problem" situation or situation of individual crisis on the way of acquiring skills in biographical research and developing further their professional competence in the field. On the basis of student answers this step could be named a "problem-solving step", though not all students overcome such a crisis and move further along the way of becoming professionally involved in doing biographical research.

5.3 On the way to a professional mentality

What are the main difficulties on this way in the eyes of students? Here are some more reflections of MA students:

> *"<u>To choose the object</u> for your research is an interesting and easy problem for me. As a person always trying <u>to find something non-ordinary,</u> I always could find some very original and un-investigated object. But more complicated for me is the question how <u>to</u>*

investigate it, that could be the main problem. That is a more difficult and more important task for me." (S.).

– *"To choose the object", "to find", "to investigate", "the main problem"* – these notions mark the formation of professional mentality of a researcher: how to do the research, how to develop a research strategy, how to choose the adequate object for investigation. It could be named method-oriented skills of future professionals. Here is another citation.
"To talk and to focus on the details at the same time is very complicated for me. I'm a very emotional person and try to follow the personal story with empathy." (B. I.)

– *"To talk and to focus on the details", "to follow the personal story with empathy"* – these are the signs of developing another aspect of professional method-oriented skills: critical thinking and empathy, the division between an analytical and personal position: What qualities does one need in order to be a successful professional "interviewer" in field situations and the interaction with possible respondents? So the students come closer to the professional mentality of the researcher and think about developing their analytical ability. One more aspect:
"…But for me there is always the danger of 'swimming' in the depth of the details and become 'food for fish' in such detailed worlds". (Zh.)

"The danger of 'swimming' in the depth of the details" – Along with the previous notions here are the aspects of developing an analytical research mentality as a condition for doing good expertise and for drawing adequate conclusions based upon your research. Reflection concerns how to act, how to investigate, how to analyze in a most adequate way in order to receive analytic results. This is yet another aspect of professionalism, important for any kind of research – analytical skills.

Along with these orientations on developing analytical skills at this step the students stress their personal reflection about the difficulties and possible professional mistakes and problems that have to be faced.

5.4 Working in the group

Another block of MA student descriptions about their experience of doing biographical research is their vision of research as collective action. We all assume that the skill to work in a group is a part of professional work on the biographical material. Here are some contradictory student attitudes towards work on the text in a group:

"While looking at the text from another point of view, you see the most important remarks of your colleagues which you missed in your own analysis. But, unfortunately, in our own group research, we didn't come to a common view on our situation and that's why we lost the whole vision of the text" (M.N.)

"The important difficulty here (in the group discussion, VS) is not so much that colleagues could sometimes not understand each other, but that they mainly do not WANT to understand the others' argumentation" (S.E.)

"In a group discussion if all its members have the same status there is always the possibility of conflicts. So I prefer to work individually but try to look at the text from different points and reflect the results using different sources of knowledge." (P.N.)

Following all these conceptions we could see that "understanding the other in a research situation" is a complicated part of research for them. On the one hand,

students understand rationally that 'working in a group' is one of the rules of the professional game that would help to achieve the most adequate result, and, on the other hand, sometimes they fail in their practice to do that because of the difficulties to reach a compromise and accept the argumentation of others.

Our students found it difficult to work in groups and escape from group conflicts. This appeared to be the weak feature of their professional socialization. Maybe it could be explained in the context of the concrete educational situation in our university: because of the lecturers' lack of interest in developing collective work within student groups. There is a certain tension between an "individual" orientation in the process of learning and the "collective" forms of practical training in sociological education that needs to be worked out. The theoretical part of the sociological training is more based on individual work (essays, exams) whereas the practical part (student research, practical placements) is more focused on group work around one problem or topic.

The responses of our MA students (step 2) show that at this step they are certainly moving towards professionalization in the field of biographical research compared to the first step. They reflect the method itself and some professional skills that have to be achieved in order to do field research in a professional way. They demonstrate some signs of 'trying out' the role of professional: They reflect about the strategy, try to analyze and understand the 'otherness', reflect about their own ability to do biographical research. They are trying to analyze their own mistakes and personal difficulties in this way. One of the restrictions to do such work is, according to them, their young age and lack of common knowledge to do comparisons between what is "typical" and "untypical" in order to understand others' life experience. Nevertheless, their whole attitude towards the biographical approach is much more critical compared with the first step. They give a priority to errors and difficulties. This is why it could be named a "problem-solving step" on the way of professional socialization.

The weakest aspect of their socialization process appears to be the inter-student communication (horizontal relations), the development of communicative skill to make group triangulations and the accomplishment of group responsibility versus an individualistic type of education in other sociological specializations. They found horizontal communication more complicated than vertical relations with the teacher, as the last type of student communication is well 'known' for them and is more regulated by the educational process while the horizontal one is more flexible.

From a teaching-learning point of view I could state here that at this stage they are in the process of leaning some assumptions about the role of field researcher, the role of interviewer, but they do not show their interest in analytical skills to reflect about the methodological basis of biographical research.

6. Analytical skills and attitude towards qualitative identity: step 3

The third group of students were the students who showed their individual interest to do qualitative research as a field of their specialization and maybe their future activity as professionals. It means that they participate not only in the student research but do such research in a team of professional scholars

("teacher-student" projects) where they work on equal terms with "mature" professionals (post-graduates, lecturers, practitioners). I would name here one such project, an international Russian-Polish project on collective memory.[2] Here the students could develop their professional skills in the field further – both in the form of horizontal and vertical group communication with other scholars.

The answers on the same questions within this group show that here the students have a different attitude towards their abilities and skills to do qualitative or more strictly speaking biographical research. For sure, at this stage they are working with a lot of text materials and concentrate on the analysis of the entire narratives, as this is the research interest of the whole group.

In general, the possibility to work in the workshops with a more skilled and experienced research group leads to a more general vision of research specifics and to the formulation of a concept of "a scholar doing qualitative research". They also name some specific features of the biographical approach in comparison with other sociological techniques.

Examples:
> *"I feel a lack of life experience as well as professional experience when I'm trying to choose (analytically, VS) from <u>the whole description of the text</u>. And here is the main point: how and in what way in the process of text analysis does <u>the personality of the researcher and his or her subjectivity come in?"</u> (E.K.)*

> *"I used to notice that the more you <u>read the transcript, the</u> more <u>details and aspects</u> you see, those that you didn't notice previously. Interpretation is hard for me because I feel that <u>my results are very simple</u> and are a type of stating banality. It often seems to me that I didn't <u>open the hidden meaning</u> of the personal narrative." (M.N.)*

Here students are more concentrated on the analytical stage of interpretive analysis ("*the whole description of the text", "reading the transcript")*, whereas on the previous step the answers were more centered around the action in the field. In comparison with the previous step we may conclude that more advanced students focus their interest mainly on the analytical part of biographical analysis.

The personality of the researcher and his or her subjectivity, open the hidden meaning, my results: – while during the previous step they were talking about "the role of interviewer", here they are more anxious about how to play "the role of interpreter" which is a more complicated vision and needs more general understanding of the approach. One of the significant changing moments here is the orientation not only in the "process" itself, but also their interest in the final "result" of their research activity (what new knowledge could we obtain from such research?). It is also important that now the students pay more attention to the professional aspects of interpretative analysis, which are discussed in the frames of professional language and discourse.

Some more examples more vividly demonstrate their ability to think about being a qualitative researcher as a specific role of sociologist:

> *"To <u>be a qualitative sociologist</u> for me means to be as close to the social reality you investigate as possible, in all its details. And you are not looking at it from the outside, as at the 'problem', but as <u>a patient participant who has empathy</u> with those who are the object of our investigation." (B.S.)*

> *"To be a qualitative sociologist for me means to touch, to look, to investigate reality, to participate, to turn locality, banality, everyday life into logics of reasoning, to discover order in disorder (which sometime later again will be put into disorder by somebody else') (B.V.)*

"That's my feeling out of my rather small experience, that to be a sociologist in qualitative research one needs to be a person of specific features: more emotionally involved in your research, trying to study social reality in its concrete, detailed form." (S.E.)

– *"To be a qualitative-sociologist"* – with regard to this notion, which was repeated in several answers, we could see that these answers on the same question are centered around students' reflections on the role of "qualitative researcher" in general, as a specific pattern of research behavior to be followed in order to conduct a specific research project. They name the definite features that construct the pattern of behavior which could be named an active intervention into social reality: *to touch, to look, to investigate reality, to participate*, and *to discover order in disorder*. They name exactly those research actions which are specific for qualitative approach and trace it back to the theoretical background of the interpretative paradigm. It can be clearly seen that they draw the division line between the pattern of a traditional positivist sociological researcher in quantitative sociology and a qualitative researcher. That means that they are moving not onlytowards the professional identity of a 'sociologist' but to a specific "qualitative researcher" identity and that they understand the difference between both paradigms.
– They also name here several personal features that one needs to be a professional researcher in this field: to "*be emotionally involved"* in your field of research and to have interest in the "*detailed"* local reality. These aspects are also the priority of a "qualitative researcher" and constitute the difference to other types of looking at the social world.

7. Closing remarks

The process of teaching-learning biographical research is a long–term process, as we have learned both from our own professional experience and from our lecturing practice. It proceeds through several steps from a first enthusiastic glance, then understanding its difficulties, advantages and disadvantages during one's own personal research experience and then understanding the paradigm and its theoretical background more profoundly.

My small research helps to trace this process during the years which students spend at the university and to discover some additional details in this process.

First, personal development and professional identity are strongly connected with the context of biographical competence. It is much more complicated to teach the biographical method to those who do not have much of their own life experience yet. In this case it is easier to move from more familiar situations and communities to those which are further removed from one's own experience. The way into biographical research is the interplay between personal and professional development and identity. If there is only one stage of the introduction of biographical research on the level of BA as it is now, it may help to develop student self-identity. (That is also not a bad result of the educational process: The combination of professional socialization and individual socialization helps to foster some communication skills, tolerance, it leads to the formation of self understanding-helps to understand human "sameness" and the diversity of cultures in our world, but it couldn't contribute much to their professionalization in the field of biogra-

phy. For sure, it helps to develop the sociological imagination and to look at social reality from different perspectives (Mills 1959). Nevertheless, whereas students receive both some theoretical and practical knowledge on this first level, they just get a first taste of biographical research – enough to make them curious. And they later use it in their future professional practice only in pragmatic terms: as an easy instrument for social research when one could do social investigation without spending much human resources or money. That is the banal attitude towards qualitative research in the eyes of those who never tried to do it by themselves. The answers of students in the first level who took part in my small research show that they do not even begin thinking about methodological aspects of practical research. They just become curious about new ways of doing research and develop a pragmatic attitude towards the biographical approach.

Even on the second level (MA) there is still the dilemma between a paradigmatic and pragmatic approach towards the biographical method. For students the main problem in this second stage is how to overcome the distance between the individual "me" and the world of "others"; how to find links between my personal known world and the role of a 'professional' way of looking. They may become good field interviewers who use ready-made instruments, but they will not turn into good biographical researchers.

This second step demonstrates that students are moving forward through the lines of difficulties and mistakes, as they stress mainly their fears and hesitation about their own ability to become professionals in the field of qualitative research. This confirms the idea of F. Schütze: that the way to professionalization is a way though "the continuity of mistakes" (Schütze 1996, translated by Bittner 2004). One could not become a professional without reflection about of his/her practical mistakes and failures in different practical situations. This step could be considered as the stage of "reflecting difficulties" and concentrating on the role of interviewer. During this stage the students do not reflect their role as analysts and do not consider themselves as future professionals in this field. They are ready to develop their "instrumental" abilities "to be a good interviewer", but do not think about their biography as professionals. Not all of the students are able to overcome that critical step and become professionally interested in this specialization.

But we should take into account that this second step (MA students-level) is the final level of formal university education in qualitative methods. So the majority of students leave the university at this "critical stage" – in terms of their professional development –, reflecting mainly the difficulties of their approach and not thinking a lot about the interpretative paradigm.

Only advanced students engaged in real research show the ability to turn into professional biography researchers as is revealed in their answers: They refer to ways of receiving knowledge, collecting data and analyzing them at the backdrop of a specific theoretical framework which differs from a traditional social science approach.

Thus according to our results the passage of professional development goes through three definite stages:

1) first, a curiosity about a new field and a new way of looking at social reality;
2) the stage of individual crises as a realization of one's mistakes and failures;
3) the reflection about the interpretative paradigm as a final step that might predict whether the student will stay in the field or leave it.

It might be conceivable that this result may be typical only for our context of teaching and learning in Russia or more correctly for my university and my students. But may be these results reflect a wider situation and might be of interest and helpful for other teaching situations in the times of Bologna. The modern system of organizing sociological training at universities in times of the Bologna process certainly gives less time for this specialization in sociology.

Collecting data on the student perspective in my small research project does not lead to some principally new results in the field of "sociology as profession", but raises questions with regard to a "qualitative researcher" identity. A biographical perspective has some specifics compared with other sociological specializations taught on the university level. As one of the students put it: at sociological departments there is usually "a lot of theory", and as university students we would like to know more about "DOING sociology" rather than "STUDYING sociology". A biographical approach helps to learn more about "doing" sociology, as it provides more opportunities to do one's own small student research during university training. Professional socialization and the development of a professional identity of qualitative researchers are a continuous process that do not stop with graduating from the academic milieu. But only through overcoming the period of crisis and mistakes the young scholars could move on their way towards becoming professionals.

We know that biographical research as paradigm and as field of research activity is oriented to specific values of the "individual". The researcher needs specific skills and qualities: s/he needs to know how to work with texts and the "textual" form of social reality, how to understand the "other", how to grasp trauma, how to use some specific interpretative competence. Biographical research could be considered as a specific field of sociological activity with its own values and its own identity. Taking into account student perspectives helps to raise the question what should be the methods to form the professional qualities needed for such work. Do our students need additional courses on psychoanalytical skills and the problem of trauma research? What needs to be further understood about the dimensions and criteria of a qualitative-interpretive researcher identity?

Notes

1 That is a specific feature of the Russian family which I mentioned in more detail before in different contexts. (See for example Semenova 2003).
2 Collective memory as a means for socialization and identification: Russia and Poland. Sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Russia. The author is the head of the project.

Literature

Adler, P./Adler, P. (2005): The identity career of the graduate student: Professional socialization to academic sociology. In: The American sociologist 36 (2), June, pp. 11–27.

Atkinson, P./Hammersley, M. (1994): Ethnography and participant observation. In: Denzin, N./Lincoln, Y. (Eds.): Handbook of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 248–261.

Breuer, F./Schreier, M. (2007): Issues of learning about and teaching qualitative research methods and methodology in social science. In: FQS 8 (1), Art. 30.

Bittner, P. (2004): On professional informatical action. In: International Journal on Information Ethics 2 (11). www.i-r-i-e.net.inhalt/002/ijie_002.05.bittner.pdf. [05.10.2011].

Combe, A./Helsper, W. (Hrsg.) (1996): Pädagogische Professionalität. Untersuchungen zum Typus pädagogischen Handelns. Frankfurt a.M.

Corbin, J./Strauss, A. (1990): Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. In: Qualitative sociology 13 (1), pp. 3–21.

Creswell, J. (2002): Educational research: planning, conducting and evaluating quantitve and qualitive research. Upper Saddle River, NY.

Creswell, J. (1998): Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five traditions. London.

Denzin, N. (1989): Interpretative biography. Newbury Park, CA.

Eitzen, S./Baca Zinn, M./Gold, S. (1999): Intergrating professional socialization and training for sociology graduated students. In: The American sociologist 30 (4), pp. 56–63.

Ferrales, G./Fine, G. (2005): Sociology as a Vocation: Reputations and Group Cultures in Graduate School. In: The American Sociologist 36 (2), pp. 57–75.

Geertz, C. (1973): The interpretation of cultures: Selected Essays. New York.

Hoop, K. (2009): Students' lived experience as text in teaching the sociological imagination.In: Teaching sociology 37 (1), pp. 47–60.

Huisman, K. (2010): Developing a sociological imagination by doing sociology: a methods-based service learning course on women and immigration. In: Teaching sociology 38 (2), pp. 106–118.

Kawulich, B./Garner, M./Wagner, C. (2009): Student conceptions and misconceptions of Social Research. In: Qualitative Sociology Review 5 (3), December, pp. 2–21.

Li, S./Seale, C. (2008): Acquiring a sociological identity: An observation study of a PhD project. In: Sociology 42 (5), pp. 987–1001.

Moustakas, C. (1994): Phenomenological research methods. Thousand Oaks, CA.

Mills, C.W. (1959): The Sociological imagination. Oxford.

Schnarr, A. (2009): Pedagogical Professionalism of teachers in vocational education in the P.R.China. German Institute for Adult Education. Online: http://www.die.bonn.de/asem/asem0903pdf [05.10.2011].

Mollborn, St./Hoekstra, A. (2010): A meeting of minds»: using clickers for critical thinking and discussion in large sociological classes. Teaching sociology 38, pp. 18–27.

Schütze, F. (1996): Organisationszwänge und hoheitsstaatliche Rahmenbedingungen im Sozialwesen: Ihre Auswirkungen auf die Paradoxien des professionellen Handelns. In: Combe, A./Helsper, W. (Hrsg.): Pädagogische Professionalität. Untersuchungen zum Typus pädagogischen Handelns. Frankfurt a.M., S. 183–275.

Schütze, F. (2003): Hulya's migration as Self-Sacrifice Undergone and Suffered in Love for her Parents, and her Later Biographical Individualization. Biographical Problems and Biographical Work of Marginalization and Individualization of a Young Turkish Woman in Germany. In: FQS 4 (3), www.qualitative-research/net/index.php/fqs/article/view/671 [05.10.2011].

Semenova, V. (2003): Two cultural worlds in one family: historical background and future. Family and History 8 (2), pp. 84–112.

Wagner, I. (2009): Coupling career fairy tale: Fascinating Sociology Class. How to teach sociology? The sociology of sociology. In: Qualitative Sociology Review 5 (3), December, pp. 26–35.

Weidman, J./Twale, D./Stein, E. (2001): Socialization of graduate and professional students in higher education: A perilous passage? San Francisco.