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Book Review

Waniek, Katarzyna. 2012. *Polish immigrants to Germany. Biographical analysis of narrative interviews with young Polish people who left for Germany between 1989 and 1999*. Lodz: Wydawnictwo UŁ

Relevance of the Objectives of the Study

This book is a result of research project aimed at inspecting *biographical* and *identificational* experiences of *young Polish immigrants in Germany after 1989*. Three issues are thus pivotal for the study. To start with the most general one that defines the Author's theoretical orientation by the very reference to the problems of biography and identity, it has been specified in the text in terms of *biographical identity work*. Within this framework, Waniek puts a strong emphasis on *trajectory* as one of the basic structures of biographical processes.

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This is closely related to the second general issue, that is, immigration as a social process that is especially vulnerable to alienation, experiences of suffering, disorder, and disintegration of one's identity, which, be it mild or acute, all lead to the reduction of one's sense of capability and actual incapability to act in an autonomously controlled way.

Trajectory, in Fritz Schütze's sense, may basically be conceived as a potential, frequent, normal, or even – to some degree and in most cases – inescapable component of, at least, the early phase of immigration by the very nature of this process, and thus, be taken as theoretically generated focus on inspecting biographical experiences. However, the stress put on the trajectorial aspects of immigration is not a result, as the Author emphasizes, of theoretical interests prior to empirical investigation but has been implied by the very content of data collected for the project.

This leads to the third pivotal issue of the study that adds empirically definite, ethnographical location to it. The choice of young Poles who immigrat-

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ed to Germany after 1989 as a category to be studied is by no means accidental. Although Waniek points to her personal motives and interests which have arisen from her own stay in Germany as a student, objective justification of the choice at hand is embedded in her argumentation that many of the trajectorial aspects of identity work of members of that category are of specific (*peculiar* – to use her words) character, occasioned by the very complexion of Polish–German relationship. The Author brings here up historically both close and difficult neighborhood these societies/nations share, overcharged with the collective memory of their dramatic relations in the past, as well as a range of stereotypes and cultural prejudices that remain alive till today.

Here, it is worth noting that in both cases (trajectorial aspects of immigration and Polish–German relationships) strong stress in analyses of identity work is put on the *national identity*, which – again – has been implied, as Waniek states, by the very results of empirical investigation.

The question of national identity, as posed in the context of Polish–German relationships, implies a close tie between the main subject of the study and larger problem of the European integration. Waniek formulates the clear-cut thesis that “although the significance of European identity work becomes pivotal, the issue of national identity still remains of crucial importance for many persons” (p. 9) and

[w]e must be careful about the ongoing debates on the making of European identity which enthusiastically advocate the disappearance or decline of national identities. This study has shown that issues of national identity, collective memory, and cultural

marginality are of great concern not only on the level of cultural and political elites and professional liaison workers but also on the level of ordinary persons who live their mundane life on the borders of two (or more) cultures. (p. 281-282)

Being not crucial for the main questions of empirical investigation – as it has been designed in the project – and certainly for this reason left unexplored, touched upon in a sketchy way only in the *Introduction* and *Conclusions*, the context of European integration or – to use Fritz Schütze's apt formulation – European identity work seems, anyway, to form a very important frame of reference for the Author's work as a whole. The question of the European identity work delineates, indeed, the fourth pivotal issue for a project to continue these problems in the future.

Theoretical Frame of Reference of the Study

The theoretical frame of reference of this study may be characterized as consistently focused on a range of perspectives that are used to be put together under the rubric of interpretive sociology. Starting, in the first segment of Chapter 1, with its foundation in the philosophy of pragmatism and classical as well as newer forms of symbolic interactionism, the Author also introduces such perspectives like social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis.

The next segment of the chapter addresses a range of issues implied by a variety of concepts of the national identity. Sticking to the interpretive sociology (and symbolic interactionism in particular) as the chief perspective to organize her overall frame

of theoretical reasoning, the Author intends here to enrich the sources of her inspiration by reaching, on the one hand, to a range of ideas developed outside of the interpretive sociology (e.g., Benedict Anderson, Karl Deutsch), and to the Polish sociological tradition of reflecting on nation, national culture, and national identity, represented here mainly by the culturalist approach of Antonina Kłoskowska, on the other.

Chapter 3, *The generalized concept of trajectory with special attention to the immigrant trajectory*, which contains a reflection on the basic features of trajectory and its dynamics seen in terms of sequential organization, and, finally, immigrant trajectory as a biographical entrapment may be read as the most important part, indeed, the core of the theoretical part of this study. Beginning with the very origin of the concept in Anselm Strauss and his collaborators' writings, the Author presents here a systematic overview of that way of theoretical inspection into trajectory in biographical experiences that originates from Fritz Schütze's approach.

There is, however, one aspect of the very composition of the frame at hand which seems to be worth commenting on. This is the mode of its presentation which has been chosen in a deliberate way, as the Author states. Waniek makes it clear that in the introductory parts of the text that are concentrated on theoretical questions, she does not aim at invoking a critical discussion of the concepts. Both segments of Chapter 1 are thus to provide a report to overview general assumptions of the overall perspective and its particular conceptual components, which is to serve facilitating the Reader's reception of the Author's thesis while a detailed discussion on "if they support the theories generated from

the collected data or if they explicate the analyzed phenomena in a suitable manner" (p. 19) is to be carried out in the subsequent chapters in which the analysis of the collected data is presented. Thus, one must notice that the way of dealing with the conceptual apparatus is on the whole, in these parts of the text, of introductory character, and expository rather than analytical. The latter qualification may be, to some extent, applied to Chapter 3, as well. However, focused on a set of ideas that are crucial for the whole project, this chapter may certainly be found more systematic in the mode of presentation and elaborated on the argumentative level than the introductory parts.

It must also be noticed that the idea of embedding a broader and deeper inspection of the concepts into a detailed discussion within the context of data analysis has been interestingly and successfully realized by the Author. Indeed, in Chapters 4 and 5, the Reader not only will find a lot of argumentatively developed comments on how the theoretical frame is working – so to say, in confrontation with data as a conceptual tool-kit – but also many useful references to other perspectives, as well as theoretical standpoints and ideas which have not been announced and introduced in the overall review of that frame's chief dimensions and components.

Now, taking into account so broad scope of that frame, one may ask if, and in what measure, such a strategy of dealing with concepts is effective and attractive from the point of view of the Reader. For a Reader who is already somehow familiar with the interpretive sociology, this mode of presentation might appear too enumerative, while a Reader whose relations with that way of theorizing and doing research are rather distant, might find it difficult

to put together the introductory overviews and expository reports from the first part of the text with the analytical comments that display the Author's working use of the concepts in the empirical part of the study. Relating these two lines of textual organization would require from such a Reader a careful switching between them to see what and how has been presented and reviewed in the introductory way and what and how has been elaborated, concretized, and contextualized later on.

This is not to criticize this way of organizing textuality in its principle. As it serves displaying the Author's competence in the field, it is plausible for technical reasons. It is, moreover, quite commonly applied in texts of this kind.

With regard to the problem of national identity it should perhaps be mentioned here, that it is just this category which, being, on the one hand, announced from the very beginning as one of most importantly related to the main thesis of the work, seems, on the other, to somehow suffer from presentational reducing it in the introductory parts – to use a formulation taken from the title of the segment 1.2 of Chapter 1 – to only "a few remarks," without a more developed attempt at problematization which the very category certainly deserves, especially with regard to the clear-cut thesis on the trajectorial consequences of national identity constructions in the case of the Polish-German relationships.

To illustrate this point, one might refer to the line of theoretical reasoning connected with the question of national self-identification. Declaring that she takes the nation as significant for her purposes, Waniek seems to use it interchangeably

with the concept of national identity as referred to individuals (see p. 31). On the level of the introductory review of conceptual apparatus, such a synonymy might generally be accepted. Yet, she adopts Antonina Kłoskowska's perspective on national identity as the chief frame of reference for the study. Now, it might be suggested that the conflation of these two notions leads to a slightly misleading interpretation of Kłoskowska's way of reasoning. The latter Author does not advocate to use the term of national identity in relation to individuals, so, in her formulation (quoted on p. 34) that refers to the national identity in terms of one's consciousness of differences and distances between the own group and the others, as well as one's consciousness of group duration, Waniek suggests to look at all these components as shaping *collective identity*, which is in turn the necessary condition for a group to fully take the form of a nation. The fact that the concept of national self-identification has not been explored enough within the frame of references to Kłoskowska has also some consequences for that part of the present study where a concept of cultural valence is discussed within the context of "heading for successful adjustment and assimilation" (Chapter 5). Univalence, bivalence, ambivalence, and, finally, polyvalence, as the types of cultural valence, defined in terms of both the competence (degree of appropriation) and acknowledging of a culture as one's own, are confronted in Kłoskowska's empirical studies with the types of national identification (integral, dual, uncertain, and cosmopolitan) – thus, the types of both phenomena form different and – at the same time – correlational dimensions of the analysis. What is interesting here is that the scheme developed by Kłoskowska enables a researcher to grasp such modalities of biographical experiences where cultural

polyvalence is linked with integral national identification (i.e., related to only one national community), or – on the opposite pole – where it leads to a cosmopolitan indifference in relation to feelings of national belongingness. In the case of the immigrants' careers, Kłoskowska's conceptual matrix (as generated from empirical research) might have probably been more explored in its "mid regions" to look, for example, at processes in which initial constellations of univalence and integral national identification tend to transform under the pressure of trajectorial experiences towards ambivalence and identificational uncertainty.

All these remarks are, of course, of a minor significance for the overall assessment of the theoretical background of the study. This cannot be but very positive. The conceptual frame of the study, consistently focused on the interpretive sociology, is at the same time very broad in scope and impressively rich in content as referenced to the variety of inner modalities of that perspective. It should be emphasized that the Author, coping with such a large field of theoretical standpoints and concepts, does it in an integrated way, giving a very convincing evidence of her knowledgeability in the matter.

Methodological Background and Methods Used in the Study

Taking into account the Author's integral adherence to interpretive sociology, it goes without saying that the method of autobiographical narrative interview, as proposed by Fritz Schütze, should certainly be assessed as the best way to realize the Author's research goals. The very method, as grounded in the interdisciplinary field of knowl-

edge, including linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and a range of other branches of research on communication, might be said to be very demanding for a researcher to use it in a competent way. This method can be by no means applied to data, in any phase of data collection, elaboration, and interpretation, as a ready-made tool operating in a repetitive, mechanical way.

The fact that the Author is well prepared to use it is convincingly documented in Chapter 2, where a detailed, indeed full, description of the method is presented in a systematic and clear way. This chapter really might serve as a concise, handbook-like outline of not only the methodological premises but also theoretical fundamentals of that approach. The latter aspect of the presentation is important as it contributes to considerable enrichment and deepening of many of conceptual dimensions which have been introduced and discussed in other chapters, and are addressed in this chapter in relation to the matters specific to linguistic and communicative organization of narration.

Now, one of the most important methodological issues in the interpretative investigations orientated to problems that concern specific categories located within specific social/cultural (ethnographical) settings, as it is in this study, is to define the scope of data collection and ways to gather the empirical material. In the tradition of biographical sociology which has been established by Fritz Schütze and adopted by his followers, the autobiographical narrative interview is closely linked with Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' idea of the grounded theory, which sets up some instructions for doing it in order to meet the principles of theoretical sampling.

The Author's collection has been generated with the use of the Internet and due to "snow ball" effect of her contacts with both private person and Polish associations in Germany. Moreover, it should be stressed that, as she was carrying out the project within the frames of the doctoral studies, she did not have a possibility to engage a research team helping in organization of the study. For all these reasons, one must admit that the realization of the project at hand, as requiring enormous individual single-handed work in the phase of searching for contacts and gathering data, deserves much appreciation.

It is rather obvious that she hardly had an opportunity to develop the project in accordance with this rule for data collection which implies controlling the process at hand, step by step, by the emerging theory, and, what is equally important in this case, with inspecting both the size and structure of the chosen category of immigrants. Waniek does not explicitly report on it in the segment concerning the general characteristics of the study, it, however, might be presumed in advance that no reliable and prior to investigation ground for the reconstruction of possible "resources" of narrators was available for her to be selected in accordance with the principle of maximizing differences in theoretical sampling and thus, encompassing the widest spectrum of variations. She seems, then, to have been forced, by the very nature of the "snow ball" mode of recruiting narrators, to look for possible ways of dealing with demands of contrastiveness afterwards, which usually entails, as it were, some compromising on hardly avoidable contingent character of data collection generated with that mode. Or, if using it was connected, anyway, with the opportunity to control contrastiveness, it should have been reported in a detailed way.

Remarks on the Empirical Results of the Study

At the beginning of her work, the Author offers an initial typology of Polish immigrants who belong to the generation under scrutiny, enumerating (1) those who render their motives in terms of economic advantages of living in Germany, (2) those who immigrated for personal reasons (mostly because of the marriage), and (3) those who mentioned in their stories a personal need for developing professional career. This typology, resulting from Waniek's empirical investigations and covering the cases analyzed in the study, might also be suggested, even if only in an intuitive and tentative way within the sphere of one's motives, as valid for the whole 89s wave of immigrants released from the political predicaments of the earlier waves. Yet, there is basically no warrant that the sample can be taken as representative for that generation in the typological – to use Thomas and Znaniecki's formulation – sense of representativeness, as for its members' trajectorial fates or careers.

Now, when the Author puts such a strong stress on the immigrants' trajectorial experiences, it might, at first sight, look like – on the one hand – as a not enough justified attempt at formulating a substantive theory (i.e., without meeting conditions of saturation of the sample), or – on the other – as a merely illustrative use of data as subordinated to the formal theory of immigration trajectory. In both cases, such interpretations might be repudiated as perfunctory. Taking into account all circumstances limiting her access to the chosen category of immigrants, Waniek's decision to concentrate on the narrators' sense and ways of coping with trajectory as a dominant process of their biographical

experiences can be defended as methodologically deliberated and quite a wise solution of the problem of what can be grasped as a common denominator of their biographical work.

Reconstruction of the framing conditions that disturb, as the Author states, the immigration process and/or enhance the trajectory development is presented in Chapter 4. There is no need to enumerate here all these phenomena which are submitted in the study to, indeed, meticulous analyses. All of these analyses, including the content of Chapter 5, where Waniek deals with the “heading,” or symptoms, or potentials of successful adjustment of the immigrants to their host society, might be assessed as a very valuable achievement of her theoretical and empirical work. And some of them stimulate further questions.

One of the leading themes of Chapter 4 concerns the question of national identity. The Polish immigrants, as the Author argues, confronted with a range of social/cultural differences which underlie expectations and patterns of normal course of life, and, additionally, having, very often, a painful feeling of being subjected to stigmatization, discriminatory practices, and the like, and thus, discovering a relevance of the problem of stereotypical categorization in ethnic and nationalist terms for their own predicament, also tend to discover – in that way – a significance of their own national identity.

What might be found not quite clear in the analyses of the problem at hand, is a question in what measure such a discovery, quite natural as it is in the circumstances of very much increased sensitivity to cultural differences and divergences, is a matter of

sharpening or intensification of one’s awareness of being different on the level of national specificity, and to what extent it results in developing the emotional resources for the national self-identification. The Author seems to suggest that both attitudes (purely cognitive and emotional) occur simultaneously and are typical for her narrators. In fact, there are other investigations which seem to confirm such a thesis in relation to the newest wave of Polish immigration to Great Britain and Ireland; it comes out, however, that quite often a discovery of deep differences between the culture of the host society and one’s own “Polishness” results in a considerable weakening of the feeling of the national self-identification, and the immigrants who undergo such a process tend to develop a constellation of cultural ambivalence in relation to their own national culture, as well as a cosmopolitan attitude towards national self-identification. The Author did not find among her narrators any person undergoing such a denationalization of self-identification. This is quite remarkable and might speak to her thesis on the specific character of historical fates of Polish-German relationships in which the “Polishness” (be that acquired chiefly through the channels of primary socialization, or reinforced further on through the channels of culturalization, to use Kłoskowska’s terms) might tend to be strongly ideologized for defensive reasons on the Polish side. It certainly deserves further research focused on those coming generations of Poles for whom living abroad will be more a replacement than immigration.

There is another empirical question which requires further and deeper investigation – it is the question of prejudices in the contemporary Polish-German cultural neighborhood. It is worth noting that the figure of the Polish *caffone* or “simpleton” is reported

in the study as a paradigmatic derogatory means of categorization. It could hardly be interpreted on the basis of this study to what extent it is a phenomenon which might be accounted for, at least in part, by a naturally increased sensitivity of the immigrants

in their still painful – even if not always acute – phase of their trajectory, and to what extent the immigrants’ narrations reveal some more widely occurring mental structures and communicative/interactional practices.

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