

Reflections: Doing Biographical Research

*Robert Faux**

Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace; when there was war, he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation,
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

(Excerpt from *The Unknown Citizen*, W.H. Auden)

By way of introducing this special issue of *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (FQS)* I would like to focus your attention on three factors, inextricably interwoven, that are most striking to me: 1) the depth and complexity of the analyses of the interview with Hülya; 2) how well I have come to know Hülya and through her the others who have lived similar lives; and 3) the intercultural group of scholars that has come together to introduce us to Hülya.

A year ago I did not know Hülya; I did not know about Turkish migration to Germany; I did not know about the conditions of those who do. But with the help of the contributors to this special edition of *FQS* I have come to know Hülya and others like her. If I had read page after page of statistics concerning the number of Turkish workers in Germany: how many were men; how many were women; how much they were paid; and so on, I would not have met Hülya, nor would I have come to know the price(s) she paid for wanting to help her family, to be independent. I will not divulge too much of the plot lest I ruin the story.

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Our lives are storied (SARBIN, 1986). Each of us has a story to tell, and it is our stories that make us who we are. Importantly, each of us has multiple ways to tell the same story to different audiences. A single narrative account of one's life has many layers. It is through biography and narrative that we learn of the vagaries and the intentions of one's life and how that life has been molded by them. The contributors to this issue of *FQS* explore Hülya's biography and in so doing reveal the vicissitudes of her life. They introduce us to Hülya and allow her to tell her story, but the contributors do more than that. They explicate the methods whereby we discover the many layers of Hülya's single biographical narrative.

In this issue we will learn that to understand the complexities of a life requires that we read and reread the many narratives that comprise that life; a single reading is inadequate. What is deemed important in one's life, what is worth sharing, the very act of recounting the details of one's life, may be shaped by who it is we are telling our story to. In addition, we discover that a narrative needs to be understood within its social and historical context.

In this issue of *FQS* scholars from Japan, Poland, and Germany share with us their analyses, perhaps better phrased, their interpretations of Hülya's narrative interview. With Hülya's interview as the sole focus of interpretation by these scholars we have before us a manifestation of the richness and depth of qualitative research. Importantly, the work presented in this issue continues as scholars from around the world are invited to offer their insights to Hülya's interview in future issues of *FQS*. This seems fitting, for in Hülya we see a restless spirit wanting more than her culture can provide. It is far too easy for many of us to become prisoners in our own cultures, academic and others. It is hoped that the contributions to this issue will reveal to readers what insights and understanding can be gained from other cultures, academic and others.

As BRUNER (1986) tells us, "... it is far more important, for appreciating the human condition, to understand the ways human beings construct their worlds (and their castles) than it is to establish the ontological status of the products of these processes" (p.46). Hülya has lived her life and has constructed ways to give it its varied meanings. What the contributors to this issue do is share with us the varied ways we can come to understand Hülya and her life.