Biographical constructions of generationality and inter-generationality in processes of au-pair migration

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Introduction

> There was happiness and sorrow at the same time, because she was happy that I will perhaps have better chances and that my life somehow will work out differently. That my life will be different than hers maybe. But she was also sad that I was going to leave.
>
> *Olga, au-pair immigrant, 26 years old*

In recounting their life stories, people, as in this case »Olga«, also tell the story of their family, their generation and their country. Analysing the biographical data for my ongoing study on au-pair migration[1] from Russia to Germany, it soon became apparent that many of my interview partners made use of similar explanatory patterns for their ›biographical acting‹.[2] Often they referred to the broader context of their decision to migrate, described transitional events in their childhood and youth, and expressed their desire to experience an environment different from that of their home country. More surprisingly, many of my interviewees not

1 Under the German au-pair scheme, young foreigners may work in a local family assisting with babysitting and light household chores for a maximum of twelve months. Au-pair migration refers to au-pair workers' settlement in the host country after the au-pair phase.

2 I define ›biographical acting‹ as an individuals' effort to gain control over the progression of his or her life. It may be guided by their orientations as regards life planning or may disagree with them if their current living conditions so require.

only named international mobility as their personal opportunity to better chances of their biographical acting, but often pointed to their parents' support for this project.

Applying a generational perspective to my empirical data my guiding question is: Do collective experiences during socialisation have a similar influence on the current biographical acting of au-pair migrants? Furthermore, I am interested in whether the interviewees' parents' experiences of the transition in Russia affected their attitudes towards their children's international mobility. Possibly, immigration after au-pair mobility was not the sole decision of my interview partners, but rather an inter-generational life project in accordance with their parents' wishes.

This investigation is confronted with the task of unravelling the interplay between social generations and the dynamics of familial generations within individual life stories. As Olga's statement illustrates, biographical constructions may involve both one's own experiences within society as well as parental experiences that are transmitted through values, norms and expectations within the family. After a short introduction of theoretical approaches to this phenomenon, developed by Karl Mannheim and others, a review of the literature on generational experiences of Russian women in socialist and post-socialist times sets the context for individual cases of au-pair migration. I then turn to my own empirical data and present three case studies[3] of au-pair mobility and au-pair migration. I analyse these interviews as regards biographical constructions of childhood and socialisation in youth. Furthermore, I aim to investigate the relationship between my target group and their parents as reflected in the biographies. This investigation provides insight into how the two different generations within one family evaluate Russia's past, and into their respective assessment of the younger generation's chances and opportunities with regard to their current life planning.

3 The empirical data was collected using biographical narrative interviews as developed by Schütze and analysed using a combination of ›objective hermeneutics‹ as defined by Oevermann and ›narration analysis‹ following Schütze. Due to limited space, I cannot discuss my methodological approach in this article.

An investigation of cases of au-pair migration applying the theoretical and methodological approach of biographical research assumes that collective and individual turning points foster biographical reflections about the juxtaposition of the individual and the social (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2004: 80; see also Humphrey et al. 2003). The au-pair migrants studied not only experienced Russia's transition as such a turning point. Their immigration to another country also required biographical processes of maintaining and constructing the self within changing circumstances. On the basis of three empirical case studies, I conclude this article with a short discussion of the applicability and compatibility of a generational approach to and with biographical studies. The epistemological potential of a generational perspective arises from its focus on collective experiences that set the context for each individual's life, such as Russia's transition. Nevertheless, it is an open question whether this approach, while making generalizable patterns of experience visible might not at the same time obstruct the researcher's perception of those cohort members who, because of different experiences, do not belong to their generation.

The interplay of social generations and familial generations

Biographies of young Russian women who have been working as au-pairs in Germany may be approached from a biographical and/or a generational perspective. In a nutshell, biographical research focuses on revealing an individual's attributions of meaning or sense (*Sinnzuweisungen*) and action orientations (*Handlungsorientierungen*) based on his or her life experiences (see for example Rosenthal 2008; Farrokhzad 2007; Küver 2008). Nevertheless, this approach also recognizes that biographies are shaped by the social and not only constructed by an isolated and independent individual. Oechsle and Geissler for example hint at the linkage of individual lives. The authors argue that women in particular tend to orient their life planning to that of partners or parents, negotiating their own aims and desires with those of the »important other« (Geissler & Oechsle 2001).

In contrast to retracing the construction of biographies and its relation to individual experiences, the generational approach focuses on collective experiences within specific socio-historical frames. The use of the generational approach in analyses of social phenomena reaches back to Karl Mannheim. In his article *Das Problem der Generationen*, first published in 1928,[4] Mannheim introduces the fundamental distinction between »cohort« and »generation«. Generation is understood by Mannheim not as a social group unified by the same year of birth. Rather a generation is determined by the time of birth because it sets an individual into a specific socio-historical space, thus shaping his or her socialisation. Members of one generational location experience historical events at the same time in their lives. Being a member of one generation, and not only one cohort, in this sense implies that an individual's consciousness is affected by his or her generational location within a historical space. As Kohli elaborates, to form a generation, individuals must also live in a common society and thus share a common social space of experience (*sozialer Erfahrungsraum*) (Kohli 2009).

According to Pilcher, Mannheim's work reflects differences in the quality of generational formations depending on specific socio-historical contexts (Pilcher 1994). Mannheim argues clearly that not every generation exhibits a distinctive generational consciousness. Generational boundaries may be blurred due to processes of the transmission of interpretations, norms and practices from one generation to the other, and by the concurrent processes of transformation. Nevertheless, in changing social and historical contexts, transmitted cultural knowledge can be challenged and may be modified (Mannheim 1970). Whether distinctive generations emerge is very much dependent on the tempo of change. Accelerated social change is, according to Mannheim, initiated by a disruption of normalcy. The usual cycle of older generations dying and younger generations maturing may be cut off by accelerated social and cultural change.[5] This results in a situation in which individuals need to change

4 In 1952, an English translation of Mannheim's article was published entitled *The problem of generations*.

5 I assume that the fall of the Soviet Union qualifies as such an event.

their »basic attitudes« (Pilcher 1994 following Mannheim 1952) more quickly than within the continuous change of the normal succession of generations.

In a human lifespan, youth and young adulthood is the phase with the largest potential to form the generational location of individuals (Becker 1989: 77). Struck et al. define this formative period as the years between 15 and 30. Personal experience of life's opportunities and risks can have a greater influence on young generations than the norms and traditions passed down to them from older generations. This leads to the emergence of new forms of behaviour that oppose transmitted traditions (Struck et al. 1998). Struck et al. define »generation« in accordance with Becker (1989) and Sackmann and Weymann (1994) as a cohort that shows a distinctive structure of opportunities and risks and is anchored in a process of social change. Generations can therefore be recognized in that they share a common destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*; Struck et al. 1998: 8).

Regarding the use of the generational approach in empirical studies, Kohli points out two main problems which endanger the analytical power of this approach. First, social generations are seldom clear-cut and therefore it is often difficult to identify distinct historical generations. Nevertheless, Kohli, in reference to the German context, explains that there are some historical markers which function as indicators for generational formation such as the transition to the First World War, the end of the Second World War and the year 1968. According to Kohli, the year 1989 might be another historical event with a similar influence on generational change, but it must be analysed more carefully as to the ways in which different cohorts and social milieus were affected (Kohli 2009).

The second problem regarding the analysis of generations stems from the intersection of generation with other categories of social differentiation such as class, gender and ethnicity. For Kohli, it is crucial to be aware that these categories of differentiation are not independent of each other, but rather intersect. This may result in their mutual neutralisation or reinforcement (Kohli 2009). Accordingly, Struck at al. suggest that

generations are segmented depending on the economic, socio-cultural, gender specific and particular location of individuals. The more segmented one generation is, the less clearly and distinctively it appears to the researcher (Struck et al. 1998).

The generational approach is based on understanding individual lives as linked to each other. This linkage may be between individuals of one generation (*Generationsgenossen*; Kohli 2009: 239) or between individuals belonging to different generations within one family. The latter shall be defined, following Pilcher (1994), as familial generations*,* denoting kinship and the succession of parents and children. Relationships between different generations within the family are culturally constructed. In spite of socio-historical variations, it is typically during youth and young adulthood that children gradually attain autonomy from their parents. While maturing young people become financially independent by entering into the employment market, moving out of their parents' house and starting a ›serious‹ relationship or even their own family. Within this process, young people have to negotiate between their parents' expectations and hopes and their own preferences (Geissler & Oechsle 1996). Consequently, the transformation from child to adult also leads to a reconfiguration of family roles, and the relationship between parents and children becomes more egalitarian over the course of time (Graf et al. 2000).

For the purpose of the article at hand it is crucial that individuals belong simultaneously to a social generation and a familial generation and that there is a mutual interaction of both types of generation. I investigate whether the act of au-pair migration marks the emergence of a distinctive post-socialist generation and its specific practices. I am further interested in whether and how the parents, who belong to Russia's socialist generation, influence their children's biographical acting. In this way au-pair migration may become an inter-generational project involving two different social generations as well as familial generations.

The context of au-pair migration: Generationality among Russian women in socialist and post-socialist times

The research literature[6] on Russian women was for the most part written after important developments in Russian social sciences beginning in the 1990s, during which gender studies and biographical research emerged as parallel foci (Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2004). One of the most prominent arguments in this field is that although Russian women participated equally in the labour market during Soviet times, gender relations were still characterized by a specific form of inequality between women and men. Article 35 of the Soviet constitution defined men and women as equal and thereby granted universal access to education and work. Article 60 obligated all Soviet citizens to work in the productive sphere of the Union (Pilkington 1992). Along with these obligations women had ›demographic duties‹ as mothers and housewives. Unlike men, women were engaged in the productive and reproductive sphere of Soviet society. This is mirrored in the image of the ›working mother‹ (Ashwin & Lytkina 2004). Although in the West equal access to work is praised as the emancipation of women, many gender studies researchers instead regard the situation of Soviet women as twofold oppression (Ashwin & Lytkina 2004; Goodwin & Emelyanova 1995; Temkina & Zdravomyslova 2003; Pilkington 1992).

In spite of their high educational levels women were concentrated in the so-called non-productive industries, such as health care and education, communication and service and textile production (Pilkington 1992). Their wages were lower (Ashwin & Lytkina 2004) and they were seldom promoted to better jobs, let alone top management positions (Pilkington 1992).

6 Due to the limited space of this article, only a broad overview of the generationality of Russian women can be given. This issue must be elaborated elsewhere.

As the Soviet era progressed, the role of women became more and more important in the private sphere of the families and the semi-private sphere of social networks and the black market. Especially in the Brezhnev era,[7] some goods became rare on the Soviet market and could only be gotten via private contacts and networks, in which women were much more embedded than were men (Pilkington 1992). These changing gender relations were criticized in public discourse when General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev[8] stated that female emancipation had resulted in a loss of morality among Soviet youth, as women do not have enough time to care for their families (Pilkington 1992). Although to this day their formal equality has not been questioned, women have had to face political and medial discourse demanding their return to more ›traditional‹ roles as mothers and housewives (Pilkington 1992; Goodwin & Emelyanova 1995).[9]

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, after different political and economic reforms known as *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* and after the privatization of national property and the liberalisation of prices in 1992, caused a massive economic crisis including hyperinflation, unemployment and constant political instability. During this time of transition, Russia's population experienced material deprivation and a decline of living standard as well as uncertainty about the stability and the future of their country (Bridger & Kay 1996). Since prices rose, the black market remained important for the survival of families during this period.

Families and social networks, held together by women in particular, remained crucial to securing a livelihood. As Shlapentokh and Marchenko put it, transition meant that for »most Russians, physical survival is the

7 Leonid Ilyich Breshnev was General Secretary of the Soviet Union from 1964 until his death in 1982.

8 Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev was General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 until 1991.

9 According to Goodwin and Emelyanova, the government aimed to pressure women out of full-time jobs in order to increase the male employment rate, cf. Goodwin & Emelyanova 1995: 338.

major goal and the solidarity of the family is their greatest resource« (Shlapentokh & Marchenko 1992: 43-44).

The position of women in transitioning Russian society was twofold. Women carried the burden of transition by becoming the family's main actor in the management of daily life with a diminishing budget. Especially after the crisis of August 1998, when wages and employment rates decreased, many families began to look for alternative means of earning money alongside or instead of formal work. It was grandmothers and mothers who started to sell self-made textiles or vegetables and fruits grown in the family dacha (summer house).

Women not only bore the burden of social change, they also represented its losers: They became more and more excluded from the public sphere of Russian society due to discrimination within the political and economic system (Shlapentokh 2003).

The new market did not change career inequality between men and women, but rather reinforced it. Especially for women over 35, it was difficult to find employment in the male-dominated new market. Younger women soon became concentrated in secretarial and assistant positions for which they were extremely overqualified. The newly developing economy was riddled with sexism and chauvinism, resulting in a discourse that perceived women »only as decorative appendages to male ›professionals‹« (Bridger & Kay 1996: 30).

Within the liberalized market, new enterprises developed quickly. As Pickup and White analysed for the city of Yekaterinburg, it was very difficult for women to find entry to these male-dominated entrepreneurial networks (Pickup & White 2003). Women therefore had to remain in public sector jobs, where wages had decreased. Nevertheless, especially in big cities, a small group of very successful female entrepreneurs and managers developed and is still growing (Pickup & White 2003). In

everyday language, these professionals are often referred to as ›business ladies‹ or ›business women‹.[10]

The dissolution of the restrictive Soviet system, which controlled almost every aspect of life, was embraced by researchers as the liberation of women. For example, Pilkington wrote in 1992, that »Glasnost, therefore, is giving women space for the first time to explore their own identity« (Pilkington 1992: 231). It was assumed that the young generation would grow up in a more liberal society, with greater chances to develop their own sense of self (Pilkington 1992: 231).

In a period of transition, Russia adopted a new political, economic and social system and opened itself to processes of globalisation and internationalisation. Following the generational approach, these are preconditions for fostering the development of a new generation that can be differentiated from older generations by distinctive life opportunities, life risks and life practices. Certainly, the state is no longer strictly controlling and guiding individual lives. After the dissolution of the Soviet system, opportunities have opened up in the areas of education and professions, sexuality and illegitimate partnerships, individualised life styles and internal and international mobility.

As the Russian economy stabilized and grew, already in the early 2000s Russia had reached the level of a ›medium-developed nation‹ according to the *Human Development Index* and exhibited a disproportionally high level of education (World Bank 2003). Today, Russia has reached the level of a ›highly developed‹ country (Human Development Report 2011).

A significant middle class has emerged in Russia (Ulrich & Nufferova 2007). This segment of the population usually lives in big cities and has a lifestyle similar to Western European middle classes. It is estimated to

10 In my fieldwork in 2006 and 2009 in St.Petersburg I often came across the image of the Russian ›business lady‹ successfully balancing her family and her career. This image is presented by young women with irony on the one hand, but on the other hand might also represent actual desires and life planning ideals.

include approximately 35 percent of the Russian population and is still growing, especially in the bottom income groups (Ulrich & Nufferova 2007; Shlapentokh 2003). Nevertheless, there are remarkable disparities between the very rich and the very poor within one region or city in Russia and there are gaps between the different regions of the vast country. For today's youth, opportunities are very much dependent upon specific living conditions in their regions of origin (Agranovich et al. 2006). In comparison to Soviet times, social security and state subsidies have diminished drastically, so that not only life opportunities, but also life risks have been individualized. This threatens in particular young people in the less developed regions, those without higher education, and single parents.

Given the career ambitions of young Russians on the one hand, and regional disparities of educational and occupational opportunities on the other hand, it is not surprising that Russian youngsters, especially females, show a high willingness to migrate within their home country (Florinskaya & Roshchina 2008). In contrast to internal mobility, international immigration is a very controversial option in the life planning of young Russians. According to a study of Pilkington and Omelchenko published in 2002, 55.2 percent of young Russians would emigrate temporarily to another country for the purpose of training, education or work. Only 10.2 percent are willing to leave their home country permanently (Pilkington & Omelchenko 2002). Emigration is often connected with a feeling of guilt for leaving one's country and people behind (Pilkington & Omelchenko 2002: 213).

Employment opportunities in the Russian employment market differ greatly along categories of gender and age. From Soviet times on, women have always been at a disadvantage on the employment market. This also holds true for young women who are still concentrated in typical ›female‹ jobs in the fields of health care, education and services, and seldom attain top management positions.

Among young Russians, the likeliness of unemployment decreases with the level of education. However, many highly qualified young Russians work in positions for which they are overqualified. This is due to the fact

that their lack of work experience and the general lack of a demand for qualified workers in certain employment sectors puts them at a disadvantage to older and more experienced workers. Young Russians can only use their mobility and flexibility to outplay older cohorts on the employment market (Dafflon 2009).

Experiencing the economic crisis during the 1980s and 1990s has led Russia's young generation to appreciate material wellbeing and to perceive education as the most important means of positioning oneself successfully on the employment market (Aihara & Ueda 2009). While education is booming in Russia (Florinskaya & Roschchina 2008), trainings or academic courses outside Russia are especially prestigious (Ulrich & Nufferova 2007). Alongside education and profession, the value placed on family and friends has been consistently high in Soviet and post-Soviet times (Aihara & Ueda 2009). This expresses itself in a feeling of responsibility for parents and grandparents as well as in young peoples' attitudes towards starting their own families.

The young generation of Russian females not only has greater liberties than their mothers did, it seems that young women often have an explicit sense of agency and clear plans for achieving individual goals as regards education, profession and family in continuing conditions of ongoing social change. However this may only be true for one segment of the young generation whose members have access to the financial and emotional support they need to plan and develop their lives.

Generationality and inter-generationality in individual au-pair projects

A review of the literature can only give a broad insight in the lives of young Russians; specific migration processes need to be investigated on the basis of empirical data.

Below, three case studies[11] are presented, selected from my data because all of them contain narrations about childhood during times of transition, which may indicate the emergence of a post-socialist generation. Furthermore, all of the three case studies provide insight into specific parent-daughter relationships, thus revealing aspects of inter-generationality in au-pair migration processes.

Viktoria - returning to Russia against her parents' advice

During my field work in Russia I met Viktoria, a 25 year old English-Russian interpreter living in Moscow, who used to work as an au-pair in Germany and afterwards returned to Russia. Viktoria was born in 1984 and raised in a small town (ca. 250.000 inhabitants) near Moscow as the only child of her parents. Her mother works in the municipal administration and her father is a fisherman working temporarily in Finland. Although the family suffered from financial hardships during the transition years due to the father's unemployment, today their lifestyle can be described as typical for a middle class family; they own residential property and go abroad on holidays.

Viktoria lived in her parents' house until she graduated from university at the age of 21. She then decided to spend one year in Germany as an au-pair in order to improve her German. Viktoria explains that she studied linguistics and cross cultural communication at a very prestigious university in her home town. She says »here in Russia I was a student with a high education, and my education was not so bad, because it was quite prestigious to finish the faculty that I finished«.

After her time as an au-pair, Viktoria returned to Russia in order to live together with her boyfriend. This was against the will of her parents. She believes that her parents wished her to stay in Germany because they

11 Please, be aware that only in the case of Viktoria the interview was conducted in English. The other two interview excerpts quoted have been translated from German into English. Also, in favour of readability, transcripts quoted in this article have been cleared of many transcription codes.

assumed that Germany would offer her a better life than Russia. She narrates: »They wanted me to stay there, because you know everyone thinks that here in Russia everything is bad. And there, abroad, everything is good. So it's like prejudice.« This argument also appeared in other sections of the interview, hinting at a generation-specific perception of life in Russia and ›abroad‹.

In a narration about her mother Viktoria refers to her childhood during the time of Russia's transition, which she terms »the nineties«. Although Viktoria has a close and affectionate relationship to her father, her mother is portrayed as her guide through childhood and youth. The portrayal of mothers as ›strong‹ can be found in almost all of my interviews, but it is Viktoria's case in which the mother is portrayed in most detail.

> *Interviewer:* Can you tell me more about your mum, when you say she's a *strong* person?
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> *Viktoria:* Ah yeah, she is I don't know – I think – the way I am is (.) thanks to her, because she is very optimistic and she is – I don't know how to say – she is just strong. […] and she is ehm I think she managed to make me want things. I mean to make me – ja, I try to explain you, when I was twelve, that was the time when eh – I think it was '90, or '91 – the year, and when not everyone went abroad, and when abroad was something you did not know, because I was the first one who went abroad from my family. And there was a trip to Finland – for one week. And my mum managed to do that for me, so with the last money and everything and when I came from there, I understood that I want to study, I want to be there, I actually wanted to live abroad as there they had bright toys and everything was bright, and here, you know like.

Viktoria constructs her personal and educational development as something she owes to her mother. She describes her mother as a »strong person« whereby she defines this strength as a profound optimism. Her mother was optimistic that finding opportunities and using them in the right way would lead to a better life for Viktoria.

Viktoria's first encounter with ›abroad‹ at the age of twelve was organized by her mother, who herself had never been abroad at that time and who invested great effort in making the trip happen. For Viktoria, Finland was bright and rich in things she wanted to possess, representing the ›better life‹. The only way to achieve such a life was perceived to be through education, as Viktoria was reminded by her mother.

> *Viktoria*: […] and then she told me that you have to study, but you have to understand that I cannot give you some things. So you have to do everything yourself, because, for example if you want to get to university, you have to be either clever or you have to pay. And she said, you – I cannot pay for you, so you have to – and so she managed to make me understand, that I have to do everything myself, and that I have to study.

With regard to the specifics[12] of the Russian educational system and the family's scarce financial resources, Viktoria's mother told her that the only way for her to succeed in school and university was to be ›clever‹. She explained to her daughter that she did not have enough money to pay for her education and that Viktoria could only attend university by being a very good student.

This section also hints at Viktoria's resource of cleverness. In contrast to what might be expected, Viktoria does not portray herself as a naturally very intelligent student. Rather she states that only because she tried so hard to improve her marks was she able to stay in school. Viktoria's cleverness was achieved by hard work. Although the Russian school system was corrupted by wealthy families, Viktoria managed to secure her position in this system by being resilient, believing in herself and working hard, as she argues. These resources helped her in later life to endure the au-pair phase and to find her job as an interpreter, although at first she was not even fluent in English.

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12 According to my fieldwork informants, ›good schools‹ in Russia during times of transition accepted either pupils of rich parents who could sponsor school facilities or high-achieving pupils. Those who fell in neither of these categories had to leave the school.

Viktoria goes on to describe the microcosm of her school, where she perceived two groups of pupils: the rich and the clever. When her father became unemployed and her mother could not buy new clothes for Viktoria, she became the victim of bullying. In an interesting narration, Viktoria describes an incident of bullying and how her mother helped her to cope with it.

> *Viktoria:* I remember that once the girl came to me […] and I thought she wanted to make friends with me, or something like that, and she said, may I ask you a question? I said [imitating a child's voice] ja, ja, ja, I am quite naïve, [imitating arrogant voice] why you always wear the same clothes? I remember how I felt. And I just came to my mum and said, she said that. and ehm (.) I did not demand, I didn't make a scandal that you have to give me proper clothes, or something. She said, oh come on, don't worry, believe me when you're grown-up you will have lots and lots of clothes, anything you want, and actually that's it.

In the excerpt above it becomes clear that not all families were affected equally by financial hardships. Viktoria was an outsider in school due to her family's low income and she was stigmatized by wearing the same clothes every day.

In Viktoria's family, her mother became the main provider. She was the one who reigned over the household budget and provided clothes or private lessons to Viktoria. Viktoria also turned to her mother for emotional comfort. This is best seen in Viktoria's narration of the incident of a rich girl bullying her. Her mother said to her that she has to endure this humiliation and must trust that in the future the situation will change for her. Here, the element of optimism in the perception and interpretation of life returns. It seems that Viktoria adopted her mother's belief that her future would be better and so developed the resource of resilience.

In Viktoria's biography, life in transitional times is described as difficult and painful, but also as an important experience for later life through which she learnt how to meet personal challenges and make use of opportunities. In Viktoria's pre-migration life, her mother had a very dom-

inant role and strongly influenced her daughter's interpretations of, actions in and perception of life in Russia. Life planning in this case has a strong inter-generational element until Viktoria travelled to Germany and entered another space of experience. She decided to return to Russia in order to live with her boyfriend against the will of her parents, which caused an enormous dispute between her and her mother. For months they communicated only when necessary until Viktoria started her own life in Moscow. The fight with her family was extremely painful to Viktoria, but it also helped her to gain independence in her life planning, as she herself reflects. Today, Viktoria has reconciled with her parents and assesses that it was wrong to »sacrifice my parents for a man«. She claims that she never again wants to act against the will of her parents, although today she seems to plan her life rather independently.

Experiencing ›abroad‹ as an environment which her parents have not experienced seems to have helped Viktoria to create her own perceptions and interpretations of her life.

Elena – autonomy from parents via migration

By the time I met Elena she was 25 years old, living and working in Germany. Elena came to Germany about seven years ago as an au-pair worker and stayed on. She was born in 1983 in North Caucasus and has one brother five years her senior. Her parents are entrepreneurs. At the age of 17, Elena left her home and moved 300 kilometres away to attend one of Russia's prestigious universities. She was unhappy with this situation as she felt bored by her studies in economics and felt lonely without her family. Making things worse, she was stalked by a man she calls »Mafioso« and was unable to find a way to fight off his approaches. In particular after the Mafioso and his friends followed Elena by car and joked about abducting her, she did not feel safe any longer.

Elena contacted her mother's best friend Ludmilla, who lives in Germany and whom Elena had visited before, to ask her to help Elena come to Germany and take a ›holiday year‹ from her studies. Ludmilla organized an au-pair family for Elena.

Elena's parents did not mind her taking this step. They supported their daughter financially in Germany. They sent her money each month, because they considered the au-pair wage to be much too low. During her time as an au-pair, Elena fell in love with a German of Russian origin. Supported by Ludmilla, she decided to prolong her stay in Germany. She first attended a language class and then enrolled in university. This education was financed by her parents, who do not seem to have tried to influence Elena's decision to stay in Germany or return to Russia. After she graduated from university with the highest marks possible, Elena began to work as a research fellow and has started her doctoral thesis.

Elena has settled in Germany and argues that she will not return to Russia permanently, stating »this is not mine anymore […] it does not fit me any longer«. For her future, Elena makes very clear that she plans to work in the field of German-Russian relations so that she can live in Germany, but travel to Russia regularly. Apart from this, she dreams about her parents and her brother moving to Germany, so that one day they will live together again.

Elena does not name Russia's transition in particular as an important experience in her life. This might be connected to the socio-economic status of her family. In comparison to all other (former) au-pair workers I interviewed, Elena seems to stem from a very wealthy family. I conclude this from Elena's narrations about her family's lifestyle (large residential property, holiday trips, domestic workers in the house, prestigious university, etc.). Moreover, in other segments of the interview, Elena tells that her childhood friends have now started careers in high positions within Moscow's administration for example, which she explains is very difficult to access. Therefore, it can be assumed that Elena's family belongs to an elite circle.

Although Elena does not mention Russia's transition in her interview, she does narrate an important experience of her childhood, which she interprets as the source of her ability to cope with difficult situations in later life. In particular, Elena pinpoints her resource of self-sufficiency.[13]

> *Interviewer:* And eh you mentioned, that you have always been quite self-sufficient and that this helped you to solve some problems. Can you tell me more, what this means (.) self-sufficiency?
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> *Elena:* Yes well I think, that means (.) that my parents for example ehm their whole life long they were working and working and working mhm that's why they have earned money, but they also quite neglected us, […] I don't really mean neglected, we were not left alone in a messy house or anything like that. Of course we always had enough food and clothes, but this, that mum and dad hang out with us and correct homework and all the time teach us something, it was not like this in my family.

Her narration does not directly refer to living conditions and circumstances in Russia. Rather it is dominated by intra-family relations. Elena explains that both her parents have always been working. It seems that her parents were already employed in highly-qualified and particularly well-paid positions during Soviet times and that they managed to retain (and probably improve) their socio-economic position through times of transition.

Elena's childhood clearly was spent in material wellbeing, but she and her brother were left alone during the day to prepare their meals, do their homework and occupy themselves in their spare time. Especially when Elena says that her parents did not spend much time with her, the lack of immaterial, emotional care is obvious.

> *Elena:* For example our mother – of course she said and asked and like this, but it was never like for other kids, like [imitating voice] my son, did you eat? Little daughter you look so thin! [laughing]

13 In German she uses the word *selbständig.*

> You know what I mean? Like (.) [imitating voice] oh my god, you are getting too skinny. Eat some decent food! Like this.

Elena, by imitating the voice of a stereotypical mother who cares about her children's eating habits, marks an ideal of family life which was not fulfilled in her own family. Furthermore, Elena narrates that her parents' conflicts with each other distracted them from caring for their children. Only in cases of acute problems at school did Elena's parents pay attention to their children.

In other parts of the interview, the relationship between Elena and her parents is portrayed similarly. Her parents only interfered in Elena's life when they assumed that something was going wrong. For example, when Elena informed them she would travel to Germany, her mother called her and asked sorrowfully whether there was a problem at her university. It is very important that Elena did not tell her mother she was being stalked by a man and was unhappy with her studies, but instead claimed that she just wanted to spend some time abroad.

In another section of the interview, Elena explains that she made the decision to study herself, following the example of her older brother, and then adds that she has always developed and realized her life goals and wishes by herself. The parents in this biography only support their children financially and seem to be barely involved in their children's actual life planning.

> *Elena:* Then my brother studied and […] then we – and then I said, now I want to study as well! And then I started to study and this was so far away from home. I was seventeen at the time and then I said, now I want to learn tennis and then I organized this by myself, always organized everything by myself, also Germany and the like, everything organized by myself. Our parents did not have to take care of everything so that we achieve something as I can now see it's like for other kids who get everything handed to them on a silver platter, all the things, just so they can stand on their own two legs. And ehm that's not how it was in our home, but this made us stronger and stronger and more immune, so to speak,

> against all sorts of shit. And now I don't see it as a disadvantage. Clearly. And now they have to – well they know, what is going on here [in Germany, CR], but they don't have to give advice all the time.

This excerpt ends with Elena's conclusion that the quasi-absence of her parents taught her how to take care of herself. She stresses that she herself decided to enrol in university and to start playing tennis (which was very important to her during her studies at the Russian university) as well as to travel to Germany. Elena says that »our parents did not have to take care of everything so that we achieve something«, comparing her own case to children from other families.

In accordance with other sections, Elena presents the achievements of her life as rooted in her own abilities and resources, which she already learned to utilise during childhood. What is more, by saying »this made us stronger and stronger and more immune, so to speak, against all sorts of shit« she marks her childhood experiences as having helped her to endure emotional hardships. The interpretation can be made that Elena has developed coping strategies for emotionally stressful situations which helped her to cope with emotionally challenging troubles especially in her au-pair family and following life phases.

Olga – migration as a mother-daughter-project

By the time of the interview, Olga was 26 years old and had studied psychology at a German university, having settled in Germany after the au-pair phase. Olga was born in 1984 in a town of one million inhabitants in the Southern Ural region. She is the only child of her mother, a teacher. Her Georgian father left the family right after Olga's birth. Olga lived together with her mother, her aunt and her grandmother during her childhood and youth. She attended a medical college and first worked as a nurse. Later she started to study psychology. In the third year of her studies, Olga decided to take a holiday year and travelled to Germany to work as an au-pair. She was supported in this by her other aunt who lives in Germany.

Olga's mother is the most important person in her life and vice versa. Olga has always discussed her life planning with her mother, even after she moved to Germany. When Olga makes plans for her own life, she always incorporates her mother. She is very clear that in the future she will live in close proximity to her mother, either bringing her to Germany or moving with her to a more attractive Russian city such as St. Petersburg or Moscow.

Olga's case reveals a specific mother-daughter relationship in which both women are the only important person for the other, although they have already lived separately for five years now. Asked, how her mother reacted when Olga got accepted for the au-pair programme, Olga presents following argumentation:

> *Olga*: There was happiness and sorrow at the same time, because she was happy that I will perhaps have better chances and (.) ehm that my life somehow will work out differently. That my life will be different than hers maybe. But she was also sad that I was going to leave.

Migration in Olga's biography is constructed ambiguously. It is implied that in her hometown she would not have good opportunities and that her life might follow the same trajectory as that of her mother. But, to migrate also means to leave her mother behind.

Asked about this topos of ›better opportunities‹, Olga finally refers to her mother's biographical experiences during transition times.

> *Interviewer:* What do you mean, that your life – mhm that you would have better opportunities and that your life would develop differently?
>
> *Olga:* Ehm well, we can see it like this – she studied, she is ehm (.) a teacher, actually not really a teacher, she studied chemistry and ehm in the same university where I studied later. And ehm then she worked in a factory for a couple of years (.) and later when she was already married and when she had a child – me so to speak and ehm (.) then she started to work as a teacher (.) and then when all this crisis and circumstances came to Russia, that was in the

> 1990s that was a horrible time und after she – (.) until that time she had earned enough and we were often on holidays when I was small and ehm in that time – I still can remember that time, she could not even buy ice-cream, and we had no money at all and that went on for a couple of years and since then eh (.) teachers in general, it is the absolutely worst paid job and eh I believe anyway that in my hometown there is nothing – there are no chances or opportunities to achieve something.

The fall of the Soviet Union in this narration is presented as the reason why the biography of Olga's mother took a negative turn. Olga links her life to that of her mother recounting that both studied at the same university. Olga concludes that in the Soviet Union, chances for highly-qualified single women were much better, but that during transition there was a drastic devaluation of jobs in the public sector.

In other parts of this interview it becomes even more obvious that for Olga her hometown is a place without any appealing perspectives, she even calls it a ›hole‹, and that she does not believe that this is going to change in the future. Olga contrasts her hometown to Russian metropolises, where chances are very different and where being a psychologist might help her to find a well-paying and satisfying job.

Olga then explains that for her it was easier to come to Germany than to move to a Russian metropolis (because of her family relations), although to this day she considers Russia her home. She says »with my mind I do understand that it is not getting any better there [Russia, CR] and it is not getting any easier, but all the same with my heart I just want to go home«. From the excerpt above the interpretation can be made that the core of this mother-daughter relationship is the understanding that the daughter's life shall by no means replicate the mother's in its negative aspects.

In spite of her homesickness, Olga considers settling in Germany and starting a career there instead of returning to a Russian metropolis as she had first planned. By now she has already lived in Germany for five years. She argues that she does not know how to live an ›adult life‹ in

Russia, how to deal with local administrative offices or even how to apply for a job. Moreover, she assumes that her German qualifications and her German language skills will not be appreciated on the Russian employment market as Olga and her mother had originally believed.

Olga has recently found out that in a couple of years she might qualify for German citizenship and thereby be granted the right to bring her mother to Germany. Since Olga still does not identify with Germany as her home, she feels very sad and unwilling to give up her Russian citizenship as an important part of her Russian identity. Nevertheless, she forces herself to consider the benefits of changing her citizenship, a step also strongly encouraged by her mother.

> *Interviewer:* And do you know – ehm and do you talk to your mother about your future, whether you should stay in Germany or return to Russia?
>
> *Olga:* Yes ehm (.) I have already told her that [that she might stay in Germany after she has graduated, CR] and I actually did not expect her to react like that. I thought she will be scared if I will stay here and not return to Russia and I was astonished a little bit, that she reacted so cool and she said that of course I have to do anything and look for anything of how to – which opportunities there are and if I can get citizenship of course I must take it. I was astonished about that.

The section above may be interpreted as an expression of Olga's disappointment that her mother did not ask her to return to Russia. This makes her aim to return to Russia in order to live together with her mother obsolete. Olga frames her mother's attitude as rooted in her mother's perception of opportunities in Germany. In this regard, her mother sacrifices her own desire for Olga's return in favour of Olga's assumed better life in Germany.

Thus the common mission of mother and daughter has shifted from organizing Olga an education in Germany in order to be competitive on the Russian employment market to Olga's settlement in Germany. Nevertheless, Olga is still convinced that in the future she will live together

with her mother and that if she stays in Germany her mother has to follow her. Olga talks about offering her mother a better life, thus erasing the hardships she bore in Russia. In this regard, Olga's better life is the reward for her mother's hardships. Olga wants to repay her mother's efforts by also offering this better life to her, although at present both suffer enormously from living apart.

Comparison of cases: Generational versus individual experiences?

Comparing the three cases presented above reveals that the young women refer to their childhood when explaining how they developed attitudes and resources important to their biography and their current life. It is not surprising that these narrations about childhood involve stories about parents. However, the specific ways in which their parents have dealt with Russia's transition and the attitudes which they presented to their children regarding the changing living conditions in Russia have strongly impacted the young women's perception of their own lives.

Whereas Viktoria's and Olga's families suffered from poverty, and their living standards decreased so much that both daughters remember the deprivations of this time, Elena's family represents a different socio-economic group that secured their wealth during Russia's transition.

Viktoria and Olga both interpret the hardships of their childhood as being caused by »the '90s«, a common experience probably also shared by many young Russians who grew up during the transition. Whether or not these cases form one generation in Mannheim's sense cannot be ascertained without a more elaborate analysis. Elena's case does not fit into this classification. Due to her socio-economic background, Elena spent her childhood in material wellbeing and never experienced poverty. Nevertheless, she suffered from a lack of emotional care and ascribes this experience to inner familiar causes: In her biography, Elena does not argue that her parents had to work hard because of the economic crises but that they were working hard of their own free will.

In Viktoria's and Olga's biographies, the topos of a ›better life‹ is striking. Guaranteeing their daughters a better life is presented as the overall aim of their mothers' efforts. I assume that this notion firstly implies material wellbeing, but also self-fulfilment and satisfaction with work. A crucial element is the mothers' optimism that a better life for their daughters depends on the detection of certain chances and opportunities (a good school or university, a trip abroad, au-pair, etc.) and their successful utilization.

The rupture between the two different social generations of women is certainly caused by the actual liberalization of life patterns after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, making international mobility possible. However, in these biographies it also becomes clear that the mothers actively directed their daughters to make use of these opportunities. Generational change for a better life seems in this regard to be an inter-generational project within the family units.

Having realised how hard their mothers worked and how much they sacrificed for their daughters, Viktoria and Olga have felt obliged from childhood on to fulfil their mothers' ideals of this better life, hereby rewarding their mothers for their efforts. In Olga's case, this effort is presented as the mother's pain about the daughter's absence, while Viktoria stresses her mother's hard work to provide for her.

Similar research findings about young Russians suggest that, as in the families of my interviewees (all of the mothers graduated from university), education is considered the key to social upward mobility.[14] These mothers value going abroad as another stepping stone in improving life opportunities. Au-pair migration in these two cases can clearly be interpreted as an inter-generational project of both mother and daughter for a ›better life‹. Nevertheless, Olga's and Viktoria's cases also show that their

14 Other means to achieving a better life, such as marriage to a rich husband or a career as a fashion model, a television presenter or musician were never even mentioned in any of my interviews. Apparently, all of my interviewees stem from social milieus in which education is the major means to social upward mobility for females.

mothers' expectations and hopes must always be negotiated with the daughters' own life plans and preferences, sometimes leading to interpersonal disputes. Following the generational approach, it may be argued that the mothers' generation has specific interpretations of their daughters' lives abroad which do not match the interpretations of their daughters' generation, who have experienced life outside Russia for themselves.

In contrast to Olga and Viktoria, Elena is not raised with the aim of once living a better life. In Elena's case, au-pair migration can only be considered an inter-generational project with regard to her parents' financial support, since they do not encourage her to go abroad. What is more, au-pair migration was organized solely by Elena and her parents did not express any expectations in this regard. For Elena, au-pair mobility is not connected with improving her opportunities, but was initiated as a refuge from the university milieu in which she was placed in Russia.

Although their childhoods were very different, Viktoria's and Elena's cases show some similar aspects. Both experienced their families as deviant from others. Viktoria's family had much smaller financial resources than the families of her schoolmates. Stigmatized by her clothes, Viktoria experienced bullying at school. Elena on the other hand recognized that other parents were more actively involved in raising their children. We can assume that her feelings of being neglected by her parents caused sorrow and distress.

Reflecting on their childhoods, Elena and Viktoria resemble each other in that they interpret their painful experiences as a source of strength for coping with difficult situations in later life. Whereas Viktoria, through her mother's encouragement, has learnt to endure humiliation and grew to become a person with remarkable resources of resilience, self-confidence and diligence, Elena learnt how to plan and organize her life self-sufficiently and how to cope with emotionally stressful situations.

From this case comparison we can conclude that hardships experienced during childhood were managed by the young women and their families in a specific way, developing resources and the motivation necessary for achieving social upward mobility in later life. Depending on the individual case, parents – with their generation-specific interpretations of life – may take a stronger or lesser influence on the lives of their children. Experiences of Russia's transition in some cases caused the understanding that (temporary) emigration from Russia is the best option for the young generation, even though it involves the spatial separation of the family. In spite of the strong unity of some families, a generational rupture may be caused when children make their own experiences and develop their own interpretations of life outside Russia, thus challenging their parents' interpretative authority about a ›better life‹.

Concluding remarks

Biographies of young Russian women who have worked as au-pairs in Germany may be approached using the concept of biography and the concept of generation. The empirical analysis of this article shows that the generational approach is powerful in investigating how different biographical explanations and interpretations of life and life planning are rooted in collective experiences within a specific socio-historic context. Following Mannheim's approach, two different generations can be distinguished in au-pair migration: First, the generation of the migrants themselves, who were born around the 1980s and experienced Russia's transition during their childhood and youth. Second, the generation of their parents, who lived during the era of the Soviet Union with its specific opportunities for and limits on life trajectories, also plays a role in the phenomenon of au-pair migration.

Intersecting the succession of social generations who lived through different historical phases within Russia are familial generations of grandparents, parents and children who form family units. As exemplified by the empirical cases at hand, some of these families coped with the hardships of Russia's crisis by creating an ideal of a better life which their children will once be able to live. Typically, families in this milieu believe

education and emigration to be major opportunities for the desired social upward mobility. Generational change to a different life thereby becomes an inter-generational project of parents and children, even if it necessitates the spatial separation of the family as a result of migration. Inter-generationality in this regard seems to be dominated by the interpretative authority of the parents' generation concerning the appropriate utilization of life opportunities. Nevertheless, in the course of maturing, members of the young generation live their own lives and in these lives migration is a reality their parents have not lived through themselves. Thus children develop their own generation-specific orientations and their own life goals, which can conflict with their parents' ideals and cause ruptures in the inter-generational life project.

The empirical analysis within this paper shows that the scientific benefit of the generational approach lies in its potential to trace biographical explanations to collective experiences of the interviewees, as can be seen in more than one case. It also reveals the linkage between individual lives – whether those of members of the same social generation or members of different familial generations. Nevertheless, it also becomes clear that this approach does not fully grasp the individual layering of experiences. Only the biographical approach, with its focus on the individual life, is able to reveal the way in which other categories of social differentiation such as class, gender, ethnicity, etc. intersect with generation, as well as how these categories relate to very individual life experiences. Cases which do not seem to share the characteristic attributes of their generation can perhaps be better understood by applying the micro-level analysis of the biographical approach. The generational approach does not itself provide methodological tools and is therefore compatible with different methodological strategies. For this reason it appears to be most enriching to integrate the generational approach into biographical research.

Even though the empirical cases at hand reveal biographical constructions which researchers of post-socialism assume to be typical for this generation, it is questionable whether the target group of this article in fact represents the entire post-socialist generation, or only forms one

specific subgroup within the larger generation. This subgroup may be characterized by its distinctive way of transforming experiences of Russia's past and present into aspirations for travelling, working and studying abroad, not to mention its access to the personal resources needed to realise their objectives. Although their biographical acting, with its focus on education and migration, appears similar, au-pair workers do not form a generational cohesion by acting collectively, instead they act simultaneously. Au-pair workers seldom plan and organize their migration processes in collaboration with other generational members. For most of them, family and sometimes partners are the important others involved in their life planning.

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