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5 Biographical work and biographical structuring in present-day societies

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Introduction[1]

In the beginning was disillusionment. When sociology as an academic discipline took shape in Europe and America hardly more than a century ago, it was as a reaction to severe problems of early industrial society. Trust that enlightenment and science would bring about both technological and social progress for all had been eroded by the nineteenth century's severe economic, political and national antagonisms. Sociology tried to articulate the situation but did not provide practical solutions.[2] Instead, structural descriptions and theoretical explanations of a very abstract sort became a means of coping with a historical situation that had disappointed the projects of autonomy, freedom, equality and solidarity for all. The disappointment lay in the fact that a dialectical process of increased technical, cultural, and social *possibilities* had at the same time produced more *restrictions and dependencies*.

By the end of the last century, sociology had reinvented the question of social order in a structural and abstract manner. It used the old distinction of 'society' on the one hand and the 'interaction of individuals' on the other. But what was the unity of this structure, what kept both sides together? Society had become an abstract entity and the linking of individuals to it a difficult theoretical task. Where was society – among and in the interactions of individuals (Simmel), or in the 'structures' encompas-sing them (Durkheim)? Was social institutionalisation (*Vergesellschaftung*) the product of social action (Weber), and did institutions of modern society rely on such action, or were they systemically independent of it (Parsons)? In short, in attempts to answer the question 'How are co-operation and integration possible?', subject and object were: (a) identified as separate operational categories; and (b) perceived as *somehow* interwoven. Thus it was not possible to observe empirically the warp and woof of the fabric, nor to abandon the differentiating concepts themselves.

The general subject–object debate had been dealt with for three to four centuries since the late Renaissance in the guise of political philosophy (Hobbes), education (Rousseau), materialistic theories and practices of society (Marx), of helpless optimism (Comte) and academic reactions to the first shock of industrialisation (Durkheim, Weber, Simmel). The discussion continues today (among Luhmann, Habermas, Beck and Giddens, to name just a few). But contemporary reasoning about society and the individual tends to remain subject to the same old dualism.

In this paper I follow but disrupt such a subjectivity–objectivity discourse by using *biographical structuring* as an alternative conceptual tool.[3] The first part examines some core characteristics of modernity, focusing on the integration and disintegration of lives. This engenders the question of 'fixing' lives in the double sense of shaping and repairing. The second part introduces the central concept of 'biographical structuring'. The concluding part focuses on some consequences of using such concepts and perspectives for sociological research and practical support in the context of the helping professions. 'Social co-operation' is reintroduced and respecified as joint biographical structuring by professionals and clients, thus reviving the old hope of self-structuring *for the better*.

Disintegration of lives in functional differentiation?

The 'big bang' of classical modernity: the fission of the life world

Put simply, the beginning of 'classical' modernity was not the placing of the sun at the centre of the planetary system, but rather the placing of humans at the centre of our universe. Establishing the subject-centred vision that eventually prevailed in all areas of human activity liberated us from old obligations. Talk about subjectivity today is still in line with this early hope of freedom, though there is a question as to whether the 'right of the individual subject' is still as valid as it has been over the last four centuries. For complementary to the birth of subjectivity at the beginning of modern times has been the discovery, study and manipulation of the so-called objective world: this has gained such momentum that it seems to have overtaken the subject.

The subject/object distinction did not create symmetric spheres. Rather, subjectivity was preferred as the point for observing, and gaining knowledge about, the object world. However, in operating *vis-à-vis* its objects and constructing them, the ego or subject necessarily became the blind spot which, when not ignored, was at least a problem. Within the object world, no subject could be seen, only objects. For example, in medicine, only the body was there to be examined and treated. Focusing on the subject itself, as the 'object' of itself in idealistic philosophy or as 'mind' in psychology, was a reaction to the vanishing of subjectivity and the problem of how to integrate it in the objective, observable world. It seemed impossible to see both spheres at the same time. Whichever side one chose to focus on, the other side was missing, but not abolished. In the long run, the hairline fissure between subject and object which developed at the beginning of modernity opened into a large gap producing separate experts and expertises for both sides.

The success of medicine as a technique for dealing with the body in the style of natural sciences began with this opposition, producing neglect of the patient's psycho-social world and separating care for inner and for outer worlds.

The emphasis, on the eve of modernity, on rationality and on the individual as subject contributed to the formation of models of social order premised on the control and improvement of society (in the sense of *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*, for example).

Both reason and the importance of 'the individual' – subject, citizen, actor, expert, professional, self – can be called guiding principles of classical modernity. Everything had to be accounted for in terms of rationality's means and ends. Its most prominent and effective institutions were the natural and life sciences, but law, economics and medicine followed as academic sisters in the same style. More rationality was equated with more control. In the second half of the twentieth century, the consequences of 'rational action' had produced ecological problems, growing poverty and unemployment on a global scale, dramatic changes of life worlds, the undermining of national regulation by 'global actors' – to name just a few major issues. Thus the extension of the principles of modernity to all sectors of society brought disastrous consequences. This development was so drastically felt that a break was posited and such terms as 'second modernity', 'reflexive modernity' (Ulrich Beck) or even 'post-modernity', stressing the non-rational character of the situation, were coined. The assumptions of modernity were found to raise two problems: first, order cannot be controlled sufficiently by rational action, and, second, order seems to be ambivalent in the first place: creating order means creating a corresponding chaos.[4]

With the complexity of choice, with the precariousness and ambivalence of order, the options for, and the central role of, the individual constantly gained in importance. By the same token, the former questions of how to be individualised *and* integrated became more difficult to answer.

From the very beginning of (classical) modernity, the development of the question of integration and disintegration is not accidental. Integration/

disintegration was the essential issue at the level of the individual and at that of society, as well as around their relation to one another. The unit was created by the distinction itself, cutting apart the pre-modern unity of a social order that did not separate society, the individual and the cosmological.

Functional differentiation

Using the sociological concept of differentiation[5] – which does not stand for 'progress' or 'social evolution' in the sense of 'an improvement of society' – we can distinguish different forms of differentiation (segmentation, centre–periphery, stratification, functional differentiation) (Luhmann 1997: 613, 595–865, esp. pp.707–76). Modern social development seems to have changed its *logic*: pre-modern *topological-spatial* differentiation has been replaced by *functional* differentiation (Luhmann 1980–95).

The diverse consequences can only be summarised here.

1 The change to *functional* differentiation entails the autonomisation and operational closing of subsystems in a society which develops organisations with *formal* membership definitions (Luhmann 1997: 42). Such areas include politics, law, economy, the production of academic and scientific knowledge, education, health care, art, the family, etc. By this process the individual and its interactions, as well as institutions and organisations, are 'constituted' in a way unknown to spatially organised societies.

2 The individual is no longer assigned to a single place (segment or stratum) in society, but is 'located' everywhere; this means that it is *de-located*, as many people's everyday experience confirms. The individual is functionally, i.e. *partially*, included in all subsystems. By the same token, he or she is excluded from these systems (except perhaps the family) as a person and as an integrated individual. Even if the system needs the individual, his or her absence does not terminate the system. This inclusion/exclusion pattern (Luhmann 1997: 131ff, 595–864) produces ambivalence. On the one hand the individual is increasingly important to society, because only the individual can transform possible choices into real ones. On the other hand, the 'in-dividual' as an indivisible whole is endangered and expelled from institutionalised society. Functionally divided participation in many subsystems, at any given time as well as over a lifetime, is demanded and enforced. 'Fragmented selves', something Simmel discovered in urban Berlin as early as the turn of the century, or 'patchwork identities' (Keupp and Bilden 1989; Keupp 1994) may become the rule.

3 At the individual level, this amounts to the double question: how can individual actors develop and *orient themselves*, first as *self-integrated* persons, and second as *integrated members of society*?

4 At the level of social institutions and newly developing organisations, other questions arise: how can the functionally different social subsystems at the same time: (a) *develop themselves* according to their own different, sometimes opposing, goals;[6] (b) *be functionally related* to each other, i.e. integrated at the macro level of society; and (c) deal with *individuals* as their personnel and/or clients? For institutionalised subsystems, individuals are uncontrollable, unreliable and costly. However, they are indispensable in maintaining inner dynamics of the institutions themselves, they react flexibly to changes in their environment, and they are necessary for innovation, growth and even the reproduction of the system. No institution or 'social structure' can reproduce itself without acting individuals.

5 The two separate spheres of *individual* and *society* – subject and object, citizen and state – are independent and yet must be related to each other. It is the self-describing semantics that produces the major theoretical and practical problem of modernity, namely to define their relations.

6 Social *institutionalisation* (*Vergesellschaftung*) and *individualisation* are both increasing; this produces *ambivalence* and *ambiguity*. More 'structure and opportunities' seem automatically to entail *more risk of failure*, both for society and for individuals. *Integration* and *disintegration* are always simultaneously present at both individual and societal levels.

From the *perspective of society*, more powerful systems with increased capacity and complexity are harder to manage, and liable to risky outcomes. One strategy for minimising institutional responsibility seems to be *not* to take the individual – as personnel or client – into account. The 'costs' are increased disintegration, but this can often be 'externalised' as costs or tasks for other social systems, such as the health-care system, the political system, the family. Even individuals themselves may be burdened with the costs, and obliged to 'do' something 'to become integrated'.

From the *perspective of the individual*, the increased freedom from social and local bonds (mediated by money, in Simmel's analysis) brought with it the necessity of manifold choices. Thus the increased freedom in modern times is counterbalanced by the stress and strain of making such choices. Even if the means to choose (education, knowledge, money) are provided – and they are systematically *not* provided equally to all members of society – the process of choosing is hard work and may not produce the results desired by the individual. It may not automatically lead to

continuous participation in any of the systems. Even participation on the level of national belonging is unsure: unemployment, loss of contact with the health-care system, or migration between societies, to name a few, have increasingly become hallmarks of present-day societies. The strain of combining all choices in a reliable structure becomes constant: the 'individual as institution' (Habermas 1988: 188). Is it possible for the individual to keep himself or herself 'together' under such conditions?

Functional differentiation entails the development of a more complex time pattern and time management. *Synchronising*, what can be done at the same time, as well as *sequentialising*, what can or must be done consecutively, becomes more and more important. With the increasing complexity of social activities to be co-ordinated and the multiplication of institutions with their own rhythms and their need for co-operation, a complex time-pattern is produced and forced upon everyone. Instruments and systems of measuring and co-ordinating time flourish. 'Being oriented' means to have some notion of what historical time, what epoch of society, one lives in. Temporal structures for routines and everyday life are often only implicitly 'known', becoming apparent only when they are disrupted.[7] Life-course patterns (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age; pre-work socialisation phase, working phase, post-occupational phase) are established culturally and through the occupational sphere, and function as a necessary co-ordinating system for orientation. In short, all social experiences and actions of individuals are linked to institutions and large subsystems by means of specific temporal orders.

Despite the assumption of a specious *disintegration of lives in the functional differentiation* of modernity, integration does seem to be possible, both on the individual and on the society level. The problems stated can be more or less managed in social reality. But how? This seems to be a riddle for sociology and its conceptual apparatus.

My thesis is as follows. During the process of functional differentiation and modernisation, the individual as well as the institutions developed new and more appropriate temporal orders, new networks for establishing meaning and co-operation, in which the individuals had new freedoms and new limits. To give a more general term to what has been named 'biographical work' (Strauss *et al.* 1985: 32, 132, 136–8), I call the specific *operation* with which I am concerned 'biographical structuring'.[8] The structures produced are called 'biography' (individual) and 'biographical patterns' (institutional).

Fixing lives by means of biographical structuring

How have both individual and society been dealing with *potentially* disintegrating developments associated with modernity? How do they systemically try to prevent 'social entropy'?

Among other means, people as well as institutions in modern societies have been dealing with the problem of complex social order by introducing self-reflexive operations. One type of such self-reflection and self-description that also uses temporal distinctions, and thus can structure the life-time of individuals and define temporally differing engagements and participation in institutions, is called 'biography'. Although the term reflects the recent[9] cultural historical form of a written (auto)biography, biography is originally produced in face-to-face oral communication. The term still conveys the idea of a description produced by prior observation and self-observation, thus structuring life before and after the event. The work of orienting the temporal process of the individual's life and of social change can be termed 'biographical work'. Biographical work is a practice that has been developed in modern societies in order to solve some of the main issues of integration and order. Biographical work is a way to orient the individual and make him or her reliable for institutions in a historical social situation when static personal definitions (such as status) or quasi-natural phases of a life-cycle are not sufficient for this purpose. A biography has to be both flexible and definite, integrating and open for new, unexpected situations and needs. Biographical work applies to both the individual and the institution and is utilised by both.

Looking for a basic tool to deal with unexpected and ambiguous situations, to locate the individual and structure the world reliably, we first come across the spoken language with its communicative and narrative qualities. By means of communication we interpret what happens, pass on to others what is important, fix experiences and build up knowledge. Spoken language can recall and interpret past events, reorder them for present purposes and even place them in a context of expected events or planned action; spoken language is able to temporalise events, actions and experiences and thus knit a multi-referential network in which the individual can orient himself or herself, i.e. be him- or herself and change as well. The main form available to the person in command of a natural language is the self-relational, self-expressive *narration*.[10] This is the minimal competence that creates a more complex life-story. We may not know who we are and what is happening to us, but if we are able to narrate how we became who we are, then we can integrate ourselves, because we can present ourselves as both consistent *and* contingent. Even if I have gone through many contradictory phases in my life, the story I can tell presents me as myself. We reconstruct our lives in a self-relational attitude, *looking back* at what we have been through and lost (such as a certain expected future), *looking forward* to what we aspire to,

putting it together for *present purposes*. This is an autopoietic process. In this process the relationship of the symbolic level – the story actually communicated – to the life really lived becomes an issue. Being truthful to our experiences, we cannot invent the life-story as pure fiction, but depend on our life history (which may be full of events that lead me to construct lies or impose certain readings and exclude others).[11] What I have been through, my life as I lived it, the communication with my fellow humans and its relevance, and last but not least my experiences with my body (Fischer-Rosenthal 1999a, 1999b, and, for the bodily experience of chronic illness, Fischer 1982): all this goes into my life story.

Is there empirical and historical evidence of this thesis?

At the level of the individual, the last two and a half centuries have seen an enormous expansion of written autobiographies covering all strata of society. Empirically, everyone is able to tell their life story, narrate a biography or parts of it in defined situations. In almost every type of communicative situation where we want or need to refer to the complex actions and experiences of a particular individual, biographical self-presentation may be required. Such situations range from hardly institutionalised occasional interactions between strangers (in a bar, in a train) to repeated narration in one's own social milieu (after dinner, during family celebrations), to highly formalised organisational settings (job interviews, visits to the doctor, testimony in court, political campaign speeches). Those who are in a strict sense not capable of biographically presenting themselves create interactional disturbances. Certain types of therapy are in essence provisions of professional support for constructing a reliable and liveable version of the life story, better fitted than previous versions to what the clients/patients have really lived as life history and to their present situation.[12] It is intended not only to change experiencing and behavioural patterns, but also to alleviate bodily symptoms. Any psycho-social therapy is professional biographical structuring.

All this can be explained sociologically by assuming that narrating one's life story (presenting the self in a biographical way) functions as a new means to cope with contingency. The 'mini-narrative' of oneself replaces those grand 'meta-narratives'[13] that were the previously pivotal ways of coping with a contingent world.

Given the precariousness of communication, presenting and creating oneself as a 'person' seems to be possible only by telling *how* one became what and who one is now. The individual as a dynamic system of plural sub-selves is realised in his or her *life stories* and not through a 'coerced identity'. Our position in the strata of society and our many functional relations to the major subsystems are less important for our own orientation and for others' perception of us than the narration of the story experienced,

with its interpretive variance. Only my story seems to be able to transmit to others in good faith a clear enough idea of what to expect from me.

Not only individuals, but *organisations and social institutions* as well, have realised that the general social complexity and resulting tasks of organisational selection can be handled by the formalisation of membership and by requirements specific to different temporal phases. The formal regulation of admittance and 'processing', with regard to both personnel and clients, involves not just functional qualification, but also biographical checks. Individuals can be better expected to meet institutional demands if a temporally sensitive standardisation of such individuals is established. A 'career'[14] pattern – sometimes expanded to non-occupational strands of the biography – is made a prerequisite for membership status. This pre-shaping of biographical patterns happens on a small scale (e.g. in training for a specific occupation) in organisations. It accumulates on the large scale (e.g. the construction of familial life stages, the division of a lifetime into childhood, youth, adult occupational life, and post-occupational old age) over one or more functional subsystems of society (Kohli 1985). In the family, in education, in the occupational area and the economic sphere in general, and of course in the ordering agencies of law, politics and religion, biographical patterns are prescribed for individuals. Of course, this process of temporal differentiation also entails people losing options which they had before, simply by growing old and passing age markers (see, for example, Bornat *et al.* this volume). In general, we see an expanding network of temporally ordered positional and actional sequences, a network which is provided for the individual and which he or she has to go through in order to be a full member of society. Many of these sequences are also directly related to phases of the life-course.

As in the logic of institutionalisation, the very process of a developing plural biographical network in institutions feeds back, requiring a greater need for individual choices, thus reinforcing individualisation through the construction of biographical narratives.

Biographical structuring as a special practice and form of temporalisation allows both the individual and society to deal with more contingency, maintain complex social structures and balance more options. Biographical structuring thus is one way to connect individual and society in modernity.

To sum up:

1 Biographical structuring is *multi-relational*, it refers to and produces a network of events and options to be combined and continuously reinterpreted over a lifetime.
2 Biographical structuring is a time-sensitive, even more a *time-constituting and time-processing* process. This refers both to chronological,

irreversible sequential time (as in institutional careers) and to phenomenological time (as in autobiographical narrations) centred in actual present time, filled with specific recollections and expectations.

3 Biographical structuring refers to an interpretive, open *process of becoming*.
4 Biographical structuring is *dialogical and interactive*. The symbolic network of self-orientation is constructed in a lifelong process of communicating and sharing interpretations of what 'really' happened and what to expect.
5 The researcher's biographical analysis mainly follows the same logic as the biographical work of the 'biographer'. It is *hermeneutical and reconstructive*, just as the biographical structuring itself – the biographical narration – is *interpretive and constructive*.
6 Biography is related to the history and the capacities of the living, animate body. Biographical communication entails the production of meaning of ageing, sickness, social functions and parts of the body.
7 The concept of biography forestalls the individual–society split. It is a structure operating in both spheres. Its manifestations of life history, life story and institutional biographical patterns bridge the gap between the theoretically induced 'inner' and 'outer' spheres.

Biography is a social structure provided by society, as it institutionalises and organises the many types of timetables one has to go through in a lifetime and it is the individual's story *always in the process of being told*, which he or she can and must tell.

Research and professional support

Biographical research

Biographical structuring is a general social phenomenon preceding the 'micro-macro' distinction in sociology (Fischer-Rosenthal 1990). The very process of social differentiation in modernity calls for flexible reproduction and transformation of the person in relation to society. If the thesis of 'biographical structuring' as a means of creating and transcending consistency holds, then general sociological research on all levels of society can be done as biographical research, stating how social order is achieved in contemporary societies.

Once a Polish speciality, biographical research has developed greatly since the times of Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, the classical study on migration at the beginning of this

century (short edition: 1996; cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 1995d). Complementing a more quantitative strand of life-course research, recent biographical research makes extensive use of the narrations of individuals (for a concise history, see Fischer-Rosenthal 1995a; also Kohli 1981) in order to analyse social processes. A wide range of topics have been treated in order to study the biographical dimensions of social orientation in general. The meaning of historic change (Kohli 1986); the experience of institutional worlds, of living with chronic disease (Riemann 1987); the past and present meaning of large-scale disasters such as Germany under National Socialism (Rosenthal 1990), world wars (Schütze 1992; Rosenthal 1995b), or the Shoah (Rosenthal 1998); the recent reunification of Germany (Fischer-Rosenthal and Alheit 1995; Völter 1994) – these are just a few fields that have been analysed using biographies (and these few references are limited to German authors). Theory, methodology and methods have been refined (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997a, 1997b).

As a research and diagnostic tool, the ability of biographical self-presentation in a narrative format is utilised to produce a narrative text as database. Additional sources (archives, written accounts of the same person, interviews of family members, etc.) may also be put into the body of material. However, the subsequent analytical task, the sociologist's reconstruction, cannot be another narrative. Rather, the goal is to discover the *generative structure* of certain selections.

The generative structures of the lived and experienced life history and of the self-presentation in the life-story interview, as well as their interdependence, are understood as principles that organise emergent events in the individual's life in order to enable him or her to achieve a consistent orientation. These generative structures can be discovered in a highly controlled hermeneutical process.

Finally, *types* of generative structure are formulated with respect to the specific research question and frame. The interviewing techniques as well as the whole process of reconstruction are quite elaborate (see Wengraf, this volume, for a more detailed sketch), but these remarks will have to suffice here (on interviewing and analysis, see Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997a: 412–21; 1997b: 139–57).

Going beyond the 'classical' focus of attention on the biography of the single individual, contemporary research concerns itself with the important question of the generational transmission of experiences (see Bertaux and Delcroix, this volume). Nothing is automatic in this interactive 'transfer' of knowledge and experience (Rosenthal 1997; Völter and Rosenthal 1997). There can be tendencies, and more or less legitimate reasons, to keep silent, *not* to convey what one saw, did or experienced.

The Germans in particular, in two wars of aggression and during the criminal Nazi system and during the socialist period of the GDR, produced a 'double burden of the past' which is now being studied in biographical research (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995b).

The collapse of the Central/East European socialist/communist states at the end of the 1980s is another very fruitful area for biographical research and incipient biographical research seems promising in these countries.

Professional support

Biographical structuring as an orienting practice has reached the helping professions. Therapy, social work, education in many institutions, secular and clerical counselling, supervision, organisational development, etc. all use biographical (re-)structuring and intervention. The internal conceptions differ from one profession to another, as does the degree of explicit consciousness that one is operating with *biographical* concepts. Somewhat programmatically, I shall conclude by sketching the uses and usefulness of structural biographical analysis in professional and expert contexts.

Given a cyclical process of continuous oscillation between the two functions of *analysis* and *interaction* with the client, two questions are obvious. What is the value of a biographical reconstruction as described above in professional support, and how can interactive interventions and unilateral expert reconstructions be practically established and linked?

Sociologically reconstructing the principles of an individual client's experience and presentation of his or her life on the basis of one or two biographical interviews and documents yields answers to two kinds of questions. One is, how is the behaviour and experience of this *individual*, especially when coping with and producing crises, brought about in the course of their life, and what crucial generative structures lie beneath the separate events/stories? The other type of question focuses on the *role of institutions* in these processes.

In most cases a professional expert has to deal with an elaborate 'history' of the client with different kinds of institutions (including their own) and the analysis has to discover what part institutions have played and play in shaping the client's trajectory – for better and for worse (Strauss *et al.* 1985: 8–39). Tracing the individual's and the institution's roles in shaping the trajectory not only demonstrates any positive potential, but also shows how any spiral of problems has developed and gained momentum.[15] The function of sociological reconstruction, identifying operating mechanisms, is identical with identifying *blind spots* of both the individual and the institutional actors. Making the blind spots visible to the actors themselves enhances their actional and experiential capabilities and reduces problems. For the client this means living better. For the professional, the self-critique and broadening of the institution's actional capacities not only applies to the individual immediately concerned, but potentially entails better support *for all clients*.

Taking a neutral position aside from the genuine interests of the client and of the expert, the sociological structural analysis of the biographical text – even if done by the expert himself or herself – can present the diverging interests of the two parties. The discovery of their respective blind spots, which are necessary elements of the actors' vantage points, brings the general paradox (Schütze 1996) of professional and client worlds into focus. More specifically, there is a distinction to be made between individual autonomy and social integration. The client identifies different problems from those seen by the expert, who is an agent of a social subsystem. The relationship between expert and client is asymmetric in regard to power, knowledge and autonomy. This tends to prevent the client from achieving greater autonomy, even though this is the explicit goal. Consequently, professional support systems very often produce the opposite of what they intend.

Focusing on these paradoxes in the concrete details of the case cannot make them vanish, but can make them less acute. The re-introduction of such knowledge in the interaction between expert and client cannot and should not dissolve the paradoxes, but, if they are known better, the range of action and co-operation between client and expert will be improved. The expert can thus avoid two common traps: he or she should identify neither with the client nor with the agency. Instead, the expert should develop a general professional knowledge and identity through skilled casework.

Today the critical point is not the level of structural biographical analysis as a unilateral expert method, but the practical re-introduction of the knowledge gained into the interactive process of the professional and the client. This problem cannot be solved by theoretical considerations but must be worked out practically, both in the training of professionals and in the actual communication between expert and client. It is not sufficient, and may even be harmful, for the professional simply to confront the client with the stark results of the biographical analysis. The insight into structures, both limiting and enabling ones, has to be transformed and respecified for a real communication and a process of guidance and support to take place. The pace has to be suited to the client's capacities and should allow for a slow restructuring of the client's biographical conceptions and narratives as well as for behavioural changes, including regressive movements, in the client's life.

Notes

1. Final responsibility for the editing of this version is taken by Tom Wengraf since, for technical reasons, it was not possible for the author to check the final manuscript.
2. Early this century the value judgement debate (*Werturteilsstreit*) in the continental social sciences was but one reflection of the tension between practical interests and 'pure' research. In Germany, the discourse reappeared in academic sociology: 1930s: between neo-positivism and critical theory; 1960s: the debate on positivism; 1970s till today: in the counterpoint between Luhmann's systems theory and Habermas' theory of communicative action.
3. Along this line of thought Luhmann has developed a non-actor-centred systemic view of society. Although relying in some aspects on his critique of sociology and on constructivist methodology, the author does not follow Luhmann's systemic approach.
4. Regarding the discourse on modernity and its derivations, cf. Beck 1992; Luhmann 1991; Beck *et al.* 1994; Bauman 1990.
5. Cf. classical: Simmel 1890; Durkheim 1893; Luhmann 1985.
6. E.g. making money in an economy, deciding right and wrong in law, deciding about truth in science, caring for health in medicine.
7. On the disruption of routines and lifetime patterns in chronic illness, cf. the author's study of terminal kidney disease and rheumatoid arthritis, Fischer 1982.
8. This is similar to Giddens' general notion of structuration, structure and the 'duality of structure' as medium and outcome of social practices, cf. Giddens 1984: 21–8.
9. There are only rare autobiographical documents out of pre-modern times, but we observe an abundance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Cf. Misch 1969; Pascal 1960; Niggl 1989; Fischer 1984: 478–82.
10. One crucial trigger for analysing stories in qualitative research in general and biographical research in particular was Labov and Waletzky 1966/1997; Bamberg (1997).
11. Rosenthal 1995a. In a critical appraisal of Gestalt theory and hermeneutics, Rosenthal has methodologically introduced and instrumentally refined the distinction and relation between *life story* and *life history*, the experienced and lived life, for empirical research; cf. also Rosenthal 1993.
12. This is also true of the ubiquitous forms of counselling in print and electronic media, ranging from serious to entertaining stage-management of giving biographically relevant advice: cf. Bergmann *et al.* 1998: 150f.
13. In this proposition I agree with and extend the thesis of the vanishing legitimising meta-narratives in the discourse of postmodernity: cf. Lyotard 1979, chaps 6–10.
14. In the eighteenth century the term originally referred to the double track of the carriage as it held its course.
15. On the negative role of helping institutions cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 1999b.

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