

## Constructing and Reconstructing Narrative Identity

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autobiographical  
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**Abstract:** The research work done by the author investigates a phenomenological field—the subjective experience of chronic illness and disability—by means of a specific research instrument, the autobiographical narrative interview. It focuses on the concept of narrative identity and its empirical substrate in the scientifically generated texts. Narrative identity is regarded as a situated, pragmatic, autoepistemic and interactive activity drawing on culturally transmitted narrative conventions which is performed within the research context. We have been working with a systematic analytic approach which covers interactive and contextual aspects of the interview situation as well as rhetoric and positioning strategies in the act of telling.

Other research questions concern the concept of "narrative coping" and the comparison of partner's narratives on problems of illness and disability, especially on scrutinizing aspects of identity and alterity (self and other) in the texts.

This work can be understood as combining aspects of the research domains of narratology, identity and coping on the background of a qualitative methodology.

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### 1. Research Questions and Problem Context

I think that my approach within the field of qualitative psychology in the social sciences can best be made plausible from the standpoint of the research questions and objectives I pursue. These will be presented in the light of their developmental history, since I am, after all, a narratologically-oriented researcher. [1]

For the past 25 years, first as a clinical physician and since 1979 as a rehabilitation psychologist, I have been working in the area involving the psychological and social effects of chronically ill patients, mainly with those that had suffered brain damage. In particular, I have been concerned with the observation that patients experienced and described a great diversity of disabilities and strain notwithstanding the range of their actual medical impairments. Thus, from the very beginning, I have been interested in the "inside" of the experience of a severe physical or mental disability. I have always had the

desire to incorporate an understanding of the patient's subjective experience in my work as a therapist, a counselor, and an instructor. This intention broadened the scope of my research to include the coping resources, following the objectives of a psychological coping research. My specific aim hereby is the level of interpretative techniques and the constitution of meaning, e.g. the way in which those who are affected treat the occurrences, experiences and changes which accompany their illness or impairment and in which they integrate them into their biographically founded self concept and life story. As a chronic illness or impairment always influences the social surrounding and stimulates joint coping efforts, by "those affected" I not only mean the patient but also close significant others. Thus, the research question can be expanded to include a systemic perspective of the experience of close significant others and their contribution to coping with the illness. [2]

My experiences with psychiatric or psychoanalytic case studies first directed my search for a systematic empirical approach toward biographical research. Taking the gestalt of subjective experiences seriously and searching for an adequate methodology almost automatically led me to look into the "narrative interview" and its methodological background in the works of Fritz SCHUETZE (1977, 1981, 1987). The use of the narrative interview proved to be a very useful, practicable, and fruitful means of addressing both my research questions and my narrators with their problem worlds, as I could take part in their life worlds, treat them as experts for the predicaments of their situation and show my intense interest in their experiences. This made communication much easier and rendered the narrative situation fruitful for both sides. [3]

## **2. The Life Story as an Act of Identity Constitution and a Coping Effort**

As my research questions were primarily psychologically motivated and oriented toward the personal constructions of meaning, my focus specified in the course of my work with narrative interviews. Although proceeding on the assumption that life stories are constructions done by the narrators, in which autobiographical memories are brought into language in a given narrative situation, and in which form, contents and function make up a unit, we can nevertheless concentrate on interpreting specific phenomena in direction of our main concern about the complex narrative process. Consequently, the center of my focus is not so much asking for the reported events, as in oral history, or for the manifestation of biographical structures, as in sociological approaches (e.g. SCHUETZE 1981), but it is the way in which narrators understand the actual communicational situation during the interview and use it to come to terms with their memories and experiences, to construct and present a special concept of themselves and their world with their narrative and rhetoric devices, and to account for them for themselves and for the listener. Questions about subjective experience and coping efforts now converge for me in doing "identity work" during the process of narrating, in its foundation and justification in biographical experience and its manifestation in the linguistic expressions of the interview partners. Thus, telling one's life story became my main interest as a process of actual identity construction and a way coping in the act of narrating itself. [4]

This in turn led to two changes in my focus on the conception of the autobiographical narrative interview. First, the biographical dimension of the narrative interview now plays only a marginal role merely for its own sake, and instead is taken as a narrative resource which potentially allows for the narrator to do his identity work. As I see it, it serves this function in two respects. On the one hand, it offers the narrator a temporal structure of organization and a backdrop for the arrangement and presentation of experience and thus makes the communicative conveyance easier for conversation partners with less speech competence. On the other hand, directing attention to life-long personal experience, which is often completely new, intensifies the process of self-reflection and provides elements of explanatory power to work out the genesis of "the sort of person I have become". Working out the biographical dimension stimulates self theories and auto-epistemic processes whose immediate observability in their act of constitution is among the exceptional attributes of the narrative interview in comparison to standardized tools: It renders possible to grasp understandings which by far exceed the means of traditional research on self concepts aiming at statistical analysis and classification according to propositional content. [5]

The second change evolved from the increased focus on the interactive dimension of the interview process, on aspects of negotiation and on the strategical positioning techniques of the narrator conveyed by rhetorical means. Therefore, I no longer considered the narrative interview a means of access to the historical reality of the narrator but as an ongoing process of construction, which is motivated pragmatic-interactively and by the immediate interest in self-exploration, assertion, and self-presentation at the time of narration. [6]

### **3. Questions about Theory, Methodology and Method**

My central theoretical and methodological questions can be circumscribed as the search for a substrate of the "narrative identity." Whereas the philosophical, epistemological, and psychological aspects of such a narrative identity can be described largely on the level of a theoretical concept or of a metaphor, (KRAUS 1996, MEUTER 1995, RANDALL 1995, RICOEUR 1990, THOMAE 1998), the task of empirical research is to establish a suitable corpus of data and to explore and create various methods using interpretative procedures based on narrative and conversation analysis. The next step after establishing the narrative identity, particularly with regard to the experience of illness, disability, and trauma, is to investigate narrative coping, which above all in therapeutic settings has been deemed the achievable and desired result of autobiographical narratives (e.g. SCHAFER 1992). Both are postulated as quasi-existential domains of human processes of construction meaning or actions in much of the English and German literature. My aim is to find such an empirical basis in autobiographical narratives which were elicited in the context of research because of their particular epistemological and construction conditions. So "narrative identity" can be understood as the narrator's solution of the task to make his own person understandable and accountable in his life story given in a special, socially meaningful situation. This can be worked out by systematically analyzing

references and patterns on the various levels of the text (e.g. implicit and explicit self-characterizations, positioning activities of oneself and of interaction partners in the life story and in the interview situation, activities of negotiating and accounting, constructions of worlds and interpretations of events in relation to one's self-understanding, use of culturally founded narrative patterns and of schemata of meaning). Thus, the interpretive work is to unfold what is meant through what is actually said by an extensive text analysis based on discourse analytical tools (DEPPERMAN 1999, SCHIFFRIN 1994). Here, I mainly use the rhetorical activities and narrative strategies of the informants, but also make use of culturally founded narrative topoi as means of self-understanding and as narrative resources (ROESLER, in prep.). [7]

This can be illustrated by a brief excerpt from an interview with a narrator who took part in a study of patients with war brain injuries (LUCIUS-HOENE, 1997). The excerpt (see also LUCIUS-HOENE, 1998) is limited to a short interact following the informant's spontaneous narration in which the interviewer wanted to ask the informant about his childhood memories. He had begun his life story with the time of his injury as a young man.

Interviewer: How did your childhood go?

Narrator: What do you mean, "childhood"? I grew up in the country.

By replying in this manner, the narrator succeeds in presenting and constructing aspects of his identity in several ways. For one, he conveys biographical information- he grew up in the country. However, if that were all that he intended, he need not have made such a linguistic effort. By rejecting the interview question with a rhetorical counter question, he conveys that the question is wrong in its approach: it does not make sense to ask a person like him, who grew up in the country, about his childhood. The term, "childhood," in the interviewer's question was not conceived by him as a period of life, as a time of not-being-an-adult, but constructed in an emphatic sense and then rejected as something that could not take place in his case. By implying that the interviewer has such an opinion of childhood, in the sense of a developmentally psychologically important and positive phase, he can obtain a distance from her and at the same time position her in another world. In this way, she appears naive and uninformed and trapped in a privileged view of the world that has nothing to do with his real life experience. Thus, he adds contours to his identity in this interact on one hand as that of a biographically severely disadvantaged individual, who on the other hand, however, with his specific experiences feels superior to the naive theoretical world view of a scientist and who can also convey it to her.

This part of the text allows the construction of hypotheses about the constitution of identity of the narrator which can then be examined and modified in the course of the processing of the entire text. [8]

The *methodological questions* I concentrate on concern the interactive production process of narrative interviews and the integration of different levels of the text

analysis with respect to the construction of narrative identity, as is also done, for instance, in the work of BAMBERG (1999) and SCHIFFRIN (1996). Another focus of interest is placed on the question of an empirical substrate of "narrative coping" and its relation to the results of coping research. [9]

#### **4. Theoretical and Methodical References within Psychology and Adjacent Research Domains**

The roots and references of my work are independent of their belonging to special disciplines and consist of methodical derivations and thematic parallels on the following levels: [10]

- In a common interest in treating narratives as a source of knowledge and the potential their interpretive analysis has with respect to the above-mentioned research questions. Here, I benefit from approaches to narrative analysis from linguistics and literary theory as well as from conversation analysis, discourse analysis and ethnographical methods of text analysis. Methodologically important, though not always identical are mainly recent approaches within a narratology in the framework of social sciences, as for instance work done by BRUNER (1987, 1990), POLKINGHORNE (1988, 1996, 1998), or MC ADAMS (1993, 1996), by ROSENTHAL and FISCHER-ROSENTHAL (ROSENTHAL 1995, FISCHER-ROSENTHAL & ROSENTHAL 1997), or linguistic approaches (BAMBERG 1999, JOHNSTONE 1996, LINDE 1993, RIESSMAN 1993) as well as the perspective of a "discursive psychology" realized by the work of WETHERELL, POTTER and EDWARDS (EDWARDS 1997, EDWARDS & POTTER 1992, POTTER 1996) or DAVIES and HARRÉ (1990). There are also parallels and shared interests with a psychoanalytically founded narrative research, as well as an exchange of ideas, as for instance with Brigitte BOOTHE (1994, 1998) or Wendy HOLLWAY and Tony JEFFERSON. [11]
- In the broadest sense social construction-oriented research on identities and identity work (KEUPP 1999, KEUPP & HÖFER 1997) and their "post-construction" further developments, such as those described in the "polyphonic" or "dialogical" self (HERMANS & HERMANS-JANSEN 1995, HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM 2000, ROWAN & COOPER 1999) [12]
- In the research on the subjective experience of illness and its narrative presentation - the "illness narratives" - as they are studied in medical psychology, medical sociology, medical anthropology, and also in literary theory (FRANK 1995, HAWKINS 1999, KLEINMAN 1988, see also HYDÉN 1997). Further German publications in social sciences and psychology are for instance those of a biographically and narratologically oriented perspective on illness and disability experiences done by Andreas HANSES (1996) or Marianne PIEPER (1993) or the ongoing work of Christian ROESLER. [13]
- In research work on illness experiences, coping and subjective theories of illness done in medical psychology on a qualitative basis as for instance by VERRES and KLUSMANN (VERRES 1986, VERRES & KLUSMANN 1998) or H. FALLER (1998). [14]

- In phenomenology of bodily experience and awareness and their corresponding disorders (FISCHER-ROSENTHAL 1999, MERLEAU-PONTY 1974, PLÜGGE 1967) [15]

A long, intensive collaboration regarding the methodological foundation of analysis methods of the narrative interview as well as the practical research work involved ties me to Arnulf DEPPERMAN, in Frankfurt. As a psychologist and a linguist, he has been contributing the perspective of conversation analysis to our work on texts. We are working together on the research questions mentioned above concerning narrative identity, trying to develop practical techniques. In this context, we also share a collaboration with Michael BAMBERG at Clark University in the U.S. [16]

A positive example of cross-disciplinary work would be my experience in the research group (*Sonderforschungsbereich 541* of the *Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft*) "Identities and Alterities" (*Identitäten und Alteritäten*), a project on mediums of self-assurance ("*Medien der Selbstvergewisserung*," ) with Michael CHARLTON), which integrates diverse issues from the areas of cultural studies, linguistics, and social science for a thematic focus and makes the individual approaches fruitful for one another. [17]

Accordingly, the information contexts I find most important are those that are not addressed toward a group of specialists in a single area but are oriented toward interdisciplinary issues or research practices. These are, for example, the journal "Narrative Inquiry" , the series "The narrative study of lives," the mailing list "Biographieforschung" (biographical research) ([biographieforschung@uni-magdeburg.de](mailto:biographieforschung@uni-magdeburg.de)) or "Gesprächsforschung" (conversation research) ([mailliste@gespraechsforschung.de](mailto:mailliste@gespraechsforschung.de)) as well as the corresponding conferences. An exception to this list is the journal "Theory and Psychology." [18]

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