

The construction of belonging in post-modern times. Narrative accounts of joining a volunteer organisation as constructions of social selves.

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is on the consequences of social „disembedding“ (Giddens, 1990) for the individual narrative construction of belonging in Western societies. It is argued that individual narratives on social embeddedness can be understood as the situative narrative (re-)constructions of one’s social selves, thus closely linking individual narratives and “community narratives” (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995) of belonging. These accounts, then, reflect the “positioning strategies” (Langenhove & Harré, 1997) by one’s selves and by others, i.e. imaginary and real dialogical partners.

Based on this model empirical material from an ongoing research project on „posttraditional ligatures“² is analysed³ in which members of various volunteer organisations have been interviewed. The paper discusses, how their passage from non-membership to membership is narratively constructed, which positioning strategies can be found, and how the meaning making process in these narrative accounts can be understood, emphasising the polyphonous characters of these narratives accounts.

1. Social ligatures: Dissolution or restructuring?

This paper is based on two questions:

- One is the question, whether and how the construction of social belonging is changing in an individualised society and
- The second one is, which sort of strategies can be found on an individual level.

Starting from sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf’s (1979) diagnosis of the melting away of social ligatures, I am assuming, that processes of social disembedding in post-modern times will not lead to monadic subjects. Instead, the emergence of new forms of social belonging is to be expected, as a consequence of social and individual deconstructive / reconstructive efforts.

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For the theoretical thinking about the changing social ligatures we can rely on an elaborate discussion. On a general level of social analysis we may refer for instance to postmodernist thinkers like Zygmunt Bauman (2001), “late modernists” like Anthony Giddens (1990), “reflexive modernists” like Ulrich Beck (2000), or “hypermodernists” like Francois Ascher (2000).

If we look for theoretical discussions closer to individual experience we find a detailed discussion of the construction of belonging and communities. Some of the concepts proposed there in my view can be paralleled to discussions within dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001). Brent (1997) for instance elaborates on the concept of a “communities without unity”, which does away with a simplistic understanding of coherence. Others deconstruct the concept of unity/diversity (Hetherington & Munro, 1997) and the idea of border (Cohen 2000), again arguing against binary concepts of difference. Instead, alternative readings are proposed which look at the multi-dimensional process of border construction and on the space between I and thou, in and out. This noman’s land or “heterotopia” (Hetherington, 1997) gets new importance as a locus of experimentation and of hybridisation.

2. Volunteer groups as an empirical field

When we look for social changes in the construction of belonging from an empirical perspective, it seems to be a good idea to choose an empirical field, in which people have high degrees of freedom for experimentation and for individual solutions. Memberships in volunteering groups/organisations do have these characteristics. Usually nobody is obliged to join a volunteer organisation. It is done – not only, but also - for the benefit of others. Furthermore, the goals of these organisations are emphasising alterity on the *programmatic* level. And these goals *in practice* can only be reached together with others. Thus, joining a volunteer group is a deliberate choice of the *alter*, the social other, and means the construction of belonging on various analytic levels. These then are my questions:

- How are individuals narratively constructing their joining of a volunteering group/organisation?
- Can we distinguish various types of narrative construction?
- What does this tell us about changes in the social construction of belonging?

3. The narrative of joining a group as a dialogic construction

What sort of material can I expect, when I ask people what made them join a specific volunteering group? Hopefully I get rich narrative accounts of this process of joining. I certainly do not get THE TRUTH, but one storied answer out of many possible stories. I, as

the interviewer, will take part in a dialogic sense making effort. This effort certainly will be based on narrative ready-mades, available for a specific author in a specific society under specific situational and biographic circumstances and may even stay very close to these ready-mades. So, the interview can be seen then as a dialogue or polylogue operating on various levels.

- between interviewer and interviewee,
- between the multiple selves of the interviewee,
- between the interviewee and imaginary others in a general sense (relatives, “friend or foe”),
- between the interviewee and his volunteering group in the sense of narrative work on a “community narrative” (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995), which encompasses, for instance, stories about entering and leaving the group or being and staying in it.

Furthermore, the storytelling implies a self-positioning of the author as an agent in his or her story. For the theoretical underpinning of this process we can refer to Harré & Langenhove (1999), who highlight the procedural character of this construction and its focus on the question of power and on the construction of personal identity. For my purposes here the mode of what Harré & Langenhove call “deliberate self positioning” is the most important one. In this mode personal identity is expressed “by stressing one’s agency in claiming responsibility for some action; by indexing one’s statements with the point of view one has on its relevant world; or by presenting a description/evaluation of some past event or episode as a contribution to one’s biography” (Harré & Langenhove, 1999, p. 62).

4. Story-lines in the narratives of joining

I certainly did get stories with an intentional self-positioning. The 40 interviewees answered my questions with a narrative on what made them join a volunteering group (Keupp, Jain, Höfer, Kraus, & Straus, 2002a). This narrative quite often is a composite narrative, which means that it is composed of distinguishable sub-stories. Many of them echo the theoretical analyses on changes in volunteering and social movements (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Putnam, 2001). For an overview I list some of the story-lines I did get. Each type of story-lines may come in stronger or weaker forms.

a) The story of heritage and obligation

Dynastic rule, social order, heritage, assignment, obligation

Strong version: Grandfather signs for his new born grandson and pays the membership fee until he dies.

Weak version: Local tradition, each family is obliged to send a male family member to the local fire-fighters.

b) The story of being liked, asked, needed

Growing attraction among neighbours, friends, members of a certain social class, combined with an invitation (“we need you”, “would you like to join us”, “you are like us”).

Strong version: I wanted to join this group and waited for being asked

Weak version: I was obliged to join, because they put pressure on me

c) The story of a causal biographic chain

Biographic/thematic logic, causal chain, one thing leads to another

Sequential form: Protestant youth group → Amnesty International

Parallel form: Trade union → SPD (Social-democratic party)

d) The story of a rational choice

Individual decision

Example: “I wanted to do something in this domain, I looked for information, and then I decided on joining this specific group”.

e) The story of a compassionate decision

Shocking event leads to the joining of a group

Example: Environmental groups get new members after disasters.

f) The story of practical reasoning

Example: A family, which could not get a public kindergarten place for its child, decides to start a private one together with other parents in the same situation.

5. From story-lines to narrative types

Usually my interviewees tell a mixture of some of the above stories. The sub-stories are presented in a specific relationship to each other and with a specific narrative structure. Thus, the story as a whole about joining a volunteer group gets a typical “Gestalt” or form. My analysis of these narrative construction is focused on the question of how joining is narratively constructed, what might be a framework for the understanding of social changes and which changes are visible in these narratives. From the many possible perspectives I want to choose a specific one – the question of agency. Agency, a well known concept in psychology, is also a specific one in narratology. This focus is interesting because it is related to various discussions.

- Under a sociological perspective we are reminded, that the “rationalist pathos” (Beck, Bonß u. Lau 2001, p. 26) of a modern autonomous subject is obviously an ideological construction.
- The discussion on volunteering and on social movements echoes this discussion and underlines the co-constructive narrative work to be done in groups and between members as well as outsiders (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

- In literary narratives post-modern theorists and writers have experimented on agency in narratives, thus deconstructing the narrative about the autonomous actor from within narrative theory and artistic practice (McHale, 1987).

Agency in this sense is meant to go beyond participation and activity. It has also an aesthetic side as “an experience to be savoured for its own sake” (Murray, 1999, p. 128). According to Bremond (1973) we can distinguish between “agents” and “patients”, the agent being the one, who acts and – most importantly – influences the patients. It is exactly these forms of positioning we are talking about. I distinguish four different types of agency in my stories depending on

- how much the agent is embedded in a coherent story structure by the author,
- how much distance is put between the author and the agent. Is there a moment of reflexivity between the positions of author and of agent, two thus opening up a space for discursive positional manoeuvring .

a) The single-storied agency

This narrative form usually goes together with the story-line on being asked to join, on being invited into a group. The interviewee authors a story, which can be told in a seemingly unchangeable and authorised version. There may be more stories to be told on him or her joining the group, but we will not hear them. These narratives are rather short, precise and final. Further investigation by the interviewer does not lead to the telling of alternative stories, but to further details and explications on the *social frame of reference*, i. e. on rules and procedures. Author and story-agent are shown by the narrator in a unified, coherent way. The telling and the told are affirmatively presented. So, we have a story in a closed world with high degrees of normativity and no obvious signs of ambivalence. Although the agent can be stronger or weaker, this does not change the general character of a closed story in an “almost classical mode”.

b) The kaleidoscopic agent: The uniform traditional actor revisited

This is a story, which can and is actually told in many versions, depending - among others - on the audience and social situation. A kaleidoscopic story not presents only onstage-talk but also information from backstage, i. e. about the various social roles the author is inhabiting. The teller does not reduce the agent to one “official” face. Instead he shows us an agent with many faces. It has to be made clear however, that the story is still functioning and is authorised by the author and that there is a closure of the story told. Even if there are many angles to look at the story, the story itself is nonetheless recognisable in an integral form.

Interviewees, who tell this story have various versions/focuses, which appear in the course of the interview. These focuses are not contradicting each other but are an enrichment to the main story-line. We might say, that the author/interviewee is positing the narrator/teller in changing locations giving him thus a fuller view on the story and the possibility to elaborate on the various sides of his story-agent.

c) The agent in a rhizome story: the actor dethroned

While the kaleidoscopic story appears to be enriched and more layered than the single true story, it is still formally intact in the sense of Labov & Waletzky's (1967) concept of a well-formed narrative. In the rhizome story however, no single story-line is privileged over the others. And the sub-stories are not complementary, but in an ambiguous relationship to each other. The question of agency is never clearly decided upon. This then is a story without a clear sequencing, without a causal chain, without an ending, but with a plurality of narrative voices instead of a singular one. We may call it a "rhizome story" as Janet Murray (1999, p. 132) - taking up Jacques Derrida's concept - has defined it. Derrida used the rhizome root system as a model of connectivity in systems of ideas. A rhizome story consists of many stories, which leave open the question of coherence, the question of dominance and hierarchy and the question of an ending.

Ambivalence comes in on all levels of the narrative. The cause-effect question is never answered and the temporal sequence stays unclear as well. In that sense, rhizome stories can be easily changed, retold, de- and reconstructed and are thus open to the future. Interviewees who tell rhizome stories on their joining of a volunteer organisation, don't put an end to their narrative. The narrative simply ends because both participants in the communication - interviewer and interviewee - agree on it, be it that they have run out of time, out of coffee or out of tape. Rhizome-stories show a narrator erring around in his story, "failing" on the coherent organisation of the telling and never succeeding in getting hold of a coherent agent in this multithreaded story-web.

d) Agency as an overt construction: the ironic actor

A fourth type of narratives came to me as a surprise. At first glance it reminded me of the single-story agency: A clear cut story with an ending, an agent, and sequential ordering. This agent-type seems to be well-known. It is the one who is individually acting within a social frame and as such he may be taken as a type (a) actor. But something is different, and indeed very different. The difference lies in the fact that he lets me see him doing the constructive narrative work. It is done with a twinkling eye, as if to tell me: You and I know that we are doing a co-constructive narrative work and so my offer is the story of the "autonomous

agent". But if you don't buy this one, I'll tell you another one. And moreover, the interviewee shows his capability of multithreaded storytelling in other parts of the interview, not to forget the ironic self positioning signals he is sending also within the narrative. The irony comes in for instance at the level of causality, where ambivalence is shown in various forms:

- a) ambivalence in the motivation for joining: Not knowing whether it is the right group - but joining anyway,
- b) ambivalence, when reasoning about the decision to stay: a frosty welcome - but staying nonetheless,
- c) ambivalence, when evaluating the group's program - but accepting it anyway,
- d) ambivalence, when evaluation of the group's actual activities - but participating in them nonetheless.

These layers of ambivalence lead to a fuzzy causal chain.

6. Two discursive strategies of reflexivity

In many theoretical discussions on post-modern subjects two characteristics of the post-modern are in the centre. One is the idea of reflexivity, of a move to constantly put one's own subjectivity on the test-bed of analysis and questioning. The other one is irony as a means to discursively realise one's self-positioning as a reflexive subject. When focussing on story types, which show these features of reflexivity and/or irony, I find two discursive strategies in my material. Both strategies are marked by dialogicality, by an open future, and the end of the monadic agent. The strategy of the rhizome-narrative works on the narrative level, i.e. the construction of the narrative. The ironic agent-narrative on the other hand presents a rather traditional narrative, which is undermined by a fuzzy causal chain and the parallel discursively established agreement about the co-construction of a seemingly traditional narrative.

The differences between these two discursive strategies lie

- a) In the focus of their deconstructive effort: either in the story form or in the discursive framing of the narrative.
- b) In their handling of dialogicality. The ironic agent-story situates the dialogic element on the discursive level outside the narrative, leaving the narrative - more or less - with a strong autonomous agent, presented however by an ironic narrator. Irony here can be understood as "some appreciation of the malleability and the mutability of social rules and realities, and the contingency and ambiguity of cultural truths" (Rapport, 2002, p. 97). This strategy then keeps the narrative superficially intact in its traditional form, while subverting it on the discursive level. Subversion here takes further place by means of

narrative metalepsis (Genette, 1980, p. 235), i. e. by entering and leaving the diegetic universe along the way of telling. It only seems to save the narrative form but undermines it from “outside”.

In the rhizome-narrative on the other hand the dialogical moment is a constituent of the narrative itself. The whole narrative constructs the plurivocality of the self. This strategy thus dissolves the concept of uniform agency. The question of agent/patient cannot be decided. It reminds one of post-modern positions, which question our expectations of storytelling and challenge us to construct our own text from the fragments provided.

“Seen from the viewpoint of textual theory, hypertext systems appear as the practical implementation of a conceptual movement that ... rejects authoritarian “logocentric” hierarchies of language, whose modes of operation are linear and deductive, and seeks instead systems of discourse that admit a plurality of meanings where the operative modes are hypothesis and interpretive play” (Moulthrop, 1988, p. 1).

Doesn't this sound too much like the playfulness of post-modern literature? My answer is no. On the contrary, in my interviews this multithreaded rhizome storytelling shows also the exhausting side of this story-telling, when having to face the impossibility to achieve a conclusive sense making.

7. Conclusion

To analyse changes in the construction of social ligatures on the narrative level we need concepts, which can show the ambivalence of the teller and the telling. They must be able to allow for the analysis of reflexive/ironic moments, which are indicators for changes in the individual meaning making on the self-other and self-world relations. To analyse the breaking up of social roles and to locate ambivalence and reflexive moments on the level of the author, it may be useful to work with the narratological distinctions of the author, the implied author, the narrator and the agent (Prince, 1989). While this is the same person, he or she organises - and is involved in - a multi-faceted process of self-positioning, which can only be analysed when these various layers are made clear. Dialogical self theory here may provide a necessary link between narratology and the *psychological* discussion of this discursive process.

With regards to the discursive construction of ambivalence and reflexivity, we need furthermore to look at the breaking up of traditional narrative form. Here a structural analysis points to the deconstruction of the traditional model of a well-formed narrative. A more difficult task appears, when the traditional storytelling seems to be - more or less - intact. The mentioned ironic part of this storytelling, for instance, arrives by means of *metalepsis*, i. e. leaving and entering the diegetic universe at will, thus constructing a commentary along the storytelling.

The bringing together of these analytic tools, coming from such diverse fields as structural narratology, dialogic self theory, discursive psychology and post-modern theories, opens up possibilities for the theoretical foundation of further narrative research on the moment of reflexivity in the construction of social ligatures.

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