Timely Stories. Narrating a Self in Postmodern Times.

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Paper presented at the *First International Conference on the Dialogical Self*
in Nijmegen, Netherlands, 23-26 June 2000

The basic idea of this paper is to discuss sociohistorical changes in identity construction from a narrative point of view. Seen under the angle of a narrative identity my question is how these changes are reflected in the individuals' self-narratives in general and, more specifically, in the causality construction of these narratives.

For the task of linking a sociohistorical analysis in a larger sense with identity construction there are quite a few possible candidates available, like the concept of *late modernity* (Wagner, 1994), of *reflexive modernity* (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994) or *postmodernity* (e.g. Bauman, 1992). As a first step I have decided on the use of *Peter Wagner's* analysis of late modernity because of its very explicit linking of sociohistorical analysis and identity theory. In my understanding of the concept of narrative identity on the other hand I will mainly rely on the work of Gergen & Gergen (1988) and Gergen (1991). Finally I want to briefly discuss postmodernist attacks on identity theory and questions arising from this discussion for the analysis of self-narratives. Let me briefly summarise my arguments:

1) I want to propose that the general idea of the constructability of one's own identity is a rather new one.
2) This idea as a real option has only recently got hold of the people in the Western world.
3) These sociohistorical changes are reflected in the construction of self-narratives.
4) From a postmodernist point of view the question, however, is, whether an analytic approach within the confines of modernity is bound to miss the very novelty of the changes in identity construction.

1. The idea of constructing your own identity is a rather new one

Although the concept of identity has a long tradition in western culture, the idea of an identity which can be constructed by each and every person is a rather new one, that is to say about 200 years old. It is closely linked to the beginning of the so-called modernity. This is at least, what Kellner (1992) - among many others - is proposing.

"According to anthropological folklore, in traditional societies, one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to one's place ' in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour. One was born and died a member of one's clan, a member of a fixed kinship system, and a member of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance. In pre-modern societies, identity was unproblematic and not subject to reflection or discussion. Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and that was that" (Kellner, 1992, p. 141).

In modernity, identity is slowly becoming subject to change and innovation. Mobility, multiplicity, self-reflexiveness are characteristic for modern identities. Yet the forms of identity in modernity remain for a long time relatively substantial and fixed, depending on a circumscribed set of roles and norms. Change is one feature of modern identities, the other-relatedness another, for as the number of possible identities increases, one must gain recognition to assume a stable, recognized identity. In modernity, identity therefore becomes "both a personal and a theoretical problem. Certain tensions appear within and between theories of identity, as well as within the modern individual" (Kellner, 1992, p. 142).

2. The practical success of the idea of constructing one's own identity was slow and contradictory

Ideas usually don't spread like water on the kitchen-floor. We should not confound the program of modernity with its realization. The development of modernity is in itself a very complex process. To differentiate between various identity configurations, it is necessary to move beyond the modernistic program of identity construction to its realization. "Fundamentally modern is exactly 'the idea that we construct our own social identity' . The social existence of this idea is what the societies we look at have in common throughout the entire period of two centuries that is of interest here. As such, thus, it does not give any guidance in defining different configurations" (Wagner, 1994, p. 157). Wagner therefore proposes three qualifying criteria to differentiate between identity configurations.

- *Social permeation.* First, the existence of the idea of identity construction still leaves open the question of whether all human beings living in a given social context share this idea and are affected by it. It can be easily imagined that the *social permeation* of the idea may be limited at a certain time, in a certain geographical or social space.
- *Choice.* Second, individuals in the process of constructing their social identities may consider this as a matter of *choice,* as a truly modernist perspective would have it. In many circumstances, however, choice may be a highly "theoretical" concept. Although other options are available, certain choices seem to be almost "natural", like pre-given or ascribed. While, for instance, the choices of gender identity may exist, it still may seem "abnormal" to indeed start actively the process of choosing one.

- *Stability.* Third, the *stability* of any identity one has chosen may vary. The question is whether a construction of identity is considered a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence or as less committing and, for instance, open to reconsideration and change. The choice of one's partner may be seen either as the task of one's parents or as a real personal choice; but even then it makes a big difference, whether it is a once in a lifetime choice or whether it can be done more often.

In the above order these criteria widen the scope of *constructability* of identities. It is important to notice that all these conditions of identity-construction have existed for some individuals or groups at any time during the past two centuries in the Western world. Yet it is only now, that these conditions are valid for the majority of the people in Western countries. The widening of the scope of identity construction has marked the transitions from one social configuration of modernity to another. "These transitions entail social processes of disembedding and provoke transformations of social identities, in the course of which not only other identities are acquired but the possibility of construction is also more widely perceived" (Wagner, 1994, p. 157) .

The crisis of late modernity and the enterprising self

Zooming in from the grand picture of modernity on our most recent past and our actual situation in the Western world, we find, following Wagner, that Western societies today experience anew a period of social *disembedding*, which is characterized by individualization and - fuelled by the ideas of Thatcherism and Reaganomics - by the idea of the self as an *enterprising self.* This enterprising self is (or has to be) prepared to engage itself actively in shaping its life and social position in a constantly moving social context (cf. Wagner, 1994, p. 165). One can and has to choose and make - and remake - one's identity as fashion and life-possibilities change and expand. In this late modernity, self-consciousness comes into its own; one engages in reflection on available social roles and possibilities and gains a distance from tradition (Kolb, 1986). These processes of individualization are characterized by the fact that the construction of coherence is no longer guaranteed by the adherence to large social groups (e.g. church, trade unions, milieus or classes). The task of creating coherence is very much laid on the individual itself.

From this point of view the answer to Mark Freeman's question: "Why, at this particular juncture, is there so much interest in narrative?" (Freeman, 1998, p. 45) would be: It is, because the construction of self-narrative is exactly doing this: creating the coherence of life, a task which is no longer fulfilled by society. And one may add (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1977): Individual self-experience is always fragmented. The difference to earlier times and other cultures lies in the fact, that *our societies* no longer offer coherence models for these fragmented experiences. This task is more than ever left to the individuals to cope with.

The actual period of disembedding has ended the thirty to forty years of relative stability since 1945, a period which is known in France as *les trentes glorieuses* (cf. Lebaube, 1997) and which ended in the decade following the oil crisis (1973). We have thus as a model:

Table 1: Organized versus. Late Modernity. A Profile of Polarities

Organized Modernity	**Late Modernity**
• Growing economy • Occupations are stable	• Economic insecurity • High unemployment (especially among adolescents) and unstable employment
• Sentiment: trust	• Sentiment: ambivalence; you still can make it but you cannot make plans
• Everybody is supposed to get a place in society	• Places in society are never safe
• Social rules are widely acknowledged, ways of living are codified	• Social rules are losing value, tribalisation of society (Maffesoli, 1988)
• Identity as "achievement" (Erikson, 1968; Marcia 1966)	• Identity as an ongoing process (Camilleri, 1991; Breakwell, 1986; Gergen, 1991)

(c.f. Wagner, 1994; Kraus, 1996)

3. Self-narratives in late modernity

In a next step I want to look at this situation from the point of view of narrative identity. Narrative psychologists like Sarbin (1986) or Gergen & Gergen (1988; 1991) have proposed an understanding of identity as a *narrative identity*, which can be defined as "the unity of a person's life as it is experienced and articulated in stories that express this experience" (Widdershoven, 1993). These self-stories are highly variable but only within a specific social and cultural frame. Each society has its own set of stories and construction rules. The storytellers therefore are not free in their storytelling. They receives acceptance of their stories only if they adapt to these patterns and if they get the consent of the other actors in their self-stories.

Looking at the above profile of polarities, my question is whether these changes are visible in the self-narratives of young adults. Certainly, the relationship between society and individual is a complex one, and changes on one level will not show up that easily on another, but still, there should be some changes in the way people take on the task of constructing an identity. We have worked on this question for the last ten years at the University of Munich (Keupp & Höfer, 1997;

Keupp et al. 1999) and have done a qualitative longitudinal study[1] with young adolescents at the age of 18 to 20 in a research project titled "work careers, social networks and identity development of young adults". The majority had a low formal education, many having been unemployed for a long time. I will limit myself to just one moment of our study, the question of the construction of this "enterprising self" from the point of view of narrative identity.

3.1. The concept of a "well-formed self-narrative" as an indicator for change in the construction of identity

The "simple" question: What is a narrative? can be answered with Gergen & Gergen (1988), who have, based on Labov and others, proposed the ideal type of a narrative, the "well-formed narrative". This narrative has to fulfill certain criteria to be labelled a "well-formed" one. Gergen & Gergen caution us however that in reality the self-narratives of individuals very seldom arrive at this well-formedness. Still, we can look at self-narratives and find out, how close they manage to get to this end-state by which means and whether there are typical failures. My interest then lies not so much in the normativity of these criteria as in the analysis of "not-so-well-formed" narratives, which may show "deformations" typical for a certain time.

Table 2: Components of a Well-Formed Narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, pp. 20 ff.)

- Establishment of a valued end point
- Selection of events relevant to the end point
- Ordering of events
- Establishing causal linkages
- Demarcation signs

3.2. The narrative construction of causality in late modern self-narratives

I will discuss just one of these criteria, the establishing of causal linkages: What happened why? The course of the story told is usually closely linked to some sort of conflict or complicating action. If the narrator does not just to want to end up in an enumeration of facts he or she has to create some sort of emplotment. From the point of view of an individualization we might think of hero-like self-narratives centering around a strong self (e.g. the "lonesome rider"). Or, less heroically, but very much a construction of modernity, a "rational choice subject", which is not so much inclined to a story of drama and conflicting forces, but to one of "problems", which can be analyzed and overcome.

With regards to causality we have a strange situation here. While postmodernist authors put very much in doubt the extent to which one is indeed the actor/agent in one's story, the idea of a single, autonomous agency is deeply rooted in our societies. You may start from the legal system, look into arts or other social constructions of reality and you will always stumble across this "most peculiar western idea of a unitary, autonomous self" (Sampson, 1993).

To reach a first differentiation of various types of the narrative construction of causality, I take a very special source of knowledge: screenwriting manuals. Screenwriters are very much aware of which kind of stories "works" on an audience. They may not be the best ones to explain *why* this is so, but certainly are very good experts on *how to do it*. In that way they are expert witnesses on the social normativity in storytelling. Eugene Vale in his book titled "the technique of screen and television writing" (1986) distinguishes three basic kinds of difficulties: *obstacle, complication and counter-intention.*

- The *obstacle* is a circumstantial given detail like a mountain or a handicap. According to Vale, in a movie the obstacle is not very helpful to build up and hold tension as it is by definition not a dynamic element.
- The *complication* is something which happens by chance in the course of action. The narrative disadvantage of the complication is that it has no causal relationship to the narrative theme and is thus only of temporary effect.
- The most important device for creating narrative tension is certainly the *counterplot, antagonistic action* or, as Stanzel (1991) has called it, the *opposition*. This can happen in various ways: Another person trying to get what the main character wants or the narrator's parents trying to convince him or her of some decision or somebody torn between two conflicting positions.

We must not forget - and Gergen & Gergen (1988) have made this very clear - that this creation of an emplotment is based on social modes of storytelling. Emplotments work, because we can "read" them, we are familiar with them, they confirm our social constructions of reality. So we certainly rely on them and we even have to, if we want to be understood by others and be accepted with our self-narrative. So, if we have our young adults tell their stories we certainly will get variations on stories, which are told and tellable in our society. When we looked at these narrative constructions, we found that the emplotments were quite different in various lifeworlds. To illustrate this point I'll choose two different lifeworlds, work and love.

Work

In the work domain the adolescents mostly used the narrative device of the obstacle. There were many obstacles why people in our panel did not end up in the job situation he or she so much had looked forward to. The narrated obstacle could be for instance lack of public transportation or left-handedness.

We might even say that complications, which could have been narrated as a counterplot or a complication can also be narrated as a given obstacle. So social or even situational factors become obstacles, when there are according social narratives available. When everybody around you agrees that it is nearly impossible to get a job, it is much easier to use this narrative and tell it as an obstacle in a given situation, than to talk about counter-forces which have to be overcome. The attribution of causality is certainly different in both cases. While the obstacle is the device for explaining why certain routes were blocked from the beginning and therefore certain decisions had to be made, the complication is used to explain why the situation has dramatically changed when it was under way. This again results in an external causal attribution.

In a way, in those self-narratives on work the narrators seemed rather trying to de-escalate, to tune down the tension than to build it up. Even the complications came as emanations of a contingent reality, which simply happened and had to be lived with. In the work domain then, you have to demonstrate yourself as a competent and rational actor. Everything, which does not fit into this pattern is narratively framed in a way, which allows an external causal attribution. This impression certainly reflects the fact that in our panel winner-type adolescents were rare. Still, even the few we had did not use a drama-like emplotment, but a strategic-choice presentation.

We can thus say, that the highly ideological model of an enterprising self is, in our panel, indeed reflected in the way young adults narrate themselves in the work domain. The I-position with regards to the work domain is one of a rational-choice subject with the according set of possibilities for the narrative construction of causality.

For the narrative construction of a counterplot the work domain usually offers one prime arrangement: the fight with the parents on the takeover of the father's profession/business. This emplotment: Doing your own thing or stepping into your father's/mother's steps, is a setup, which at least *was* archetypical for a whole tradition of youth narratives. In our research, however, we did not find it anymore. Especially in our interviews with the sons of small farmers in Northern Bavaria the farewell from a century old professional model was a common narrative. The stepping out of an old family tradition was narrated as a factual necessity due to changes in the general economic situation which does no longer allow small farmers to exist independently. So it is not the story of the son searching self-fulfillment at the cost of neglecting old family

traditions, but of an entrepreneur taking hard decisions as a consequence of economic reasoning. This again stresses the need for a self-narrative with a rational-choice actor who acts certainly within the boundaries of chance and economic obstacles, but who nonetheless takes his own decisions.

The enterprising self then is a narrative construction which nowadays does no longer offer any more room for the setting up of a scene in which a story of self-fulfillment can be told on the basis of professional choices.

Love

Personal relationships, or love, were totally differently narrated than work. Certainly, this is to be expected, but why? Is it romance we are expecting, a narrative of ups and downs, slow approaches, sudden insights, abrupt changes, final fulfillment? The enterprising self as a rational choice subject is obviously not the right narrative frame for self-stories about love. Although the demonstration of competence in establishing relationships was important, we found in our panel that love definitely must keep its mystery. The social institution of marriage - especially a first marriage - in the Western world nowadays is far away from a rational-choice discourse. While you might want to de-dramatize your work narrative, you certainly have to mystify your love narrative. Let me give you an example.

Gundula, a young woman of 21, has been unemployed for two years. In our third interview she tells about how she fell in love nine months before this interview. Only three months later she moved into her boyfriend's apartment. Now she is right into planning her wedding, scheduled for next month. Her fiancée who seems to have come "from nowhere", has changed, as she said, the direction of her life by 180°. She has given up her peer group because she felt as having no longer anything in common with them.

During the interview there is an interesting situation when the interviewer asks her about the boyfriend she had two years before, at the time of the second interview. She cannot remember him at all. She has no idea whom the interviewer is talking about. After some reconstruction work it becomes clear that her now fiancé and co-actor in the actual story of "love on first sight" is the same person who co-acted two years ago in the then told story "better than nothing". And apart from that he had been a member of her peer group for a long time.

So in reality a rather loose partnership, which has lasted for a couple of years, gains momentum and leads suddenly at high speed into a traditional model of marriage, accompanied by adaptation and changes in social network, peer group and leisure time activities. The narrative, however, is not one of gradual development but of sudden change, of development by fate. The pressure to choose this model is - according to the interviewee's story - not coming from her parents, the social world, education, or culture, but from within, from her own deep emotions, the "call of the heart". This narrative offers the possibility to display at least partially the role of an actor in a situation where the biographic models are limited. At the same time responsibility is given up, because it was not a deliberate choice, but destiny. And if there should unfortunately be a divorce some time later on, it too can be attributed to destiny.

While the start of a love relationship definitely seems to need the narrative construction of a "founding mystery", the *development* of this relationship is very much open for rational choice elements. So although Bavaria is well-known for its catholic conservatism, *all* parents and

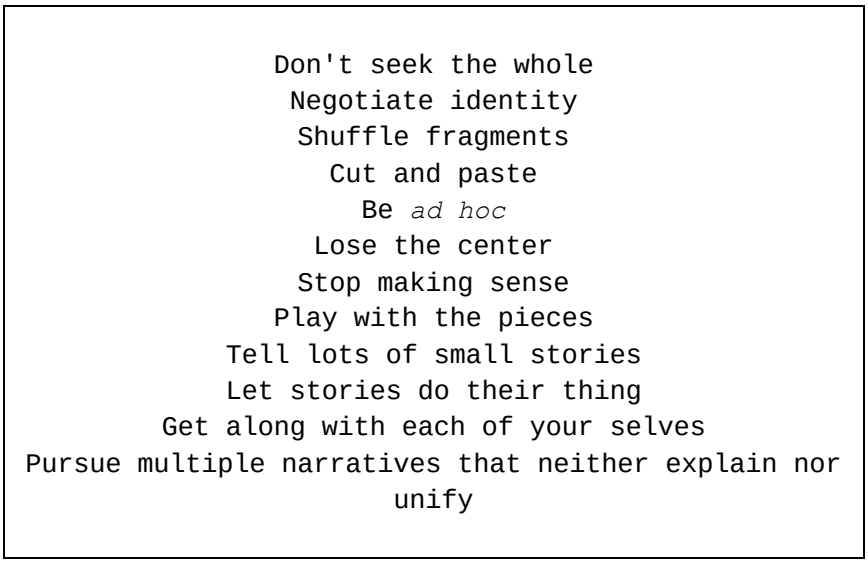
children - in our study - were convinced that sexuality and living together is something which should be tried out before marriage is decided on. Romantic love is not supposed to lead in itself to sexual fulfillment and a lasting relationship. Therefore a whole program of exploratory steps is started, notwithstanding the moral positions of the churches they belong to. One is reminded of the so called "right to manage", a phrase from late modern organization theory, very much in tune with an enterprising self: "If you, dear society, tell me, that it is me who has to manage my life, to define myself, then let me do it. Don't bother me with normative, moral rules. I'll have to define them myself, develop and agree on them together with the relevant others around me". From the point of view of causality it is out of a counteracting force that the love story gains its dramatic development. And even if this has not yet happened, the romantic emplotment is already visible: "The right one has not shown up yet" or "when I'll meet him/her, I'll recognize him/her at once as the right one."

Causality, then, with regards to love has two faces. We have on the one hand the mystery of its beginning, which is narratively displayed and on the other hand the strategic testing steps afterwards, encompassing testing grounds, which not so long ago had been strictly regulated and supervised by moral authorities. This is very much in accordance with individualization theory, insisting that it is the individual him- or herself who has to develop a coherent narrative without much help from social "grand" narratives.

4. Post-modern self-narratives?

Having started out from the concept of late modern identity and individualization, we found self-narratives, which present different I-positions in different lifeworlds. These stories are highly dependent on social narratives emphasizing the model of a rational-choice actor. Our argument presupposes a model which encompasses various I-positions, although the question of the integrating force has been left open, So in a way we accepted, what Morton Prince wrote a hundred years ago: "Philosophize as you will, there is an empirical self which may be designated the real self" (Prince 1905, p. 233)[2].

The postmodernist discussion confronts us with a totally different and provocative discourse on this question. I confine myself here to the presentation of some playful advice in a postmodernist "self-help-book".



Boyd, A. (1999). Life's Little Deconstruction Book. Self-Help for the Post-Hip.

Leaving aside the question, which of the presupposed fragments of the self is the addressee of these one-liners, I want to discuss here briefly, what we should make out of these positions with regards to a narrative identity. I will start by making a difference between post-modern and postmodernist self-narrative, following an idea of Walter Anderson.

"Postmodern*ist* fiction - which is cerebral and usually campy - and seems to have been written for (if not by critics) - is quite self-conscious in showing its awareness of the social construction of reality, calls our attention to the games it plays with the conventions of literature. Postmodern fiction - which is simply anything written in the postmodern era - reveals its own awareness of the social construction of reality in different, and sometimes more interesting ways" (Anderson, 1990, p. 101).

This tension between postmodernism as a critical position and as an individual practice in reality construction is also visible in identity theory. While we have, at the theoretical level, many stimulating postmodernist analyses, the empirical research seems to be way behind, emprisoned in a paradigm of a unified self. In narrative interviewing for instance, we as interviewers are together with the interviewees creating again and again rather coherent narratives, which miss the fractioned self-experiences of the individuals (Kraus 2000). And we are not very sensitive on the decentering side, on looking at the disparate not fitting parts of a person's self. Instead we take part in the creation of coherence because researchers as researchers and more generally as human beings do like the coherence side of a story, the creation of a personal myth, as you may call it. In my opinion, certainly, there is a point in this argument. Self-narratives come out as a mythopoetical device confirming the unified self-model, but they are not analyzed in their changes and with regards to the interplay of the various I-positions of the narrator. This may eventually lead to a position which constructs a coherent subject in opposition to a chaotic, unknowable world and thus falls back on a theoretical position which seemed to have become obsolete.

Postmodernist narrative theory then is a warning against the reification of a unified self via too narrow a focus on narrative as a means of coherence construction. Agency, causality, time arrow, time perspective: all these concepts may easily be read within a model of a monolithic self, thus confirming the old paradigm. What is needed instead, is to better understand how these reifications work on the narrative side, e.g. in our models of a well-formed narrative, and to look for theoretical concepts which open up the space for empirical research.

This conference, however, is a sign for the better. The conceptual work of Hermans and others (Hermans, Kempen & von Loon, 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans 1997), the introduction of concepts like *polyphony*, of the *multiple I-positions,* together with its translations into empirical work, are highly needed steps to narrow the gap between a sense of our - historical - time, which is shared by many people, and a psychological research, which quite often seems out of step with it.

Endnotes

[1] Our Research Project A6 was part of the Special Research Unit 333 at the University of Munich, Germany and headed by Heiner Keupp.It was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft DFG, Bonn (Keupp & Höfer, 1997; Keupp et al. 1999; Kraus, 1996; Mitzscherlich 1997; Höfer, 2000). We were working in two teams at the Universities in Munich, Bavaria, and Leipzig, Saxony, in a longitudinal study on "work careers, social networks and identity development in adolescence", from 1989 to 1998.

The central aim was to explore the identity development of adolescents under the conditions of social transformations, which have been described by sociologists as individualization, loosening up of social bonds, and destandardisation of individual biographies. We take it as a starting point that in a society with such characteristics identity development becomes more important and - at the same time - a more precarious task for the adolescents. Heiner Keupp, the head of our team, has used the metaphor of *patchwork identity* to illustrate our understanding of identity development as an open process characterized by complexity, creativity and - sometimes - dramatic aspects.

The study was a qualitative longitudinal study of 152 adolescent women and men at an age of 18 to 22. We conducted three waves of semi-structured interview on various lifeworlds: family, work and friends/leisure, at two year intervals.

Two case-groups were distinguished. #1: Adolescents with an unsuccessful work biography at the moment of the interview. They are in governmentally financed projects for youths without jobs; #2: Adolescents who have been in an apprenticeship for a career as clerk in town/city administrations.

[2] Morton Prince was the therapist of Sally Beauchamp, a famous case of Multiple Personality Disorder.

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