

Kiss, Valéria¹

**Legal consciousness and life story research:
Empirical investigation of the concept of 'living law'.
Methodological problems of the research on legal consciousness II.***

I. Researching Legal Consciousness

I.1. The Hungarian traditions

What is striking in reviewing the 'traditions' of Hungarian sociology of law is, on the one hand, that for a very long time, in fact until as late as the second half of the 20th century, the sociological viewpoint failed to emerge as a distinct mode of scientific inquiry. This despite the fact that a survey of Ehrlich's lifework and the American legal realist movement make it all too apparent that the beginning and subsequent institutionalisation of this scientific realm date back to the early 20th century, a period when many major works appeared in this field. By the second half of the 20th century it bore all the hallmarks of an institutionalised area of science in the core countries, even though it was at the same time grappling with many related and characteristic - though not unique - issues of legitimacy. David Nelken noted³ that the sociological examination of the law extends to two substantially divergent traditions. For one, it includes investigations that seek to employ sociological instruments for examining how the law operates (*socio-legal studies*). Second, it also denotes investigations whose focus is to better understand society through analysing the law (*sociology of law*). Even though Nelken's ideas in this context are remarkable, what I would like to draw attention to here is that those engaged in the sociology of law - which as an applied science had become institutionalised as a subdiscipline of sociology - were subject to forceful criticisms in this period because of the weakness of the social theory foundations of their discipline.

Such debates were atypical in Hungary: There is little history of researching law from a sociological perspective here, and what exists is unequivocally tied to legal theory analyses, and never appeared as a distinct area of research. In this respect the early works of Bódog Somló are worth noting and mentioning. The use of ethnographic instruments to examine the law, as previously discussed in the context of Ehrlich, was not unique in the region,⁴ and the work of Ernő Tárkány Szücs⁵ provides a Hungarian example. In the early 20th century there were some promising signs that sociologically-centred research of the law might take off, but ultimately this development proved fragmentary in many respects: 'Disarray prevailed after a brief heroic age in the first two decades of the 20th century, and the history of social scientific thought too was determined by tragedies of yore and a general foul mood'.⁶ The sociologically-centred investigation of the law shared in the fate

¹ The author is assistant lecturer at Centre for Theory of Law and Society, Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Law. (kiss.valeria@ajk.elte.hu)

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³ Nelken 2009a, the article was originally published in 1981.

⁴ See Eppinger 2009

⁵ See for example Tárkány Szücs 2003

⁶ Fleck 2014

of its fellow disciplines.⁷

Nor was this to change later: In the first decades of state socialism the official ideology's tenets concerning the law 'replaced' scientific examinations, and such investigations were regarded as superfluous, as in no way deserving of support. The empirical research that began in the 1960s implicitly questioned the prevailing official ideology, just as all sociological research topics at the time did. Kálmán Kulcsár's early studies on the sociology of law fall into this category. In 1968 he examined the participation of lay assessors in judicial decision-making, and his next research topic concerned an issue that is expressly connected to the subject explored in the present study; he published his results in 1967 under the title *A jogismeret vizsgálata* [An Examination of Legal Knowledge].⁸ His work entitled *A jog szerepe a viták kezelésében* [The Role of Law in Arbitrating Disputes], which is also connected to the issue of legal consciousness and legal knowledge, was published in 1918. The way society relates to legal norms became an important research topic in this period: 1977 saw the publication of the joint research by Sajó, Székelyi and Major, entitled *Vizsgálat a fizikai dolgozók jogtudatáról* [An Examination of the Legal Consciousness of Physical Labourers],⁹ and László Boros' study *A család és a családi jog megjelenése az állampolgárok tudatában* [The Appearance of Family and Family Law in Citizens' Consciousness].¹⁰ András Sajó's 1983 volume *Jogtudat, jogismeret* [Legal Consciousness, Legal Knowledge] performed an analysis of the results of the 1976 study.¹¹ Another important domestic scholar of this subject is Antal Visegrády.¹² Attila Hlavaty performed research on the legal consciousness of youths.

These studies basically fit with the group of KOL (*Knowledge and Opinion about Law*) research projects at the time. Those studies, which were initially mainly conducted in (the 1940s) Scandinavian countries, measured respondents' knowledge of and attitude towards the rules of official law, but they revealed an occasionally stunningly low level of legal knowledge.¹³ These research results naturally raised the question as to why people voluntarily comply with the law - which is the basis for the functionality and survival of all legal orders - if the knowledge of its written and official statutory provisions is so deficient? This may be explained by the co-variance theory,¹⁴ which was aptly summarised by András Sajó in his 1980 monograph on compliance with the law: Legal norms are either effective because they happen to coincide with social norms or because in response to enforced compliance the individual accepts the law as compulsory guidelines for his conduct and adjust her attitudes to the factual situation thereby resolving cognitive dissonance.¹⁵ In the latter cases, however, norms originally posited and enforced by the state lose their legal character. Sajó's study also features a forward-looking idea regarding the embeddedness of legal consciousness in individual life histories, which is exceedingly important in the context of the present study:

[...] individual legal consciousness arises from individual development in the course of a given narrative: the individual acquires her relevant experiences in various life situations that frame her individual development, in other words a conceptual scheme emerges out of a life history that is shaped by the individual's position in the social

⁷ For more details on see Saád 1996 and Némedi 1996

⁸ Kulcsár 1967

⁹ Sajó-Major-Székelyi 1977

¹⁰ Boros 1983

¹¹ See Sajó 1983, and his other research on the topic, Sajó 1981

¹² Visegrády-Schadt 1985, Visegrády 2003

¹³ See especially Kutchinsky 1979, Podgórecki 1973

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion see Bencze-Vinnai: 18

¹⁵ Sajó 1980: Chapter 12.4

division of labour, and the events and experiences in her life history that become incorporated into her consciousness are suffused with her own mental characteristics and dynamisms, and with the economic needs of everyday thinking.¹⁶

At the same time the large sample surveys at the time offered researchers few opportunities to transpose these insights into practical research. Still, there was a substantial desire to produce questionnaires that provide well-supported answers rather than mere opinions. This is what András Sajó's research attempted, in a study whose results were published in 1988 under the title *A jogosultság-tudat vizsgálata* [An Examination of the Consciousness of Rights].¹⁷ The study presented respondents with hypothetical scenarios, asking them to assess the legality of potential individual behaviours in such situations. The goal was to remedy deficiencies in previous research projects: '[...O]ur research is not inspired by the needs of political science or public opinion research. Instead, it strives to explore the structure of legal consciousness as a segment of social consciousness'.¹⁸ It also emerges from the research paper that the questions based on 'juridical categories' were not really suitable for capturing the subject they sought to address:

We came up with our hypotheses using a system of categories that was inspired by legal thinking, and we also used this system of categories in summing up our data. Naturally, this should make us wary when it comes to the presentation of the results regarding the structure of legal consciousness. It is obvious from the present research as well as other studies that the expression (articulation) of demands, and the understanding and assessment of situations that arise from social life, do not exclusively take place within the framework of rights. Such a 'legalistic' approach is - for obvious historical reasons - even less characteristic of Hungarian social culture than what one would typically observe in many other cultures.¹⁹

The researchers nevertheless believe that their results are instructive: They shed light on the fact that a conception of legal norms as individual rights or freedoms is rare. Instead, legal norms are predominantly understood as sources of obligations, which is a 'mirror image of the regulations and the application of the law in the patriarchal and overextended socialist state'.²⁰ My view is that though regional history is certainly not irrelevant in interpreting the way individuals relate to the law, the interpretation advanced above is nonetheless somewhat simplified. It might be more appropriate to say – and that is what I argue in my own study – that it simplifies the complexity of the issue, namely the embeddedness of law in its social context. Researchers' observations that people do not tend to conceive of the law as a source of rights and privileges that they might use to assert their interests, and that the characteristic experience with the law is rather that individuals become the objects of the application thereof, may sound compelling; but nevertheless they are not nuanced enough. In this context (just as in many others), research conducted following regime transition fundamentally failed to overcome the limitations stemming from quantitative research.

¹⁶ Sajó 1980: 229

¹⁷ Sajó 1988

¹⁸ Sajó 1988: 146

¹⁹ Sajó 1988: 147

²⁰ Sajó 1988: 148

1.2. Qualitative approaches

Strictly speaking, there is no Hungarian pre-history to report about in this section.²¹ I will speak later about the qualitative turn in the social sciences, but I must note already at the outset that such aspirations have also appeared in sociological research on the law. Similarly to sociology and other social sciences, the sociology of law also offered some space for qualitative research, but though these became fashionable, their role never became dominant.

Even though as already the title reveals (*After Legal Consciousness*) Silbey is rather sceptical when it comes to the future of this field of research, he provides a solid overview of it.²² Research on legal consciousness and theoretical works related to this concept appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, and their main objective was to understand legal hegemony, that is a deeper understanding of the problem discussed above - namely why people comply with the law, which continually reproduces inequality even though it promises equal treatment?²³ Within the previously mentioned broader school addressing legal culture, the issue of legal pluralism was, for a while, an immensely popular area of research. 'Recent studies of legal consciousness have both broadened and narrowed the concept's reach, while sacrificing much of the concept's critical edge and theoretical utility'.²⁴ As one flaw of the proliferating – and increasingly diluted – research, Silbey notes that researchers tend to be content with learning individual opinions and actions rather than seeking to properly understand the complex circulation of the process whereby the social attribution of meanings takes places, which keeps the legal system going.

Research on legal consciousness has transformed the focus of sociology of law analyses in three respects.²⁵ For one, it no longer presumes the primacy of official law; it does not rely on such an understanding of the law and correspondingly it does not design the collection of data nor their interpretation in line with this presumption. This has simultaneously had the result of moving laypersons into the focus of research. Moreover, rather than focusing on measurable variables, it revived the Weberian programme and sought to understand actors, considering the law as an interpretive scheme that manifests itself in everyday processes of attributions of meaning. Third, it involved a turn towards everyday life, and in their research the scholars used the categories used by the actors to capture phenomena with a legal character. In trying find out from whence this theory originates, we can point on the one hand to the representatives of the phenomenological school, and on the other hand to the proponents of western Marxism. An important shift in terminology was the transition from the traditional law and society approach to the term

²¹ Like all summary statements, this is not entirely true. In taking stock of domestic traditions, we must not forget the ethnographic research traditions of domestic folk law. These research projects have enriched research on domestic legal ethnography with case descriptions and collections about folk law and customs which we might well regard as the antecedents of qualitative sociological research. As I mentioned above, the works of contemporary ethnographers, such as Baltazar Bogišić, which were also used to serve as foundations for codification work, had a significant impact on Ehrlich's research as well. In the history of Hungarian legal ethnography it took until the end of the interwar period to conduct a systematic and comprehensive folk law research that complied with 'requirements' emanating primarily from the German model (that is research conducted within the German Historical School of Law associated with Savigny) (Nagy 2013: 304). After World War II, legal ethnography was forced to cede ground to sociology of law investigations on the continent and in Hungary as well. Nevertheless, this tradition continues to remain relevant for contemporary research, as it will - hopefully - emerge from the present study (on this question, also see Fleck 2009).

²² Silbey 2005: 323

²³ Silbey 2005: 323

²⁴ Silbey 2005: 324

²⁵ Silbey 2005: 327

'law in society', and the replacement of research on the effectiveness of law with research on the effects of the law.²⁶

Currently, research on legal consciousness faces three challenges: It needs to situate this type of research in the frames of reference provided by social classes and gender-based, racial and other status groups; it needs to resolve the periodically resurgent debates surrounding the meaning and cultural implications of acts that defy the law; and, finally, it needs to provide theoretical and methodological instruments for bridging the gap between actors' microcosms, as they are captured by the research, and macro-level theoretical constructs that pertain to the social structure at large, such as ideology, hegemony or the rule of law.²⁷

Even the short discussion above may be enough to show that this line of thinking meshes remarkably well Ehrlich's theoretical insights and research programme. In support of this assertion, I will use the following section to review in detail one of the many studies within the legal consciousness school.²⁸ Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey published their research results in 1998 in their book *The Common Place of Law*.

In the introductory chapter they clarify what concept of the law they used in their research.

Commonplace experiences and images of the law vary. At times, the law appears as a magisterial, remote, and transcendent force governing human affairs from some high and distant place. At other times, the law seems like an all-too-human arena in which people struggle with one another in serious and playful encounters, more or less skilfully, for all sorts of sublime and petty purposes. Most of the time, though, people don't think the law at all.²⁹

The starting point of their study is that the overarching goal is to learn about the process wherein law is socially constructed, severed from the official concept of law, and to discover the bottom-up processes that endow legal action with practical meaning. This approach – just like Ehrlich's previously – runs into the following problem: If it does not identify law with official norms, then how can it distinguish law from other norms regulating social coexistence? A jurist trained in the tradition of legal positivism may wince at the proposed answer, just as Kelsen did back then: 'To discover the law outside of formal legal settings, we must tolerate a kind of conceptual murkiness'.³⁰ As was noted previously, this implies the need to lean on everyday terms used by actors. In order to distinguish law, which after all is still a concept associated with official law, from this diffuse and all-pervading 'legality' - which is still mostly invisible and operates in the background - they differentiate between the concepts of law and legality.

In the interest of capturing law broadly understood in everyday life, the researchers conducted 430 interviews using a representative sample. In other words in compiling their sample they did not focus on persons who were 'affected', they did not seek out persons who had any type of relations with official judicial bodies. They conducted 'unusually lengthy', semi-structured interviews with these persons,³¹ which quickly 'turned into open conversations' since the introductory topics were neighbourly relations as well as family

²⁶ Silbey 2005: 328

²⁷ Silbey 2005: 351

²⁸ See for example Merry 1990, Sarat 1990, de Silbey (2005), whose wealth of citations provides a sound basis for mapping the 'school'.

²⁹ Ewick–Silbey 1998: 15

³⁰ Ewick–Silbey 1998: 20

³¹ Ewick–Silbey 1998: 25

relations and friendships.³² Less than half of these interviews were typed up, and then those transcripts were processed by the researchers (that is each text was reviewed by several researchers). In presenting the results, for the most part they relied on the narratives provided by the respondents: 'For most of the book, we try to bracket our own understanding of legality, allowing our protagonists' notion to develop in ways that put the question of law and legality in a new light.'³³ In their analyses they identify three strategies for the uses of law in the legal field broadly understood: what they term 'with the law', 'before the law' and 'against the law'. These describe patterns of relation to official law. The first denotes a sort of consciousness of rights and privileges that is an attitude whereby the individual can use the law for the realisation of certain objectives. This is especially dominant in the 'with the law' approach. 'Before the law' reflects a similar perspective, but it complements it with some kind of justification that reaches beyond individual interest (for example the notion that standing up for a cause serves the broader community or the interests of those in a similar situation). In practice, the two approaches are difficult to distinguish. The against the law strategy denotes an avoidance of solutions based on official law.

Even though the starting point of the research, its theoretical framework, is very persuasive, in my assessment the actual analysis has not made adequate use of the wealth of empirical material, it only compiled 'sets of opinions' with little explanatory power. In the following I will argue that, simply put, less would have been more. The originally intended research programme, that is the goal of understanding law in its broad sense, as it manifests itself in everyday life, would have been better served by a method that seriously engages the characteristics that emerge from the theory's phenomenological assumptions, and which places less of an emphasis on quantifying results in the process of seeking scientific insights.

II. *Life Story Research in the Social Sciences*

II.1. *The 'qualitative turn'*

Though the title of the present section may seem to suggest this, we cannot by any stretch of the imagination claim that the role of life stories is uniform across the social sciences. In contemporary Hungarian sociology, too, there are numerous more or less divergent notions about this issue. The disagreements pertain to both, the proper method of learning about life stories as well as the analysis of the empirical knowledge thus obtained. The goal of this chapter is to offer a brief overview of these various approaches, so that we have a frame of reference to interpret their role in the structure of legal consciousness, in discovering patterns in the way the law is used and the characteristics that define this use.

The surge of interest in life story research is a development that is linked to the crisis of traditional sociology.³⁴ Relying on the concept of Knorr-Cetina's 'knowledge culture', Némédi argues that the early stages of sociology were marked by a 'professorial mode of knowledge production' which was 'massively individualised, and the methodological arsenal at the disposal of scientific research in this early period was minimal (apart from books)'.³⁵ After this early period several knowledge cultures formed and were relegated to the periphery (we can also find the antecedents and traditions of life

³² Ewick–Silbey 1998: 25

³³ Ewick–Silbey 1998: 29

³⁴ Némédi 2008

³⁵ Némédi 2008: 25

history research among them, such as the Chicago urban study or the anthropological approaches), and a research 'technology' emerged which was centred around the questionnaire as a research instrument'.³⁶ This technical paradigm is not hegemonic. In certain circles sociology works as an applied science (market research, public opinion research, research institutions working on commissions by government or market actors), and university education conforms to this expectation in that academia from time to time laments the lack of theoretical foundations.

Severing ourselves from Némedi's analysis, which refers to the science of sociology, one can state that the abovementioned schism has left a mark on the sociological investigation of the law as well, and that the lack of theoretical foundations also weighs down on those engaged in specialised professional variations of sociology.

The scientificity that is attained through the use of the questionnaire as a research instrument has been subject to continuous challenges, but no comprehensive theory has emerged; sociology is a scientific discipline without a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense of the term.³⁷ In this respect Némedi believes that symbolic interactionism does not offer an alternative to Parsons, though that is the way 'it sometimes appears' today.³⁸ In this context Némedi asserts:

The exact and mathematised apparatus [...] cannot replace the interpretation of the results that are obtained; and in this interpretation there is - rather often - some fragmentary method of 'understanding' at work. This 'understanding' is devoid of the sophisticated procedures of those who are schooled in phenomenology. Instead, it is often based on everyday competencies. Yet, it is unavoidable.³⁹

Mead and his followers, the school of symbolic interactionism, had ample grounds for criticising the prevailing research paradigm, yet Némedi argues that Mead failed to provide adequate methodological instruments for those who sought to overcome it. To achieve that, one must lean on the 'the sophisticated procedures of those who are schooled in phenomenology'. The propositions advanced by symbolic interactionism are nevertheless important theoretical antecedents of the research focusing on life stories.⁴⁰

What motivates the rather detailed discussion of Dénes Némedi's ideas in this study is that he provides an inordinately compelling and exhaustive review of - and hence also the proper perspective for - a fundamental question that crops up in a variety of contexts in my study. This question also pertains to the crisis of individual fields of social science⁴¹ and specialised sociologies, thus for example the sociology of law as well, which have been described separately but nevertheless bear very similar characteristics,⁴² and thereby he touched upon the central role of the need for a methodological renewal. His insights can provide guidance in clarifying the reasons and goals underlying the turn towards

³⁶ Némedi 2008: 25

³⁷ See Kuhn 1996

³⁸ Némedi 2008: 32

³⁹ Némedi 2008: 32

⁴⁰ see Lányi 2007: 13

⁴¹ Sociology, social psychology (see for example Lányi 2008). In the introduction to an article originally published in 1985, Gusztáv Lányi sums up the situation rather starkly as compared to Némedi's assessment: 'In the empirical social sciences, especially sociology or psychology, it has become »fashionable« to question established methods, primarily those used in the positivistic tradition. In Hungary, this »fashion« has manifested itself in debates surrounding the »crisis« of psychology – especially in social psychology circles' (Lányi 2007: 11).

⁴² This is manifest in concerns about the lack of a unified theory and criticisms of the technical paradigm and the methodology based on positivistic traditions. The criticism mostly stress that these methods do not help a process of genuinely understanding actors and thus social processes.

qualitative methods, which in turn could help us in evaluating the approaches reviewed below in light of this old-new objective (practically in order to understand the actor).

II.2. Antecedents of life story research

In a history of science context, Lányi traces the antecedents of the 'life story method' to the Chicago school,⁴³ specifically Thomas' and Znaniecki's prominent study on Polish immigrants.⁴⁴ Thomas and Znaniecki argued that 'individual life stories provide [...] the most perfect sociological raw material'.⁴⁵ In their research they sought to explore life stories through personal documents (autobiographies, series of family correspondence) and third person accounts. In Zsuzsanna Kiss's words:

The use of personal documents implied a major shift in the history of sociological research. Through using these, Thomas and Zaniecki created a tradition that proved decisive not only in sociology but in other sciences as well, and has, especially in the past decade, when as a result of qualitative methods the individual person and 'narratives' have increasingly moved into the limelight of scientific interest, emerged as a continually recurring point of reference.⁴⁶

Anthropological research is often mentioned among the antecedents, as are references to Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sanchez*,⁴⁷ which introduced a poor family in Mexico City through the family members own narrative accounts.

Thus there are some antecedents for research based on life stories (one might also say that attempts at establishing such a canon are not futile). At the same time 'the year 1978 counts as a turning point'⁴⁸ in the research based on life stories. At the IX World Congress of Sociology in 1978 in Uppsala, a group of attendees joined together to examine the method of studying life stories.⁴⁹ A collection of studies entitled a *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* was published in 1981. The book, which was edited by Daniel Bertaux, contains sociological studies that use life stories. In addition to reviewing specific sociological research projects, the studies in the volume also address epistemological and methodological issues surrounding the use of life stories. Furthermore, they also include a discussion of the problems resulting from the use of life stories as historical sources. Lányi stresses⁵⁰ that these studies are only connected by their methodological reliance on life histories; the theoretical frameworks and perspectives that the authors bring to bear on the subjects of their studies are very diverse. The role of documents (letters, diaries, autobiographies) continues to play a pre-eminent role in learning about life histories, and hence the proper method for analysing these is a central issue in the book.⁵¹

⁴³ Lányi 2008

⁴⁴ The basic idea underlying the research was to attain insights through the life history of actors: 'We can only fully understand a social institution if we do not merely examine its structure but also analyse how the institution manifests itself in the personal experiences of individual group members, if we track how it affects their lives' (Thomas–Znaniecki 1927, Volume I: 10).

⁴⁵ Thomas–Znaniecki 1927, Vol. I: 10

⁴⁶ Kiss 2004: 134

⁴⁷ Lewis 1968

⁴⁸ Lányi 2007: 13

⁴⁹ See Bertaux 1978

⁵⁰ Lányi 2007: 14

⁵¹ See Kohli 1981

II.3. Trends in life story research

Sociological and social psychology investigations based on life history are not the only schools of research which assign a key role to narratives. In the context of narratives, stories and life histories, there are also numerous divergent ideas in terms of how stories can be explored and how a person's life history can be fully learned. The proper objective of processing life histories and the most suitable method for so doing – in other words what we can learn from life histories – are also subject to dispute.

The first question discussed here seeks to ascertain which of the techniques at our disposal (document analysis, in-depth interview, focus group, narrative interview, life history interview) is best suited for fully exploring a life history, and in what form it works best. Potential responses to the above include the possibilities of reconstructing life history based on documents (as was previously mentioned, this may be done through analysing autobiographies, diaries, letters and other family or archival materials) or using interviews. With respect to the interview method, the degree to which the conversation is structured in the interview process is also an important dividing line between various types of studies. Certain aspirations to quantify results based on some sorts of content analysis of the interview texts are also manifest in the processing of interviews – as will be shown in more detail in the discussion of János László's approach. The reason why a discussion of these methods is of outstanding importance is that the qualitative methods employed thus far in legal consciousness research have also tended to move within this conceptual range in conducting their analyses.⁵²

In the present study I will draw on research by Júlia Vajda and Éva Kovács to show - by using an analysis of the interrelationship between identity and narrative – that we can best attain an understanding of actions (for example the use of the law) through the most consistent application of the designated qualitative approach; research that combines qualitative data collection with quantitative analysis, and to this end filters data already during the data collection phase through a system designed based on considerations that the researchers stress, so that after a slight 'deviation' they conform once again into the mainstream of the scientific paradigm, not only fails to combine the advantages of both methods but in fact loses out on their potential benefits. A technical paradigm provides suitable methods for describing and taking stock of phenomena, and for discovering correlations. A semi-structured interview may be seen as a questionnaire consisting only of open-ended questions. In this sense semi-structured interviews and content-based analysis (processing the texts based on a coding of the elements deemed important by the researchers) are mutually consistent data collection and processing methods, but in essence they fail to overcome 'hard' quantitative research methods, they merely soften them somewhat. As Némedi notes:

The popularity of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and related schools may reflect a latent guilty conscience on the part of the 'sociology of variables'; what may be underlying this is an inkling that just maybe refined techniques of interpretation are indeed necessary, even though they are relegated into a subordinated position by the prevailing practice of research.⁵³

⁵² see Ewick–Silbey 1998 Appendix A

⁵³ Némedi 2008: 32

In my view, a guilty conscience is precisely what is at play in these studies. Yet accepting understanding as a goal does not in itself help to identify the appropriate method. Understanding actors is in my opinion best served by data collection methods that refrain as far as possible from intervening and by analytical methods based on the 'phenomenological schools' that Némedi refers to: In other words discourse analysis, non-participant observation and the version of life history interview techniques designed by Gabriele Rosenthal,⁵⁴ and developed further in Hungary by Júlia Vajda and Éva Kovács.⁵⁵ No matter what methodological precepts it is based on, an interview cannot under any circumstances be considered a non-intervention method; I find the following observation especially poignant in this regard:

An interview situation is a call for presenting a narrative life history, for testimony, for encountering ourselves and the Other. While she attempts to present the events of her life story as a unitary narrative that embody her own existential experience, the 'I' narrating the life history balances between her own expectations and those of the Other. She is not aware of the Other's expectations, however. Especially when those - as in the case of the interview situation - hide as best as they can.⁵⁶

The most important methodological feature of the life story interview technique - which will be reviewed below - is that the interviewer must withdraw and stay in the background as far as possible. Though we cannot completely disregard the individual impact of the interviewer's person, as compared to other interview techniques it ought to be possible to place the subject of the interview front and centre. As compared to traditional non-intervention techniques, this makes it possible to collect data while we focus on our own research interest and give the interviewee the greatest conceivable latitude to interpret the topic and to discuss it in the context of her own life story. I should note that even researchers who employ interview techniques for their data collection that involve more or less structured interviews (following the accepted terminology, this is what I refer to as in-depth interview in my study), stress the immensely potent impact and illuminating power of an interview text which has been purged of the interviewer's person and questions. In this context, a joint study by Ferenc Erős and Bea Ehmann is worth citing at length:

In analysing the interviews we had an idea: What would happen if we were to arrange the typed text in a way that removed the interviewers pre-structured questions, which strictly followed the chronological order, as well as the questions whereby the interviewer consistently sought to steer back the interview subjects' meandering associations, so that we were left only with the interview subjects narrative words? Would we find a coherent life history? Well, we did. We found bewilderingly powerful narratives. The removal of the questions and the transformation of the dialogue structure to become a monologue allowed for a wholly new structure to emerge from the text. We find that the narrative resists the attempts to steer it back into a chronological order. It creates its own chronology instead; time is not linear in the texts [...], neither is it chaotic, however. Instead, in obeisance with the laws of the organisation of life history, it creates an organised meta-chronological structure.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ see Rosenthal 1995

⁵⁵ see for example Kovács-Vajda 2002

⁵⁶ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 360

⁵⁷ Erős-Ehmann 2007: 30

Despite these insights, the authors do not desire to transform interview techniques, and in terms of 'processing' they vest their hopes in the 'evolution of computer-based text analysis programmes'.⁵⁸

When we speak of life histories, it is important to demarcate them from oral history; I shall discuss this in more detail later.

II.4. Narrative and discursive psychology

In psychology the desire for overcoming the information processing paradigm had become obvious by the 1970s.⁵⁹ Both the 'cognitive revolution' and the 'second cognitive revolution' positioned themselves in opposition to the mainstream that governed academic psychology, in the sense that in explaining the processes which psychology sought to investigate they stressed social and societal aspects. This renewal of psychological investigation and theory formation may also be conceived of as the manifestation in psychology of a turn towards narrative and discourse in 'intellectual environments' outside psychology.⁶⁰ At the same time, beyond their common starting point of abandoning the machine metaphor in examining mental phenomena,⁶¹ these approaches tend to be far-flung and diverse, and it is increasingly difficult to find a common denominator that unites them. We would probably be in trouble if we sought further substantial similarities in these theories besides this starting point. They state that counter to mainstream approaches the fundamental units of analysis are found in the social sphere. Furthermore one may be well-advised to see the theories of the major authors of social constructivist psychology as a bundle of theories rather than a single and unified new paradigm. Hence this should be sketched at the outset of this study. Anchoring the subject of psychology in social interactions and the uses of symbols renders constructivist psychological approaches to a certain extent familiar with symbolic interactionism.⁶²

In seeking the theoretical sources of discursive psychology, we find the philosophy of everyday language, Austin's speech act theory, Wittgenstein, ethnomethodology and discourse analysis. One of the most important theoreticians and the 'founding father' of this school is Rom Harré. Harré defines psychology as the 'study of active people, singly or in groups, using material and symbolic tools to accomplish all sorts of projects according to local standards of correctness.'⁶³ Harré significantly expands the concept of discourse to extend beyond the use of language, arguing as follows:

Throughout this paper the word 'discourse' is to be understood very broadly. Its usual implications of verbal presentation of thought and argument are broadened, to provide a handy word for all those activities which are intentional, that is make use of devices that point beyond themselves, and which are normatively constrained, that is are subject to standards of correctness and incorrectness.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Erős-Ehmann 2007: 43

⁵⁹ Bodor 1997

⁶⁰ Bodor 1998: 88

⁶¹ Sarbin 2001

⁶² László 2005: 11

⁶³ Harré 1994: 26

⁶⁴ Harré 1994: 26

In other words, seen from this angle the 'mind' is only 'a rather unsuitable name for those discursive activities, that is those skilled uses of symbols, that one performs privately'.⁶⁵

Harré uses the example of emotions and memories to show what he means by social construction in interpreting individual action in the course of psychological investigations. He argues decisively in favour of the notion that we create everything collectively, that there is no privately executed discursive action. In contrast to the behaviourist and information processing approaches he speaks of rehabilitating the actor, however, at least when read superficially, this observation does not point in this direction either. He presents the individual actor as a junction in the web of social interactions, in a symbolic space whose elements appear predetermined to her, even though through her acts she is also involved in maintaining, reinforcing and forming them.

Another important group among the constructivist approaches seeks to retrace the social element in narratives, and here the analysis turns towards investigating life histories as somewhat more stable and more easily captured phenomena than evanescent discourses.⁶⁶ Narrative psychology may be wedded even more strongly than the discursive school to the changed intellectual atmosphere in the second half of the 20th century, as I noted above. Authors who stress the role of narratives in general, such as Barthes, who states that '[...] the narrative is present in an almost infinite variety in all ages, all places and all societies',⁶⁷ have always had a major influence on psychologists who were trying to find their way and searching for possibilities of renewal. In the introduction to a volume he edited, Theodore Sarbin, a prominent representative of this school, also discussed this quest - though he wrote about his own inquiry, the volume itself is an expression of how many other have followed him on this route.⁶⁸ In terms of finding a place for narratives, and in its justification for the selection of the narrative as an organising principle, the road traversed by Sarbin primarily involves an adoption of Stephen Pepper's theory of root metaphors, an application of this theory to psychology.

Pepper's ideas about root metaphors as conceptual frameworks that follow the basic patterns of explanations of the world appear captivating indeed, though we may wonder whether each and every metaphor was rightly chosen. Nevertheless, it renders more tangible the choice between the positivist-mechanistic approach (which involves the metaphor of a machine and the transmission of power and thinks in naturalistic analogies) and the approach which seeks to capture the social through aspects that are distinctly human, through stories and narratives (or seeks to preserve these aspects within the latter phenomena).

At the same time in a broad, generous and permissive gesture Pepper also allows for the use of other basic metaphors and claims that we can choose among these; though to a certain extent our choice may be pre-determined by the object at hand (after all, these manifest a different image depending on the perspective one approaches them from; but there are some among them that better serve the process of understanding and provide a better fit with the phenomenon under investigation), but ultimately our choice is not at all independent of the researcher's tastes and predispositions, either. Knowledge organised around certain root metaphors can therefore help reveal a more 'authentic' image of individual objects of investigation. This statement, which appears so alluring is at the same time so difficult to gauge fully; nevertheless, there are other authors who help to further specify the psychologists' turn towards narratives.

⁶⁵ Harré 1994: 26

⁶⁶ Bodor 2002: 69

⁶⁷ Cited in László 2005: 94

⁶⁸ Sarbin 1986: ix-x

One of the authoritative scholars in narrative psychology, Jerome Bruner, identifies the paradigmatic/logical-scientific mode and the narrative mode as two natural forms of human thinking.⁶⁹ Fully developed narratives do not only convey what happened according to the narrator (according to Bruner, this is the field of action in narratives), however, but also what participants knew and felt (the field of consciousness). The latter level interprets events and explains actors' actions with their knowledge or lack thereof, and with their motivations. In so doing, it also attributes meanings and, correspondingly, it also creates an implicit psychology. Among the sources of narrative psychology we also find the representatives of post-modern and post-structuralist literary sciences, but a psychology based on narratives must also face the charge – among many others (such as for example the notion that an analysis of life histories is ill-suited for generalisation, that it is merely a diffuse and unscientific story-telling) – that what it seeks to realise has been performed for millennia at a considerably higher level of quality by writers, poets, playwrights, in other words literature. This concern crops up in many forms, thus for instance in the question of how sociology and novels relate to one another.⁷⁰ But in any case: The point is that narrative psychology must clarify how it relates to literature. Pursuant to Bruner (or, for that matter, Ferenc Mérii), the central categories in narrative psychology are experiences, meanings and references. Attributions of meaning play a decisive role in fictional narratives, which fall into the terrain of literature. Serge Moscovici writes that 'all narratives, novels or plays include the author's observations about types of persons, important social events and the prevailing modes of thinking in a particular era'.⁷¹ The reading of literary works simultaneously involves an interpretation of both, the work itself and ourselves; it involves introspection, and as Ricoeur points out, it simultaneously analyses and constructs the soul.⁷² It would be a mistake to disregard this critique. The methodological issues of narrative psychology mostly revolve around the question of how we can extract some kind of knowledge – knowledge that might be considered as valid in a scientific context – from the narrative materials, from the wealth of undoubtedly useful information? This ambition is of crucial importance in this particular branch of psychology, as is well apparent in János László's above cited book, which seeks to document the emergence of a 'scientific narrative psychology'. In the following, after a discussion of the basic principles of narrative psychology, the present study will mostly focus on going into further detail about these issues.

III. The foundations of narrative psychology

Human knowledge is constructed in narrative processes. People think in stories, experiences, and they can process abstract concepts only in their relation to experiences or examples. Human knowledge is narrated in its nature.⁷³ László adds the following:

The previously discussed method is not the only way to express the narrative, however, that is the narrative need not necessarily be conceived of only as the expression of and material for reality and the social-cognitive elaboration of meaning. In psychology, narrative research also extends to the mode of narration itself, in other words to the question of how stories work, to the psychologically

⁶⁹ László 2005: 94–95

⁷⁰ Bertaux 2001

⁷¹ László 2005: 30

⁷² László 2005: 30

⁷³ Schank–Abelson 1995

interpreted forms and functions that can be derived from the role that narratives play in the individual's life.⁷⁴

The referentiality of stories: Stories are texts that refer to a set of events that is external to them,⁷⁵ in other words they contain a certain image of reality. Though they do not do so as explicitly as philosophy does, they strive to explain the world. Also, in an ambiguous and covert way they do contain a worldview that the narrator can relate to, and which the recipient, too, can relate to, integrate and develop further. In creating and accepting these stories the point is not at all that it is possible to juxtapose the narrative with any kind of objective reality: given the immense variety of facts, events and actors, reality offers an infinite number of potential components which allow for constructing innumerable real stories. Among these some pre-eminent (widely accepted) stories owe their explanatory power to their internal coherence on the one hand, and their connection to other stories on the other. As a result, they evince a skilled ability to avail themselves in a meaningful way of elements, sets of symbols and metaphors that are commonly accepted in construing the world. Still, the text always offers more than one meaning, and we tend to accept the interpretation that complies with the conditions above, in other words one that makes sense.

In the case of literary stories, the world that the narrative refers to is fictional in a very obvious way, while in the case of narrative constructions, such as a history that is being 'restored' in therapy, the historical narrative or the creation of scientific explanations claims to represent reality. For constructivist theory creation, however, the similarities in processes of creating narratives are more important than identifying differences between them.

In some sense, this translates doubts regarding post-modern thinking into narrative psychology. János László sums up these doubts in the following:

The metaphor of narration implies two crucial consequences in post-modern thought. A) Since it is commonly known that the narrative is a fictional genre, those who narrate do not make true or false statements about reality but construct meanings instead, which they treat as reality in certain cases. B) Since language enables us to theoretically come up with or recount an infinite number of narrations, that is to theoretically create an infinite number of realities, and to imbue these with an infinite number of interpretations depending on our own views, reality is relativised in post-modern philosophy and stays within language.⁷⁶

László also uses Ricoeur's fundamentally important ideas about identity and the dual meaning thereof, which he captured by drawing on the Latin expression *idem* (identical, completely the same) and *ipse* (itself, in spite of changes). He argues that individual identity is created through the individual's identification with herself and the non-fragmented character and coherency of her life story. (The *ipse* dimension of self identity can be related to Tajfel and Turner's social psychological concept of social identity, in the analysis of the individual's identification with her own groups).

According to László, the reliance on individual life histories does not lead to a situation wherein psychology can no longer identify generally applicable principles, in other words it does not forgo scientific knowledge in its fields of investigation in favour of some endless stream of 'storytelling'. The mission of psychology is to examine and

⁷⁴ László 2005: 98

⁷⁵ László 2005: 100

⁷⁶ László 2005: 26

discover principles that are at work in creating stories, in construing their meaning and how they operate.

The temporality of stories: Another characteristic of stories is that they take place over time. Yet the role of real time is less cardinal in stories, what makes the construction of narratives interesting is precisely how segments of equal length in real time are either condensed or stretched out, that they feature gaps or still images, for that matter. Narratives rely to a substantial extent on the possibility of conveying the significance of a happening, event or element by manipulating the concept of time. Recounting the story may take far longer than the extent of the event in real time, but at the same time a narrative might 'wrap up' a story that lasts years in real time in a single sentence.

Typical forms of stories: Even though theoretically we can create and narrate an infinite amount of stories, in practice we can hardly avail ourselves of this theoretical option. There are limited forms at our disposal to tell a story, and narratives tend to conform to one of the archetypal forms of narratives. These genre requirements suggest that a story is good and persuasive, and the interpretation of reality – be it in a scientific context or in a personal life history – is credible if the underlying narrative is organised based on one of the following forms.

Northrop Frye's lists for archetypal forms of histories.⁷⁷

Genre archetype	Period	Theme
comedy	spring, dawn, birth	creation, rebirth, victorious struggle with darkness
romance	summer, sun at its zenith, vitality	trial of strength, adventure
tragedy	autumn, sunset, death	restoring order to a dislocated world
irony and satire	winter, night, decomposition	the parody of romance, adapting romance to more realistic contents

To be credible and persuasive, a story must narrate events in line with these forms – and, as it emerges from the above, this also implies that a credible and scientific narration of history is also constructed along the lines of such forms of history.

Narratives become instructive and good stories by virtue of the complications they contain, which significantly deepen their referentiality. The structure underlying the interpretation of everyday events is simpler, we are prone to invoke narrative canons, that is scenarios which describe the immediate succession of events or actions. The junctures of life history or history are the periods which disturb this peaceful and boring flow of events and offer alternatives, compel choices or – in a traumatising manner – set the individual on a new route entirely.

⁷⁷ László 2005: 107

IV. Methodological conclusions, the critique of 'Scientific narrative psychology'

The question is what information the conclusions of narrative psychology imply for sociologists (a discovery of the practical conclusions regarding the renewal of clinical psychology exceeds the framework of the present study). The significance of narrative psychology stems precisely from the fact that we cannot understand the subject of sociology, the issue of how socialisation, structure and actors relate to one another, without understanding the individual theoretically – that is a sociologist inevitably needs the insight of psychology. In effect, any subfield of psychology, be it psycho-analysis, behaviourism or cognitive psychology, can be linked to a social theory analytical framework; research results from any of these fields may be incorporated or interpreted in the process of formulating a sociological theory, and this is in fact often done. Nevertheless, there is greater proximity between the views of those who engage in a social constructivist approach towards psychology on the one hand and sociologists on the other: Among the former, psychology itself is open to exploring the social dimensions of individual behaviour, which is why the nature of the interaction between these subdisciplines and discipline, respectively, is not one of pure adaptation but one of genuine dialogue between two scientific fields. Another interesting issue is what scientific questions the results of narrative psychology raise and what methods they require. The conclusions regarding the choice of methodology are rather obvious.

For discursive psychology, the obvious method is to identify and gather where discourses are located. Harré's observations regarding the psychological investigation of emotions also illustrate this. He argues that we can compile the given language's emotional vocabulary (study of emotions) for each individual society, that is we can identify the words used for expressing emotions. Moreover, expressions of emotions and emotions are manifested in discourse as discursive acts in individual acts.

There are serious ethical limitations on the scientific observation of everyday discourse, which are also manifested in methodological and even legal statutory prohibitions. At the same time, the notion that focus groups, which are recently becoming increasingly fashionable again, could be suitable for gathering 'semi-everyday discourse', has gained traction.⁷⁸ In light of Harré's observation that actors constantly engage in discursive acts – whether they are alone or in company –, it is important to highlight that focus groups, as a specialised form of group interview, are suitable for gathering discourses – but not because they create a dialogue between several subjects. At the same time an expansion of the concept of discourse based on Harré also renders in-depth interviews suitable for investigating discursive acts.

The unit of analysis in narrative psychology regards other histories – primarily life histories – as its research material (or the 'basis' for therapy). At the same time, the method and objective of life history as empirical material raises several difficult questions. The research programme of scientific narrative psychology as envisioned by János László aims precisely to find out how life histories, as totally unique qualitative sources, can be used to extract data (mostly through a method inspired by content analysis), in a way that will allow to quantify these data and then to find patterns in the 'material' with a method that is similar to factor analysis. An illustrative example is Ehmann's study presenting the processing of interviews with Hungarian émigrés who left in 1956.⁷⁹ The starting question of this study is how oral history interviews might be used for the purposes of historical science. According to Gábor Gyáni - whose position is characterised in a very simplified fashion here - these are the sources that make it possible to write the history of everyday

⁷⁸ Bodor 2010

⁷⁹ Ehmann 2003

life - in other words real history. Ehmann does not follow this bold programme and in opting instead for a moderate - mainstream - camp, which seeks to compile some type of collective biography from narrative interviews, she wishes to resolve the analytical complications that arise in this context.

V. Life history reconstruction

As I pointed out above, there is also an approach in the analysis of life stories which refuses any effort at quantification and insists on analysing a case from within, arguing that through an immersed analysis of life history as a source we can acquire knowledge of society by - in a certain sense - putting to use the text's previously discussed referentiality. The juxtaposition of histories and the discovery of strategies of action are the instruments that lead to understanding; in other words these histories are in and of themselves realities that cannot be combined - not because it would be methodologically difficult but because it is theoretically impossible. It is through understanding the individual that we arrive at an understanding of her environment, of society and of structure. For the impact of the other actors aggregated into a society is manifest in the way she acts and the way she weaves her actions into a history, and through the determinant factors she uses in her story. I will delve into further detail about this approach in the section about narrativity and identity.

V.1. Life history reconstruction and oral history

As I pointed out above, there is also an approach in the analysis of life stories which refuses any effort at quantification and insists on analysing a case from within, arguing that through an immersed analysis of life history as a source we can acquire knowledge of society by - in a certain sense - putting to use the text's previously discussed referentiality. The juxtaposition of histories and the discovery of strategies of action are the instruments that lead to understanding; in other words these histories are in and of themselves realities that cannot be combined - not because it would be methodologically difficult but because it is theoretically impossible. It is through understanding the individual that we arrive at an understanding of her environment, of society and of structure. For the impact of the other actors aggregated into a society is manifest in the way she acts and the way she weaves her actions into a history, and through the determinant factors she uses in her story. I will delve into further detail about this approach in the next section.

The oral history school strives to build this jointly experienced reality with the pieces extracted from breaking apart the totality and self-insulation of life histories. Ehmann's very pithy observation is that if we only use the method of thematic groupings and generalisations, then all we get is a picture that is devoid of substance and meaningless: 'The end result is just as blurred as when we photograph many faces on top of one another'.⁸⁰ Following Mérei, Ehmann proposes to resolve this problem by using the concept of a common but not joint experience, as well as the introduction of a common universe of experiences as a unit of analysis. What this means is that the analysis is structured around experiences that constitute the common junctures of narratives. In other words the information emanating from individual interviews, their elements, combine to

⁸⁰ Ehmann 2003: 37

form the pieces of a common but not jointly shared experience, thereby constructing a universe of experiences. As a result, each piece of the mosaic gives the overall picture greater nuance rather than making its contours vague. At the specific level of analysis, this implies that by analysing interviews we receive bundles of phrases for each given experience, which jointly delineate the experience.

As I touched upon previously, there are substantial theoretical counterarguments to such efforts at quantification in the name of science. Éva Kovács puts it fittingly in an effort to distinguish these from an oral history approach: 'If I want to express this difference in a summary fashion then - though pure types exist only in theory - oral history as it emerged from social history regards, as even its name suggests, life history narratives as historical sources, while sociological life history research views the same as instruments of a qualitative sociological method'.⁸¹ A life history is tied to the individual, and this, as well as its self-encapsulation into a universe of its own, provides a theoretical starting point that is difficult to reconcile with content analysis approaches:

The discovery of an 'objective' truth or an 'objective' narrative or history [...] cannot be our goal. As researchers we can but express the meaning that we have arrived at through analysing the interviews in our own narratives.⁸²

*V.2. Narrativity and identity*⁸³

The starting point for the analysis of the relationship between identity and narrative is rooted in a deeper understanding of the individual's experience of identity. I have already noted the distinction Ricoeur draws between the terms 'sameness' and 'selfhood', drawing on the Latin terms *idem* and *ipse*. Sameness is based on the uniformity of external features, while selfhood is 'derived from internal experiences which we are unable to capture with language due to limitations inherent in their essence'.⁸⁴ The experience of selfhood is closely related to self-identity, that is to the notion of expressing our own lives as a meaningful and coherent story. Our experience of selfhood is the result of a continually ongoing 'work' of newly creating ourselves.

The time that we live in is interwoven with stories. Even before we attain consciousness - indeed, it may be no exaggeration to say that even before we are born - our place in the world is designated by family narratives. To the stories that are bequeathed to us we then add our own continuously changing story, which will not come to rest even with our death. Whatever reaches us from the outside; what we do ourselves; what we think, imagine and experience; what we are afraid of and what we hope for - that is what we say about ourselves and we say about one another, and what we say over and over and what we say in different ways. [...] What we deliberately conceal and what we unwittingly avoid is lurking in the shadows of what has been said and what is still to be said.⁸⁵

In the life of an individual it occasionally becomes necessary to reformulate her life

⁸¹ Kovács 2011: 3

⁸² Vajda-Kovács 2002: 354

⁸³ In this section I will rely to a significant extent on the works of Júlia Vajda and Éva Kovács (Vajda-Kovács 2002, Kovács-Vajda 2002, Vajda 2006).

⁸⁴ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 356

⁸⁵ Tengelyi 1998: 13

history. The concept of fate and fateful events as proposed by László Tengelyi is of central importance in terms of understanding the concept of narrative identity.⁸⁶ The term 'fate [...] attributes such a hidden uniformity to life which we ourselves only realise with astonishment',⁸⁷ and time can only be recounted when weaved into fate. At the same time, the concept of life history is originally ambiguous: it includes the reality of life as it was experienced as well as the narrative story behind it.⁸⁸ The theory of narrative identity⁸⁹ stresses the latter.

[...] selfhood (*ipséité*) does not require what the French call *mêmeté*, it does not require in other words that our character have some type of core that is retained no matter what changes may take place; what makes us remain what we are is not some permanent feature we have, it is not the rock solid nature of our character or the constancy of our convictions. Instead, what it means is that all the transformations that we experience in our life can be told in the framework of a single coherent narrative.⁹⁰

In this approach the role of the life reality/fate underlying our life history is uncertain, it is not clear what type of relationship obtains between the preservation of the intactness of our selfhood and our fate/life experienced. In Tengelyi's words:

If we discard MacIntyre's notion of dramatical storytelling, just as Ricoeur's idea that our self-identity is but an easily disintegrated mix of woven tales and vital experience, then we face a serious dilemma: For one, we cannot deny that there are accurate and less accurate narratives, for otherwise the notion that when we recount narratives from our life we strive to discover ourselves would not even arise; on the other hand, we do not know how we could assess the accuracy or credibility of a story once we have grasped that only with playful irony can we refer to vital life reality as a foundational text that other narratives ought to orient themselves along.⁹¹

According to Tengelyi, the processes of constructing meaning through a life history are very particular and linked to those moments when the self becomes split, when the fabric of our history is torn and we need to imbue our experiences with new meaning. This is what Tengelyi terms a fateful event, and he claims that in the processes of constructing meaning through a life history such crises are decisive. This opens up the possibility of connecting actually experienced life history with its narrated version. At these moments the 'self calls out from the deep'.⁹² When the self is not integrated, then the attribution of meaning may also be unsuccessful: '[O]ur recounted life history is at best a jumbled or playful set of stained glass pieces mixed up in the kaleidoscope of life events, but these pieces fail to cohere into a self-evident identity'.^{93,94}

⁸⁶ Tengelyi 1998

⁸⁷ Tengelyi 1998: 14

⁸⁸ Tengelyi 1998: 15

⁸⁹ See Ricoeur 1992 and MacIntyre 1999

⁹⁰ Tengelyi 1998: 18

⁹¹ Tengelyi 1998: 26

⁹² Vajda-Kovács 2002: 354

⁹³ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 354

⁹⁴ The question of whether we can organise our lives into unified narratives is hugely important for us. What we refer to as *therapeutic effect* is also intertwined with this phenomenon. The notion that the point of therapy is to remedy tears in the fabric of life history also meshes with the perspective of narrative psychology. Numerous ideas previously elaborated in this study tie into this framework, and I shall not

In modernity, identity attained new shades as compared to previous periods. Conceiving of our identity as unique, in other words not interpreting ourselves as part of a community, has become the norm. Our group affiliations continue to be decisive, but at the same time identity becomes subject to an expectation of uniqueness, even if this is sometimes just a deceptive mirage:

A social perspective on personal psychology regards the impact system of individual/group relations as the trigger, propellant and foundation of individual rationality, emotional harmony, moral character and situational/behavioural routines. It is not without reason that we regard the individual as a dependent constitutive element embedded in society and culture, situated at the intersection of various social groups and subject to their dynamics. At most, it is the individual's deceptive self-consciousness that make her believe that her personal and social experiences are entirely unique.⁹⁵

Another important characteristic of our notion of identity - which became attached to it at a later point - is that as opposed to previous epochs in late modernity reflectiveness, non-closure, flexibility and avoiding rigidity become objectives to be pursued.⁹⁶ This is complemented by struggles for recognition (*identity politics*), which aim to attain a congruence between self-identity thus developed and the environment's proper assessment thereof.⁹⁷ Considering the aforementioned, contemporary sociology's treatment of identity as a research topic is depressingly myopic; it views it as a static and rigid set of attributes, as an ensemble of features that the individual chooses for herself, 'as if our self-identity were some freely exchangeable piece of clothing'.⁹⁸ Counter the measurable, expressible and numerable sameness in the Ricouerian sense, it is worth striving for scientific knowledge that is capable of capturing the individual's selfhood, if our goal is knowledge and understanding.

The basic underlying idea of the method working with narrative life history interviews and the hermeneutic case reconstruction of the texts obtained from such interviews (which is based on Oevermann's objective hermeneutics and was subsequently further developed by Schütze and then Rosenthal), is that if we conduct an interview in which the biographical narrator can freely develop the narration of her own life history, then the text that emerges simultaneously carries the memories of the past that are being recalled and the perspectives of the present.⁹⁹

enumerate them individually; I would merely call attention to the fact that the interview situation, which calls on the individual to recount her life, can – in certain situations – in and of itself have a therapeutic effects, if it promotes the process of attributing meaning. See especially Vajda 2006.

⁹⁵ Hunyady–Hamilton–Lan Anh 1999: 9

⁹⁶ Vajda–Kovács 2002: 355

⁹⁷ Substantial academic literature has been devoted to the concept and significance of recognition. The proposition that recognition is of central importance to the individual's integrity, self-respect, self-image, well-being, in other words her identity, can be traced back to both, Hegel as well as the representatives of Scottish Enlightenment. But it is also an accepted tenet within the conceptual framework espoused by symbolic interactionism. The connection between identity and recognition has emerged as a central idea in Axel Honneth's contemporary social theory (see for example Honneth 1992). Also see Fraser 1995, Taylor 1997

⁹⁸ Vajda–Kovács 356

⁹⁹ Vajda–Kovács 2002: 362

V.3. Narrative life history interview and hermeneutic case reconstruction

The essential feature of the interview technique that I wish to discuss is that once the object of the research was introduced, the biographical narrator is asked to recount her life history, while the interviewer in turn is requested to 'completely withdraw once she has established the interview situation and asked her interview subject to recount her story in line with the requested perspective'.¹⁰⁰ Complete withdrawal implies an understanding and attentive quiet listening, while the interviewer leaves the form and structure of the interview, as well as the selection of information, up to the narrator.¹⁰¹

If we conceive of the biographical narration as a social construct that simultaneously encapsulates social reality and the interview subject's universe of experience, then we must confront the following question: How can we reconstruct a social structure that is constantly reformulated through the interaction of socially determined schemes, and in the process keeps on changing, too?¹⁰²

Rosenthal strongly endorses the notion that life history is not a source for research in the sense delineated above, but a distinct social construction and object of research, in which the subject's universe of experience and social reality simultaneously manifest themselves in the way repeatedly described above. If we accept the above, then it is obvious that the texts created based on the narrative interview form a body that cannot be broken down into pieces and assembled into 'bundles' following a factor analysis logic, as some of the abovementioned authors have recommended and done.

Rosenthal distinguishes between the concepts of life history and life story. By the former she means life actually experienced while the latter denotes life as it was narrated. The main question of this analysis is how we can reconstruct the one or the other, and what may be gained from each, from projecting them unto each other and juxtaposing them with one another. The first step in this method is to select biographical elements and to interpret them in the context of historical background (based on all the things that were mentioned above concerning the narrative approach to history, and what can be gleaned from the relevant literature, this idea raises a lot of questions – I shall return to this below). This phase of genetic analysis is followed by thematic field analysis, in other words an investigation of how the narrative is structured, what its main topics are, in what order and in what scope they appear, and how they are connected.¹⁰³

To sum up, we can state that life history as it unfolds around a certain thematic centre is based on a general construction of biographical experiences that is condensed from episodes of past interactions and future expectations, and which is simultaneously a product of the biographical narrator's current situation. This comprehensive biographical construction, the condensation of past and future into the currently experienced present determines the principles that guide the narrator in selecting the stories she presents during the interview.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Vajda 2006: 124

¹⁰¹ Vajda 2006: 124

¹⁰² Rosenthal 1995 cited in Kovács 2011: 3

¹⁰³ Some potential analytical considerations: Does the biographical narrator form narratives? To what extent does she conform to the set of relevant criteria as designated by the interviewer? What thematic field is the sequence embedded in? What explains the type of text she chose to reconstruct her experience? Which issues are mentioned and which are left out? How much emphasis is each issue given and why?

¹⁰⁴ Rosenthal 1995, translated from a manuscript, and cited in Vajda–Kovács 2002: 362

As a result of thematic field analysis we can reconstruct life history as constructed by the subject, and we check our hypotheses regarding the main elements of this construction process using a thematic field analysis on the text, employing a micro-analysis of pre-eminent passages. Next, we move to the comparison of life story and life history. In analysing the text that has emerged from the interview, the events retold by the narrator must be considered 'and then a conceivable horizon of the subject's further life path' must be sketched.¹⁰⁵ In the analysis, each event triggers a new hermeneutic cycle, comparing the horizon of unfolding possibilities with the events that have veritably occurred. This is what an understanding of actually experienced life history implies. A process of understanding narrated life history as a construct created by the narrator from her current viewpoint takes place in a similar fashion, but the process orients itself not along chronologically successive events but instead follows 'narrative sequences unfolded along the lines of changes in the themes and modes of the narration'.¹⁰⁶ The comparison of the thus unfolding life history versus narrated life history is complemented by a micro-analysis of critical parts in the text (*key events*).

Interpreting actually experienced life history as a testimonial, which is what Júlia Vajda and Éva Kovács recommend, is a different approach from the original Rosenthalian conception.¹⁰⁷ This approach consistently applies throughout the entire research the idea that though we cannot speak of an 'objective reality' which researchers ought to strive for, and that we need to keep in mind that the material for reconstructing actually experienced life history also comes from the narrator, actually experienced life history is just as much a construct as its narrated version. Apart from this difference, or rather in connection with this difference, it is important to point out that the Rosenthalian approach is based on Gestalt psychology foundations, while Vajda believes that her methodology is linked to the psychoanalytical method, since the analysis of the interviews (also) reveals subconscious substance.¹⁰⁸

It emerges from the above that narrative interviews can be processed in a variety of ways, but using them to disseminate conclusions that strive to convey some sort of 'objective social reality' is a strenuous enterprise whose outcome is dubious. Objections regarding qualitative methods derive from ideas about scientific quality, in our case from the distrust towards stories that we received from old-established and grand authorities.

'Clearly, this aversion is hardly novel. Already Plato (The Republic, Book 7) did not hold stories in high regard. He considered that similarly to other forms of art, stories are merely imitations of the material world, while the material world for its part is an imitation of a higher order reality. In other words, stories are imitations of imitations'.¹⁰⁹

Regardless of whether we view it as a research method or a historical source, the narrative life story interview is a text created with rigorous methodology and analysis, which is of considerably greater service to scientific knowledge than quantification methods.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 363

¹⁰⁶ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 363

¹⁰⁷ Vajda-Kovács 2002: 364

¹⁰⁸ Vajda 2006: 124

¹⁰⁹ László 2005: 24

¹¹⁰ It should be noted that despite this, the narrative interview technique reviewed here is subject to 'an endless amount of aversion' (Vajda 2006: 123), even more so than the rejection qualitative methods are normally subject to. Vajda identifies the reason for the greater rejection of this method as compared to other qualitative methodologies in the fact that it functions similarly to psychoanalysis. The similarity, thus Vajda, is that 'if it is possible to be present in a non-interfering way - as the perfect listener who pays attention but

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does not disrupt with comments - then our interview subjects open up within a minute or two, and recount their stories in such depth as one would not experience in everyday interactions but only in therapies' (Vajda 2006:124). This evokes aversive sentiments regarding this methodology.

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