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## Biographicity as ‘mental grammar’ of postmodern life

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### Abstract

*‘Biographicity’ is a concept that has been discussed in international adult education for more than 30 years. It has stimulated research concepts and has become a metaphor for the resilience potential of biographical learning processes in modernised modern societies. A basic theoretical foundation has so far been lacking. This article attempts to provide such a foundation. The stimulating influence of modern neurobiology will be discussed in the first section (1). Afterwards, innovations and restrictions of a system-theoretically reformulated biography theory will be the issue (2). Its self-referentiality blockades can be illustrated clearly by the problem of the social construction of ‘gender’, in which we also reach the limits of the interactionist concept of construction (3). This theoretical discourse creates a concept of its own: the idea of a ‘biographical habitus’ as the ‘mental grammar’ of life in postmodern societies (4).*

**Keywords:** Biographicity; constructivism; doing gender; grammar; semantics

### Introduction

In the sociological discourse, the concept of ‘biographicity’ connects to constructivist considerations. We find a first hint in an overview article by the Swiss sociologist Martin Kohli, in which he defines biographicity as a “code of personal development and emergence” (Kohli, 1988, p. 37). This very preliminary characterisation must be specified and related to the constructivist discourse.

In biography research itself, constructivist approaches have been *en vogue* since the 1980s. In an interesting essay, Uwe Schimank (1988), following Luhmann’s autopoiesis concept, made the provocative thesis that “the relationship between the social communications to which a person is exposed and their biographical consciousness ... must be understood as strictly constructivist” (Schimank, 1988, p. 58). “The construction of one’s own biography by one person takes place autonomously,” says Schimank, “in



the radical sense of the word. All influences from the social environment, whether targeted or unintentional, are processed in accordance with the internal structures of the personal system, intercepted and escorted by withinputs, and can only gain biographical meaning in this way.”(ibid.)

This idea can plausibly fall back on a number of empirically observable phenomena - such as the trivial fact that certain social influences in one biography can have almost the opposite effects as the same inputs in another biography. Therefore, it makes sense to consistently perceive ‘sociality’ from a biographical perspective - not to deny the ‘objective’ character of structural external influences, but to understand the semantics with which ‘psychic systems’ tend to code social issues. So it seems convincing that “social communication”, as Schimank puts it, has to be understood as self-referential intakes rather than as inputs that produce expected outputs. How the unique ‘code’ of the biographical processing of experience comes about, how it has to be thought from a temporal perspective as ‘constituted’ by social influences, how structure and emergence, social constitution and individual construction in a lived life build a specific melange, Schimank’s intelligent treatise still leaves us in the ‘dark’.

The following considerations make the cautious claim to get to the bottom of this difficult epistemological problem. The stimulating influence of modern neurobiology will be discussed first (1). Afterwards, innovations and restrictions of a system-theoretically reformulated biography theory will be the issue (2). Its self-referentiality blockades can be illustrated clearly by the problem of the social construction of “gender”, in which we also reach the limits of the interactionist concept of construction (3). This theoretical discourse creates a concept of its own, which at least implicitly follows on from the previously developed concept of *biographicity* (4).

### Inspirations and open questions of neurobiological constructivism

The criticism of the autobiographical reconstruction of social reality recently articulated in sociology, the accusation that it is a simple ‘illusion’ (Bourdieu, 1990), repeats a classic debate in modern epistemology: the perception of reality from the point of view of the biographical narrator is attached to something subjective and particular; and it seems questionable whether it can be used to gain general insights into social reality. This position, which is at least implicitly based on the epistemological standpoint of critical rationalism and which has also influenced everyday behaviour in modern societies, appears to be at least in need of addition from the perspective of recent research in neurobiology. Despite all distrust of the accuracy of subjective perception - especially when there are considerable periods between event and recapitulation - the fact that memory (more generally: the brain as a synthetic ‘organ of perception’) has direct access to reality remains usually completely hidden.

This skepticism is necessary, however, if one looks at processes of perception with the younger neurobiology from the perspective of the brain.<sup>1</sup> Then the information from the various sensory organs does not appear as direct impressions of the eyes and ears, sense of smell or touch, but as principally unspecific neuronal information, which the brain itself transforms into clear “sensory impressions”. “For the brain there are [...] only the neuronal messages that come from the sensory organs, but not the sensory organs themselves, just as little as there is a recording camera for the viewer of a television picture.” (Roth, 1987a, p. 234)

The possibility of the brain to make ‘correct’ assignments of meaning results solely from a relatively early spatial differentiation of neuronally transmitted states of excitation.

For example, all neuronal impulses that are processed on the occipital cortex are interpreted as visual impressions. They would also be 'perceived' as information from the sense of sight, for example as a red colour, if the neuronal stimulus of this part of the brain had not been transmitted through the eye, but had resulted from the manipulation of the occipital cortex by an artificially inserted electrode. "All of this leads to the strange observation that the brain, instead of being open to the world, is a cognitively self-contained system that interprets and evaluates neuronal signals based on self-developed criteria, whose true origin and meaning is not really known." (Roth, 1987a, p. 235)

Since the brain moves in a self-referential manner in a radical sense and does not depict reality but rather constructs it, it also creates criteria for checking its construction results. Because in order to survive, the brain not only needs a cognitive world, but three 'worlds', as it were: a world around us, which could be called a 'thing world', a kind of 'body world' that relates to sensory and motor experiences with our body, and the 'non-physical world' of our thoughts and feelings (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 236ff). These worlds are related to each other, form inner and outer dimensions for each other and correct each other to a certain extent, although each is strictly a cognitive construct, meaning that it has no direct connection with the real material 'outside'.

Gerhard Roth compared our brain to a person who travels through a foreign country whose language they do not understand and who therefore needs an interpreter (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 242ff). The person has several strategies available to assess the reliability of the translator: have had excellent experiences with the interpreter in previous situations, which guarantee the reliability of the cultural mediator. The organisation of our brain also points to a long past and obviously extremely successful phylogenetic legacy. The 'interpreting services' therefore deserve an advance of trust. The person could also engage several interpreters to check. Our brain is also familiar with this strategy if several sensory areas are activated to ratify the same state. Finally, that traveller has the opportunity to compare any information added by the translator with existing information and to check its consistency. This function is taken over by memory.

However, this means: strict self-referentiality in no way leads to a fundamental isolation of the brain from external influences. Such "perturbations", as Maturana and Varela call them, have to be processed constantly and change the overall processing system. But they do not influence it according to the laws of the "intruder", but only according to the internal rules of the system developed until then (Maturana & Varela, 1987, pp. 108f). In increasingly complex environments, this disposition seems to guarantee much more successful chances of survival than the basic openness of the perceptual apparatus (cf. detailed Roth, 1985, 1987a; Maturana & Varela, 1987).

What is challenging about this neurobiological concept of cognition is the idea that any processing of reality, including, of course, the recapitulation of biographical experience, should be viewed as a self-referential achievement of the cognitive system. However, it is shown sympathetically that there is still some dissent among the representatives of this appealing thesis about how closely this process can be linked and explained phylogenetically and ontogenetically with the principle of autopoiesis. While Maturana, the real discoverer of the conceptual idea, puts life and cognition in one and claims the principle of circular self-production and self-preservation (autopoiesis) for both (cf. the Maturana quote in Roth, 1987b, p. 262), Roth's research group emphasises the only relatively autopoietic character of all organisms, which are always defined by their environment as well (An der Heiden, Roth & Schwegler, 1986), and also insists on evolutionary structural differentiation between the self-preservation principles of the whole organism and the self-referential, but by no means autopoietic functions of higher nervous systems (Roth, 1987b, pp. 266ff).

To put it more pointedly, cognition is, from a neurobiological point of view, the more efficient for the autopoiesis of the organism, the more clearly it remains free from the constraints of circular self-production and self-preservation of its components. This property makes learning processes possible, which every cognitive system has to develop 'self-explicatively'. "The fact that the cognitive system is not autopoietic thus constitutes on the one hand [...] the possibility of self-referential development, but at the same time the need to always start again from scratch." (ibid., p. 281) This 'starting over and over again' is basically identical to the uniqueness of the respective biographical process. These conceptually important affinities of the critical insights of the recent neurobiological discussion with sociological and educational biography research will be explicitly discussed later.

The discovery that cognitive reality processing, i.e. the synthetic coding performance of our brain, is structured in a self-referential way is of high relevance to the theory of biographical learning. However, according to Gerhard Roth and his working group, this process does not seem to be 'autopoietic', but depends on the relative autopoiesis of a surrounding system structure (organism), the survival of which in turn benefits from the brain's self-referential performance. In a way, we would be dealing with the relative (inner) autonomy of a principle dependency structure - a sociologically undoubtedly highly interesting model.

### Conceptual aporias of system-theoretical biography concepts

The constructivism debate is experiencing a certain sociological radicalisation in recent systems theory. It should be of less interest here that Luhmann's 'theory of self-referential systems' (Luhmann, 1984, p. 24) drastically modifies the relationship between system and environment that he had previously developed conceptually. The internal differentiation of the system is no longer interpreted as the result of environmental pressure due to complexity, but only as an effect of self-referential operations (ibid., 25). The connection to Maturana's autopoiesis concept relativises the dynamics of contingency and selectivity in favour of a "running self-reference", as Luhmann puts it.<sup>2</sup> Rather, for our purposes only those aspects of the theoretical development that are directly related to questions of biographical theory are of interest.

In addition, it makes sense to briefly reconsider the crucial point of Luhmann's modernity diagnosis. The primary vertical differentiation of pre-modern societies, social actors, apart from exceptional cases, assigned their clear place in a subsystem of society (cf. Luhmann, 1980, p. 30), has given way to a functional differentiation in which social subsystems such as economy, family, politics, law, religion or upbringing coexist and require individuals to integrate into several subsystems at the same time (more detailed Nassehi, 1994a). The self-understanding of social actors is no longer determined by their clear placement in a hierarchically structured social field, but in a way by individual self-description. "So the identity of the person is not based on the principle of social differentiation; rather, it is almost the opposite of it." (Nassehi & Weber, 1990, p. 164)

This "multi-inclusiveness" (Nassehi/Weber), which makes it impossible to gain identity from the simple belonging to a subsystem of modern society, forces the individual to permanent self-observation and self-description, i.e. for self-referential processing of social experience. And what is described in classic socialisation theories as a 'balance' between social and personal identity (cf. Goffman, 1963), shows itself from a system-theoretical perspective as a simple reflex to the fact that modern social actors are forced "into multiple selves, multiple identities, to break down several personalities in order to

be able to do justice to the majority of social environments and the differences in requirements" (Luhmann, 1989, p. 223). In truth, the split into social and personal identity components is a result of "self-referential self-observation of the psychic system" (Nassehi & Weber, 1990, p. 165).

However, the question remains how the "social" can become the subject of self-description at all. The idea, modeled on the neurobiological concept of cognition, that the "reflexive self-awareness" (Schimank) of social actors is not "self-referential environmental observation - the construction of an inner world from materials of the outside world -, but a self-referential self-observation, that is, the construction of one special inner world made of materials of the inner world" (Schimank, 1988, p. 61) does not solve the problem of the origin of that '*material of the inner world*'.

In fact, Luhmann and his successors resort to a hierarchisation of the phenomena of consciousness<sup>3</sup>: "The primary phenomenon is the huge number of externally or internally induced experiences and actions, which, although contained in a continuity of consciousness and in this respect relatable to each other, do not form a context, because it is impossible to coordinate everything with everyone." (Luhmann & Schorr, 1982, p. 237) A kind of "basic self-confidence" (Schimank) has to be 'tamed' by reflexivity. The fact that this process does not run without contradiction, but is drastically influenced by 'environmental conditions', can easily be demonstrated by Schimank's aid construct of "biographical incrementalism" (Schimank, 1988, pp. 67f). Because the "evolutionary dynamics of biographical transitority at the level of basal self-confidence" (ibid., 67) – Schimank's surprisingly unspecific reformulation for the influence of social change in modernised modern societies -, describes the biographical disposition of "muddling through" (Schimank) in the face of risky external conditions. Here the 'social' breaks into the self-referential self-description of the psychic system, as it were, without being conceptually integrated.

A crucial reason for this blind spot of system-theoretical biography concepts is the uncritical hypostasis of the autopoiesis of consciousness in Luhmann's thinking. In systems theory, consciousness processes - starting with the basal operations up to the higher-level self-descriptions and self-observations - are produced as circular and conceived of themselves. In a way, Luhmann reproduces a weakness here on a sociological level that Maturana's emphatic autopoiesis idea had already limited neurobiological models: the blockade to understand that the brain is more functional for the autopoiesis of the whole organism when it is itself 'exempt' from autopoiesis and not forced to self-manufacture and self-reproduce its components (cf. again Roth, 1987b). This objection does not deny the self-referential nature of the operations of the brain, but it allows the thought of a systematic opening for a certain 'outer world' - a semantics, as it were, that balances 'perturbation from the outside' and 'inner coping' in such a way that external influences can be processed in a self-referential manner, but their character can still be decoded semantically even after processing.

A conceptual parallel could be constructed between biography and social environment. Biographies have the structure of an open self-referentiality (cf. Alheit, 2009; already Alheit et al., 1992). This opening to 'society' requires a common semantics that make the 'social' biographically codable and the 'biographical' socially transposable. The example of the gender category shows how clearly 'social issues' break into the personal system and make it necessary to assume an interactive semantics between the individual and society; and that means: to overcome the self-referentiality blockade of systems theory.

### 'Doing Gender' as a touchstone of sociological constructivism

At this point, the feminist discussion is directly relevant to an empirical critique of system-theoretical biography conceptions. Gildemeister and Wetterer (1992) e.g. propose a research perspective that is interested in a 'de-construction' of essential gender concepts, but initially see this approach as a scientific re-construction.<sup>4</sup> They call for an analysis of the "gender classification as a generative pattern for the creation of social order" (ibid., p. 229). The focus is on the mode of construction itself. However, it is not regarded as a cognitive act of individual consciousness, nor as an 'effect' of a discourse without subjects, but as a *social practice* with which individuals continue to produce and reproduce the gender category (in the form of bisexuality) in their everyday actions (see also Wetterer, 1995a). The analysis of social gender is to a certain extent empirically "situated" with the concept of doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

In this approach, which explicitly follows the action-theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, interaction processes and not individuals (closed "personal systems") are made the "basic unit" of the (empirical) analysis. Studies e.g. on the "crisis experiment" transsexuality (Garfinkel, 1967; Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Hirschauer, 1993b; Lindemann, 1993b) reveal the subtle rules with which individuals "represent" their affiliation to one of the two sexes in a wide variety of fields of activity and everyday situations and thus passively ratify, but also vary in certain margins. These everyday practices and rules are only accessible to a limited extent in the consciousness of the actors. They act more like routines that are only available where "disruptions" occur, where unexpected or unknown interaction patterns force the participants to reflect on their actions, e.g. when a person with a 'male' body history and a 'female' identity learns the flexible handling of the rules that 'he' needs in order to be able to successfully interact with others in social situations as a 'woman'. This 'tacit knowledge' of the rules of doing gender is so sustainable precisely because it usually remains largely precognitive, as experience knowledge from countless interaction situations and becomes effective to a certain extent in the background of a new action situation and is therefore given to the acting subject as 'unquestionably', appears as 'natural' (cf. Schütz & Luckmann, 1979).

As Erving Goffman shows in his still up-to-date study from 1977, the rules of doing gender also affect those supposedly simple characteristics that appear to be 'purely organic', such as body size. The relation 'bigger man - smaller woman', which seems 'natural' to everyday consciousness, is only the result of a subtle social regulation system that is created interactively in the process of pair formation, which works 'behind the back' of the participants (Goffman, 1994, pp. 141ff) and leads to the fact that selective social situations are sought out or staged "in which women and men can effectively pre-exercise each other's supposedly different 'nature'" (ibid., p. 143)<sup>5</sup>. The example shows that on the one hand, social construction processes rely heavily on the flexible self-organisation of individuals, who have to reconstruct themselves again and again as women or men in changing everyday situations with the most varied functional and personal references and scope for action. On the other hand, it has also become clear that this process is to a certain extent localised in the interaction 'between' the actors.

Up to this point, the findings on gender construction can be read as a clear and convincing confirmation of the suggested model of an open self-referentiality. But now the example takes us one step further. If we accept the thesis of the interactive construction of gender, then the question arises about the rules of this construction. Obviously, these are not rigid patterns that are 'put on' individuals. On the other hand, they cannot be changed arbitrarily from situation to situation. Goffman points out that the

actors involved in their interactive actions are integrated into higher-level social frameworks, which set certain sets of rules depending on the situation. For example, in a situation defined as an erotic 'game', different rules sometimes apply than in an application situation on the job market.<sup>6</sup>

However, another generative structure also seems to be hidden behind this cross-situation framework. Goffman gives convincing examples of how society members repeatedly create the same hierarchical gender ratio in a wide variety of everyday situations: in work, family or marriage, during sport and leisure, when using public spaces, when visiting bars or toilets, when flirting, when entering classrooms, in situations of need and assistance, etc. (see Goffman, 1994). The social construction must obviously be interpreted as a reflexive process between the interactive actions of individuals in contingent situations and the extremely stable 'institution' of gender. Goffman (1994) uses the term "institutional reflexivity" (ibid., p. 107) and describes the corresponding social practice as *genderism* (ibid., p. 113).<sup>7</sup>

At this point, however, it becomes clear that the strength of the interactionist access to expose those subtle microsocial manufacturing practices in everyday situations also determines its limits. If the time horizon of the situation is exceeded, there remains only the assumption of an abstractly effective "genderism". The historical origin of the classification system itself then hardly seems relevant. Now the *binary gender code* in modern societies has undoubtedly become an institution *sui generis* (cf. Gildemeister & Wetterer 1992, pp. 237ff). Feminist research provides a wealth of evidence that the patriarchal structure of gender relations remains constant across a variety of 'social frameworks'. But they also show that these frameworks are subject to specific historical, economic and cultural change processes. The interactionist concept of doing gender lacks this historical 'depth dimension' to a certain extent. This requires the inclusion of historical analysis<sup>8</sup>, but it needs - conceptually - another level: the perspective of lifelong process structures.

Already the considerations so far in the context of system-theoretical biography concepts prove clearly that the construction processes on the part of the subjects are 'more' than fixed reactions to historical-social framework conditions on the one hand or interactions of "free floating designers" (Lindemann, 1993a; 1993b, pp. 22ff) in contingent situations on the other. It is important to grasp the relative autonomy of the acting subjects, who - under concrete historical-social framework conditions - construct through changing situations and in interaction with others their individual 'history' of becoming a woman or a man. In this sense, 'doing gender' can be interpreted as a biographical structure that lends that interactive mode of 'producing' gender a temporal depth dimension and a connecting design principle.

This idea is not satisfied with the mere hint that this interactive gender-doing process "has to be seen as the basis for the identity of the person" (Gildemeister & Wetterer, 1992, p. 245). It goes beyond conventional approaches to 'gender-specific socialisation'.<sup>9</sup> The process of becoming sex is not limited to the ontogenetic adoption of interactive rules for the representation of gender. It can be understood as a biographical process of stratification and construction of experience (cf. Dausien, 1994, 1996a).

This perspective follows the individual 'paths'<sup>10</sup> through the historically changing 'action environments', which in turn are always gender-coded and provide specific areas and boundaries of experience. For example, the possibilities of living a biography as a homosexual, depending on historical-cultural framework conditions, on the concrete social milieu, on family constellations, on possible relationships in close social areas, on the accessibility of 'gay' subcultures etc. (cf. Scheuermann, 1996). The chances of realising a 'normal' life plan as a woman, in which work and family can be linked



according to your own ideas (cf. Dausien, 1996a), are no less limited than the possibility of living a life that ‘drops out’ of traditional roles. Without reflecting on the specific biographical conditions, the step towards generalisation and thus the reification of social constructs is not far.

However, the analysis of the biographical construction of gender (cf. Dausien, 1996a) does not stop at reconstructing the individual ‘route’ that female or male travelers travel in a gender-coded world in order to take up Roth’s metaphor again (see above). It is primarily about the reconstruction of the individual biographical stratification of experience that an individual has developed as a woman or man in this way and which in turn has a say in the next steps. Empirical reconstructions of biographical narratives show that the story of ‘becoming gender’ is inextricably interwoven with the unique biographical form of experience (Dausien, 1996a). In this way, the social construction of gender is reconstructed through all individual and historical processes of change. Therefore, de-construction cannot mean the abolition of the gender category, but at most its transformation.

The approaches to the social construction of gender undoubtedly convince through their consistent rejection of essentialist theories of femininity and masculinity. They also plausibly show that the idea of strict autopoiesis of ‘personal systems’, as represented by the recent systems theory, deviates significantly from social reality. But they do not yet provide a consistent overall concept for how the ‘construction of gender’ should be theorised and how the social actors contribute biographically to this process. That would be precisely the task of a social (and by the way also an educational) science biography theory. On the one hand, it would have to reconstruct the influence of social constructions on individual life, the way in which social structures nestle in the terrain of ‘subjectivity’. On the other hand, it would have to make transparent how individuals react most stubbornly to those external influences. This self-referentiality of biographical processing ‘open to the outside world’ will now be exemplarily developed in the following section.

### **Biographicity as a unique ‘grammar of the social’**

The fact that gender cannot be ‘deconstructed’ by intellectual means is not due to its inevitability as an alleged biological fact, but to the fact that in the course of a biography of concrete women and men, also of people who move intersexually, it is socially and temporally acquired and always ‘manufactured’ anew. To use a metaphor from language theory: the ‘*semantics*’ of the gender code may be hidden in the historically changing institutionalised order of interaction (classic: Goffman, 1977) or in the routines of social practices (classic: Garfinkel, 1967), their ‘*grammar*’ lies in the biographical action resources of the individuals, in their *biographicity*, themselves. And this grammar creates performances that do not want to fit the concept of deconstruction because other semantics affect them as well: for example the semantic code of social inequality (‘*class*’), which has long been the focus of classical sociological discussion, but also the semantics of ethnicity (‘*race*’), which is becoming increasingly important in the course of post-industrial and post-colonial modernism with its global colonisation processes and migration movements. The world region in which we are born or the historical time that shapes us can also be semantic codes. These semantics work together in the affected individuals. And the ‘mental grammar’ that every individual has to develop, that becomes the basis of his/her lifestyle and determines the performance of his/her everyday activities, namely biographicity, is not just a simple addition of those semantic codes; it is a unique

productive resource for dealing with oneself and the world - a kind of 'generative principle' of the temporally layered performances of a concrete biography.

However, the wider theoretical context associated with this metaphor is by no means as clear as it seems. Neither the relationship between semantics and grammar nor the multidimensionality of the grammar term itself has been clarified. Noam Chomsky, whose important studies on a "generative transformation grammar" are directly affected here (Chomsky, 1965, 1969, 1977), has remained ambiguous - as far as his 'grammar idea' is concerned. However, what makes his provocative concept interesting for the following considerations remains the idea that 'grammar' represents a mental depth structure, a generative principle that creates a (in Chomsky's case: *linguistic*) performance level through certain transformation rules.

It appears conceptually essential that this deep structure is designed syntactically, as a system of rules for signs, and not - as with George Lakoff, his prominent opponent (representative Lakoff, 1971) - *semantically*, as a relationship of meanings. If the narrow area of linguistics is left, if the question of a generative principle is raised not only by language, but also by behavioural dispositions, routines, practices, taste preferences, implicit knowledge and experience resources, Chomsky's model is more convincing than Lakoff's "generative semantics": It explains why a concrete individual reacts to very different "social semantics"<sup>11</sup> - the gender problem, social inequality, ethnic and religious differences - in a "very own" structural mode, why one obviously uses an "experiential code" for processing the different social semantics whose transformation rules remain relatively stable.

What distinguishes this transfer of the linguistic model to the more complex area of *biographical experience* from Chomsky's grammar theory is the critique of the tendency to assume a kind of 'nativistic competence', which is, a basic ability that is already available at birth. *Biographicity* as a unique social grammar of the individual, however, only arises in the biographical process of experience. Through self-referential processing of external impulses, through dealing with the different semantics of the concrete social environment, an '*inner logic*' grows, which can also change again and again through new external impulses. But it does not change according to a principle of determination inherent in the impulses, rather within the framework of this inner logic itself.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps this is why another theoretical reference is useful as a supplement: the concept of "*habitus*" in Bourdieu's theory (cf. Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 139ff; 1987, pp. 277ff, 1983). This concept also benefits from Chomsky's grammar idea (Bourdieu, 1987; Kraus & Gebauer, 2002), but in the distinction between *opus operatum*, as an incorporated form of generative schemes, as a "structured structure", and *modus operandi*, as a "structuring structure" (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 282f), the dialectical idea of an active production principle emerges, which refers to a previous 'social syntax'. This depth structure is incorporated through practice. It is not a "natural" competence (as in Chomsky), but a "*coagulated life story*" (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 57f).

Interestingly, Bourdieu's idea of a "history turned into nature" (1979, p. 171) refers to a classic script of educational sociology, to Emile Durkheim's *L'évolution pédagogique en France* (1938):

In each of us, according to changing proportions, there is the person of yesterday; it is even he who, through the power of things, prevails in us, the present is only a minor compared to that long past in the course of which we took shape and from which we come. However, we do not feel this person of the past, because he has taken root deep within us; he forms the unconscious part of ourselves. Because of this, one is tempted to give no more account of him and of his legitimate claims. On the other hand, we have a keen sense of the most recent acquisitions of civilisation, which, because of their

recent nature, have not had the time to organise themselves in the unconscious. (ibid., p. 16)

Bourdieu is only interested in the “forgetting of genesis” (1979, p. 171), the unconscious willingness to understand one’s own (life) ‘story’ as a *fait accompli* and thus to prove the obstinate resistance and inertia of the habitus. Bourdieu’s consequences from this interpretation are extremely radical and are reminiscent of the statements made in his polemical essay on *The Biographical Illusion* (1990):

By viewing the habitus as a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, as a pattern of perception, thinking and acting that is common to all members of the same group or class and that is the prerequisite for every objectification and apperception, this becomes objective agreement of the practice forms and the uniqueness of the worldview based on the complete impersonality and interchangeability of the singular practice forms and worldviews. However, this boils down to considering all ideas and forms of practice created according to identical schemes to be impersonal and interchangeable - in the manner of the singular views of space, which, if you believe Kant, do not reflect any particularity of the empirical ego. [...] Since the history of the individual never reproduces anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his group or class, structural variants of the group or class habitus can be seen in the systems of individual dispositions, which are systematically organised precisely in the differences that separate them and in which the differences in careers and positions within and outside the class are expressed: the ‘personal’ style, this special characteristic that all products of one and the same habitus, all actions and works, are never more than a self-regulated and sometimes even codified deviation from the style peculiar to an epoch or a class, so that it refers not only because of conformity [...] but also because of the difference that the manner makes, to the common style. (Bourdieu 1979, p. 187-189)

But is this really just about “personal style”? What about the “changing proportions” that Durkheim also mentions? What does the generative power of an individual experience system stacked up in time mean, whose self-referentiality develops relative autonomy in the course of a life story? In view of the importance of social-constructivist insights developed in previous considerations, can such a ‘de-individualised’ perspective on the habitus still be justified?

Let’s take up again the dynamic relationship between ‘semantics’ and ‘grammar’, which was metaphorically addressed above. Semantics are objectified horizons of meaning, such as the *class* position of individuals. The *gender* dimension is also such a semantics (see above). It can hardly be argued empirically that the formative power of these ‘meta-semantics’ can vary historically. If one takes the US society, for example, the class question already marks second place to the gender and race question in the early 20th century. That has hardly changed. Rather, phenomena of “*intersectionality*” (representative Butler, 1991) emerge, the mixing of objectified semantics, which also produce new dimensions of grammars, that is, of forms of habitus. Bourdieu’s certainty about the class dimension may be a historical syndrome, and perhaps also a European one (cf Bourdieu, 1978). After all, his fascinating work on “Masculine Domination” (2001) has given gender semantics a central place.

However, it is indisputable that the function of grammars of the social, i.e. the principle of creation of certain behavioural dispositions, world interpretations and lifestyles of the subjects, has shifted from collective basic orientations to the individual him/herself. The “individualisation thesis” (representative Beck, 1986, 205ff; Reckwitz 2017<sup>13</sup>), which is not without reason discussed critically, is a superficial indication of this. Findings from recent neurosciences (see above) may be more sustainable. This can mean - and here Bourdieu’s early works may sharpen the sensitivity (cf. 1978) - that especially

in Europe the 'class semantics' still have an unmistakable influence on the configuration of habitus. At the same time, however, it means that the 'grammar of the social' arises in the biographical process of experience of each and every individual: as a "structured structure" and as a "structuring structure" – however, that the process of "structuring" has become more complex. It is no longer dominant semantics alone that determine structure; it is about a mixture of external semantics, possibly about changing hegemony in the mixed situation. What then develops as the 'grammar of the social' is unique and linked to the individual's biographical process of experience. It is the *biographicity* of each and every individual - if you will: his/her 'biographical habitus'.

In late or 'postmodern' societal formations we are thus dealing with new constellations in terms of figuration sociology (Elias, 1977): from the positional fixation of class existence in pre-modern societies to certain movements in social space with the relative stability of social habituations in modernity, the trend in current societies is now in direction of erosion of social-structural bonds and security and the concentration of life risks on the individual him/herself (see also Reckwitz, 2006, 2017; Alheit & Schömer, 2009). This in no way means that social relationships would become superfluous. However, it means that they are not, of course, available as 'natural' resources, but have to be recreated again and again. And the active basic competence for this process is the *biographicity* of the individuals (cf. in detail Alheit, 2019, 120-128; Alheit & Dausien, 2000).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am mainly referring to the work of Humberto R. Maturana and his colleagues (Maturana, 1970, 1978, 1987a, 1987b; Maturana & Varela, 1975, 1987; Varela, 1979, 1981, 1987; Varela, Maturana & Uribe, 1974) and the congenial and partial modification of follow-up studies by Gerhard Roth's research group (e.g. Roth, 1985, 1987a, 1987b; Roth & Schwegler (eds.), 1981; an der Heiden, Roth & Schwegler, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 605. Incidentally, it also appears secondary to the present outline of the theory whether Luhmann is thereby unwittingly approaching the classical philosophy of consciousness, as Wagner and Zipprian (1992) demonstrate in an interesting analysis.
- <sup>3</sup> The hint that such a gradation naturally belongs to the inventory of the classical philosophy of consciousness is relatively irrelevant; Schimank's reference to Tugendhat (1988, p. 69, note 11) or Nassehi's and Weber's scholarly recourse to Husserl and Bergson (1990, pp. 156ff) also demonstrate the connection to the philosophy of consciousness and reinforce the skepticism about an apriority of the autopoiesis of psychic systems (cf. also the cautious criticism of Luhmann in Nassehi & Weber, 1990, p. 166).
- <sup>4</sup> See Hirschauer's position (1993a), who, like Gildemeister and Wetterer, regards the question of deconstruction primarily as an empirically based *reconstruction* and contributes to this with his own study on transsexuality (1993b).
- <sup>5</sup> With regard to body size, which is not itself an environmentally independent factor, there are only differences in the average values between the two sex groups, which are significantly smaller than the variances within the groups. Pair formations in which the woman is taller than the man would therefore practically be possible in large numbers. Social norms and subtle strategies for action guarantee that they remain the 'exception'.
- <sup>6</sup> This observation corresponds to Luhmann's 'functional differentiation' (see above).
- <sup>7</sup> "So right from the start of an interaction there is a tendency to formulate things in gender terms; in this way the gender class provides an overall profile or a container to which the different features can be traced or into which they can be emptied." (Goffman, 1994, p. 138) Gender thus becomes the prototype of social classification at all (cf. *ibid.*, p. 108).
- <sup>8</sup> Becker-Schmidt (1996) particularly points out the necessity of a historical-social differentiation of the gender category. The historicity of the gender relationship can be seen above all from the changing forms of the division of labour and the associated variations in social gender role scripts and scope for action. A vivid empirical example of such processes is the "gender change of professions", which can

- be used to analyse the production and de-construction of gender at the institutional level (cf. Wetterer 1992, 1995a, b; Knapp, 1995).
- <sup>9</sup> Concepts of socialisation theory (cf. Nunner-Winkler 1994) are affected by (de-)constructivist criticism. Regardless of whether they are oriented towards learning theory or psychoanalysis, they are particularly subject to the danger of an essentialist interpretation of gender (see again the example of “female work ability” or “female morality”). They share the strengths and weaknesses of their theories of origin and tend either to overemphasise social characteristics or to adopt a biologically anchored, internal drive dynamics.
- <sup>10</sup> According to the above considerations, it no longer needs to be justified that these should not be considered as closed autopoietic structures, but always as interaction stories.
- <sup>11</sup> I am really conscious about the fact that I am reinterpreting Lakoff’s approach and that I am not adopting his generative ‘sense metaphor’. However, a syntactic deep structure, i.e. a creative system of rules, as Chomsky constructs it, seems to me to be more suitable than a deep structure consisting of ‘meanings’ that always rest on socio-historical process structures.
- <sup>12</sup> For the kind of comparable change, Maturana and Varela proposed the convincing metaphor of ‘drifting’ (cf. 1987, pp. 14f, 86f, 119ff), a movement that does not change direction abruptly, but allows very gradual shifts in the tolerance level of a previously existing dominant basic impulse.
- <sup>13</sup> I am extremely aware of the fact that I did not adequately appreciate time-diagnostic sociological studies in this essay. In addition to Reckwitz, Rosa (2016), Sennet (2012), Boltanski & Esquerre (2017), Eribon (2013) and a few others should also have been mentioned. In Reckwitz’s case, a reference to his habilitation thesis *The Hybrid Subject* (2006) would be particularly important, the theoretical outcomes of which coincide with the results of a major historical project that a research group under my leadership carried out at the same time (cf. Alheit & Brandt, 2006; Alheit & Schömer, 2009). However, this essay is a strictly theoretical contribution – in a way ‘timeless’ and without the urgent claim to be up to date.

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