



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Corsten, Michael

Narrative Explanations of Biographical Developments

### Original Citation

Corsten, Michael (2006) Narrative Explanations of Biographical Developments. In: Narrative, Memory & Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics, Contexts. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 17-26.

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/4895/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

## 2 Narrative Explanations of Biographical Developments

MICHAEL CORSTEN

The biographical method in social sciences is confronted on the one hand with sceptical arguments from contemporary constructivist and ethno-methodologist approaches. These arguments are concerned with the 'truth conditions' of life stories, especially of narrative sentences as statements about past events. On the other hand - from the analytic or nomologic standpoint - biographical analyses were accused of being only description, and therefore, lacking explanation.

These apparently newer arguments have been already discussed in principle by Arthur C. Danto in his prominent work on the 'analytic philosophy of history'. I want to show that his refutations concerning sceptical and deductive-nomologic arguments against statements about past events in history can also be taken to defend biographical analysis of life narrations against recent constructivist, ethno-methodologist and analytic critics.

Especially, the problem of explanation is illustrated by the exemplary parts of a narrative interview.

### 1. Defending the Truth of (Life) Histories

Nowadays, the sociological analysis of life histories is usually confronted with three objections: (a) they would take (unnecessarily) the biographical constructions of narrator as testimony of real life events; (b) they would be satisfied with mere retrospective (or reconstructing) documents of past instead of collecting registering data (records, tapes) of social practices; and (c) they would be unaware of the ideological, illusionary or (expressed less pejoratively) historically relative character of descriptions of past developments.

In the first part I want to go back to Arthur C. Danto's analysis of narrative sentences (concerning historical statements) to reject these critical arguments. I start by introducing Danto's definition of narratives, and then I go through his reflections on three problems which are theoretically identical with the objections stated above (1.1 - 1.4).

### *1.1 Defining Narrative Sentences and the Claim of (Life-) Historical Statements*

A history of one's own life would be - in Arthur C. Danto's understanding of narration - only a history if it is constituted by narrative sentences. He defines narrative sentences as:

that we describe events and objects with reference to other events and objects which stand in various temporal relationships to them. (Danto, 1985: 347)

But narrative sentences would not be simply listed sequences of events they were more concerned with truth conditions (criteria) for sentences.

There are in fact any number of predicates in the language which are true of a given object only on the presupposition that it has a certain causal history. ... Hence such a predicate is true of such an object only if a certain earlier event occurred. (ibid)

Danto shows some examples for objects and events presupposing such truth conditions:

Something is truly a scar ... only if it is caused by a wound; a document only if caused by the events it records (ibid)

Let me extend these examples to a thesis concerning the case of life events:

- Autobiographical stories are only true (accounts) if they are caused by life events that actually took place in the life of the narrator (as the person who has lived/experienced his/her life).

I intend to defend this thesis because it clarifies an important difference. I mean the point that it is not trivial if an event narrated in a life history has taken place (was experienced) in one's life or not. Insofar my argumentation shall contradict a constructivist view on histories as this view tends to eliminate the claim that goes along with the notion that a narrated life event actually has taken place.

Some of the constructivist counter-questions have already been introduced:

- Why should it not be satisfying to say that a life story is true in the sense that it is a belief system of the narrator or his/her communicative/semantic construction of life?
- Why do we need such fragile documents as (auto-) biographical accounts?

- Would it not be more satisfying if we had gathered true records (e. g. video tapes of certain situations in one's life) about the events that really took place or other more 'valid' documents?

These counter-arguments are coming from two sides of an epistemological perspective that Arthur Danto has called 'instantaneous scepticism'. It derives from the idea that only the present exists. Phenomena can only be called true if they are experienced as they are actually taking place, and such an experience is possible only in an instantaneous present.

In contemporary social sciences there are two approaches that seem to show a way out of this problem. One is the stated semantic constructivism that asserts the irrelevance of truth conditions concerning events symbolized in stories (Luhmann, 1998, for biographies Armin Nassehi, 1994). The other one is ethno-methodology in its complementary attempt to gather 'true' records that register social events in its process form (Bergmann, 1985).

In my reading of Danto's classical work 'analytic philosophy of history' I found precise refutations of the two variants of instantaneous scepticism. The first one is seen in Danto's reflections upon 'historical instrumentalism', the second one is his discussion of the 'Ideal Chronicle'.

### *1.2 Danto's refutation of historical instrumentalism*

First of all, let us look how Danto reconstructs historical instrumentalism as a way out of the truth problem of sentences about past events. He states the problems which emerge when sentences about past objects and events are treated 'as about the evidence offered on their behalf' or are detected to be 'not capable of being fully analysed into sets of observation sentences' (Danto, 1985: 78). But a strategy suggested by semantic constructivists would be to view sentences about the past as in 'their role ... of serving to organize present experience' (Danto, 1985: 79). He names this perspective 'the Instrumentalist view of sentences about the past' (ibid).

Danto's argument is here that the Instrumentalist view becomes 'sheer arbitrary'. By constructing the hypothetical example of the case that the world sprang out into being five minutes ago, he can show two difficulties of the Instrumentalist view:

We can admit those past-referring predicates which refer to past events and objects connected with presently existing objects, so long as they happened or existed within the past five minutes. Thus there would genuinely be three-minute eggs, and not merely called three-minute eggs. There would be some fathers, some genuine memories, and so on. But now, as we shift the arbitrary beginning point back and forth in time, the populations of these various classes will vary. (Danto, 1985: 83)

First it is not yet clear how long an instantaneous present would last. The effect is that one can not say what could be experienced as being real and what not. Moreover - and that is the second point - one might notice that every experience only could be stated after the instant of the experience and then every sentence about the world would be a sentence about the past.

### *1.3 Danto's Refutation of the 'Ideal Chronicle'*

A special problem is the question of completeness. How far can a description of a past sequence of events be complete? Danto illustrates this problem by introducing an ideal claim - the Ideal Chronicle (I.C.).

First he defines a 'full description' as 'a set of sentences' that would tell everything and which were 'perfectly isomorphic with an event'. An Ideal Chronicler then would have the ability to know everything in the moment it happens 'even in other minds'. He also has 'the gift of instantaneous transcription: ... The resultant running account I shall term the Ideal Chronicle. Once E is safely in the Past, its full description is in the I.C.' (Danto, 1985: 148).

For the reflection of the Ideal Chronicle it is not so important that it is actually impossible. No one will ever be able to write such a chronicle. But we seem to be influenced by its logical implications, eg. in the project of 'taping the world' as it was introduced by the ethno-methodologist researchers Harvey Sacks and Harold Garfinkel. And although it is impossible to tape the whole world we might hope to tape some bits of social processes in detail.

And then the standpoint of the Ideal Chronicle implies the superiority of such recorded bits of social processes compared with stories retelling the actors' experiences. The records will be regarded as register of the past whereas the stories only reconstruct (retrospectively) the past events (Bergmann, 1985).

Danto's argument against the Ideal Chronicle is that it would be nothing more than a list of instant events (as a kind of duplicate) but not a narration offering explanation for the sequence of events (see here chapter 2).

### *1.4 The Vagueness of Autobiographical (Historical) Memory - Historical Relativism of Accounts Claiming the Truth of Past Events*

A third doubt concerning sentences of the past is rooted in the suspicion that the author (the historian) of such sentences would be influenced by certain moral or cultural presumptions of his own (world-view).

There are schemes of interpretation he suggests, which an historian is likely to insist upon even in the face of what might appear to others as overwhelmingly contrary evidence. (Danto, 1985: 103)

Danto is dissatisfied with this doubt as a specific argument against historical sentences.

- (1) It would not take sufficiently into account that historical sentences are not statements about things but about *x* as evidence for something *y*. Therefore, we should not treat ourselves as being 'historically illiterate' (Danto, 1985: 90).
- (2) In emphasizing the effects of the present view on past events relativist view would underestimate the influence of experiences made earlier on the present view of things.
- (3) The confrontation of history and natural science would run out into a misleading idealization of natural sciences because relativism is also valid for natural science.

## **2. The Question of Explanation**

The question of explanation is important because in chapter one we had discussed only refutations of a constructivist point of view. But what do we offer instead? Here, we can present the ability of narrative reconstructions to gain explanation for a past sequence of events.

In Danto's early treatise on historical sentences we find answers on the question of the extent to which historical analysis is explanatory or not. In the same manner one could ask to what extent biographical (in the sense of life-historical) analysis is explanatory or not.

In principle, three statements contradict each other:

- (1) Historians sometimes explain events.
- (2) Every explanation must include at least one general law.
- (3) The explanations historians give do not include general laws.

(Danto, 1985: 203)

Danto attempts to solve the problem of these contradictions by modifying the meaning of the three sentences in a way that makes them compatible to each other.

Therefore, he discusses the example why the Monégasques decorated the streets with their own national flag and the American flag during the celebration of the fête nationale monégasque (but no flags of other nations). Now, we might know an event *K* (Prince Rainier III marrying the actress Grace Kelly) which connects with event *E* (putting out American flags). But this only would make a sequential connection between the events. It does not introduce a general law that would cover (logically) the occurrence of event *E*.

In the deductive way we could develop the following conclusions:

- K-1 The sovereign princess of Monaco is of non-monégasque origin.  
K-2 The fête nationale monégasque is an appropriate occasion for honouring sovereigns of Monaco.  
K-3 Putting out the flags of a person's native country is an acceptable way of honouring that person as a native of that nation. (Danto, 1985: 222)

That means for the description of event E:

The members of one nation were honouring a sovereign of a different national origin from their own. (Danto 1985: 221), here a sovereign of American birth.

### *2.1 Explaining a Life Event by a Narration*

Now, I take a case from my own research, the explanation of a reported life-event by Mrs. Monika Teufel, at the time of the interview in 2002, a sixty-one-year old woman and former chemical worker.

In 1992 M.T. initiated as a volunteer worker a project with street urchins in the region of Dessau.

By the example I want to show why the interpretation of Mrs. Teufel's narration of how she came to this volunteer work is important for the explanation of this event.

Before we take a look at this narration I want to reflect upon some general circumstances that could explain Mrs. Teufel's decision.

First of all, one would expect that some important circumstances of her life had changed. We would expect that because the event of starting volunteer work takes place in her middle age, being about 50 years old.

Such changes in life could be:

- Children leaving home
- She gets unemployed
- She is confronted with historical changes.

If we regard the events that occurred just before she became a volunteer worker we find that the last two points were given:

In 1990 Germany was re-unified - in 1992 she became unemployed.

However we may interpret these historical and biographical circumstances in the life of Monika Teufel, these interpretations will not become precise enough to show a law that would cover the specific case of starting volunteer work in a project with street urchins.

What we could get to know by these two circumstances is only that

- (B-1) the phenomenon of street urchins could be caused by social disordering passing by historical transformation (re-unification);
- (B-2) volunteer work could function as a replacement for being employed.

But as general laws to explain the taking up of volunteer work it would be rejected because:

Not every unemployed person in East Germany started a volunteer work after re-unification.

Not every (unemployed person) got confronted with the problem of street kids.

But if the two stated circumstances are correct as background factors then one could address the following questions to the way Mrs Teufel describes the taking up of volunteer work in her narration:

- (Q-a) How did she get confronted with the problem of street kids?
- (Q-b) Why is the replacement of employment by volunteer work satisfying for her?

Keeping the two questions in mind, let us take a look the narration of Mrs. Teufel:

Well, on my way after 90 it was so that at every corner there were 'Karin's snack bars', kiosks and so on, so it was already perverted (somehow) everywhere people stood around and quarrelled but also little children with them and on my way I have always experienced that always there little children with (.) with their fathers and wives eh early yet drunken have roared around there.

O.K., well and there was also much eh rubble where kids were gathering. So they destroyed that what was left and played with fire there and I had then one (.) I mean first I tried to lure away the kids from the beer dumps. I did not have any fears to contact them. To get close to them (.) sometimes I went also really wholly un - complicated (ways). So for example I drove with my bike really into such a group eh because they were standing around on the pedestrian way and did not step aside. They have been there simply sitting and messing around and eh but I have got them in my sight since several days. It were horrible scenes that I have seen myself in these ruins. ... I can not really say brutal but it was simply sick, yes.

To reconstruct its explanatory capacity one can read the cited narration in two ways.

The first one would reflect upon the reasons that the narrator explicitly gives herself.



The second one would be a kind of second order reading - that means an interpretive analysis of the background assumptions that guide the reported information. In my reading I take the second way.

If we look at the reasons that Mrs Teufel mentions explicitly we find that she

- (1) observes a certain behaviour of parents and its consequences for the kids,
- (2) judges this behaviour as 'simply sick',
- (3) is able to get close to the kids.

In talking this way Mrs. Teufel takes some aspects as self-evident

- (s-1) that one would automatically be irritated by the narrated scenery,
- (s-2) that it is natural to react on the reported situation.

Here I will emphasize that Mrs Teufel reports a specific form of observing and reacting in a certain situation. As a second-reader we have to find a kind of rule (or law) that could explain the specificity of her response. Therefore, we could introduce a law similar to the monasque example in Danto's work.

L-1: In her reaction Mrs Teufel follows a sense for the reconstruction of (culturally) damaged life.

She uncovers the cultural background, the causes, the damaged life especially by describing the scenery of beer dumps, drinking and roaring parents neglecting their children's sensitivity.

In reconstructing the narration we are able to find specific motives that explain more precisely how it could become possible that someone takes the opportunity of volunteer work as a response to two changes in the background of their life - which were in our case:

- a dynamic of social disembeddedness caused by re-unification
- the loss of a central life activity - here employment as chemical worker.

That what we called the sense for the reconstruction of culturally damaged life enables the actor to realize the social disembeddedness in their own environment (social surrounding) and to feel responsible and able to respond to this deplorable state of affairs.

## *2.2 Narrative Explanations Explaining Narrative Explanations*

Now, looking at this first result, the explanation of a life-event by a single narration concerning this event is only partly satisfying. One would be interested in the causes that could have effected the specific motive - this specific sense for the reconstruction of a culturally damaged life. To find such

causes, we have to take a look at narrations of further life experiences (experienced life situations).

In biographical texts one could gain a whole set of such stories concerning further life situations. For the brevity of my contribution I can only present one more example, the beginning of the story (in the interview).

Hm hm well it is over sixty years ago (.) so in October 41 I am born eh here in Dessau /I: yes/ the only one of four children that has been delivered in the hospital and my parents had a restaurant

At that time my father was in war, my mother had carried on the business with all its consequences and eh I am more or less - when I did not have to help at home - grew up in the ruins all around. Well, this I can remember and much at the Mulde, that means at the water /I: hm/ it was always dreamlike beautiful outside and I have learned swimming in the Mulde that this little river that runs into the Elbe

Well, it was a small restaurant /I: mh/ no big business. But he (the father, M.C.) had oriented the family that eh both brothers, my both brothers one became a pastry cook and the other a cook my sister was in the domestic help at the Bauhaus there was yet such a school of home economics at that time and I am - thanks to my stupidity (short laugh) as I used to say I am eh 'beaten totally out of the track' (original german phrase: 'völlig aus der Bahn geschlagen')

The stated story shows a similarity between the situation of the street kids of Mrs Teufel's volunteer project and her own situation as a child of a restaurant owner. In both cases we find a situation of neglect and an absence of the parents.

In Mrs Teufel's own case her father was in the war - and probably in captivity after the end of the war - and her mother was fully preoccupied by carrying on the small family business.

Mrs Teufel - like the street kids nowadays - grew up in the ruins. But differently to the kids today she finds a contrast to these ruins in her natural surrounding which she experienced as dreamlike.

And also after her father came back and attempted to orientate the whole family on the small restaurant business (comparable to 'Karen's snack bars') she found a way out of this scenery.

From a structuralist point of view (eg. Levi-Strauss, 1963) one might say the stories of the street kids nowadays and the childhood of Mrs Teufel show equalities concerning basic symbolic differentiations: family/gastronomy; inside/outside; ruins/dreamful nature; sensitivity/insensitivity.

But if we claim that Mrs Teufel's story of her own childhood includes an explanation of the story of her recent engagement for street kids we do not refer to the structural parallel but to the causal link between her child experience that could be interpreted as the main cause that effects her sense for the reconstruction of culturally damaged life.

For her the experience of an intact natural environment aroused a sense for her own sensuality. This self-experience enabled her to recognize how life could be damaged and how a neglected sensitivity could be revived.

### References

- Bergmann, J.R. (1985) Flüchtigkeit und methodische Fixierung sozialer Wirklichkeit, in *Soziale Welt. Sonderband 3*, 299-320.
- Bourdieu, P. (1987) The Biographical Illusion. *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Centre for Psychosocial Studies (University of Chicago)* 14, 1-7.
- Danto, A.C. (1985) *Narration and Knowledge*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1963) The Structural Study of Myth, in C. Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York, Basic Books, 206-231.
- Luhmann, N. (1998) *Love As Passion: The Codification of Intimacy (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, Stanford, University Press.
- Nassehi, A. (1994) Die Form der Biographie, *BIOS*, 7 (1), 46-63.
- Schegloff, E.A. (1992) Introduction, in H. Sacks *Lectures on Conversation, Vol. I*, ed by G. Jefferson, Oxford, Blackwell, IX-LXII.

