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# 9 Biographical Certainty in Reflexive Modernity

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As a result of continuous social change it seems more and more difficult today to produce biographical certainty in the sense of clear expectations and the shaping of one's own life-course. What was previously taken for granted is being transformed into (real or apparent) decisions by means of social individualization processes and individual processes of building up one's biography (Beck, 1992). Life courses are no longer simply given, but (allegedly) dependent on decisions, and if this premise is accepted, the pressure on individuals to make the right decisions increase.

Against this background, the essay aims to determine the different action and interpretation patterns with which biographical certainty is created under the conditions of a systematically uncertain world. A typology of *biographical certainty* developed on the basis of qualitative interviews will be presented. At the end of the essay, the results will be discussed against the background of the thesis of a fundamental change or structural rupture within modernity (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 2003).

## Introduction

The issue of *biographical certainty* presupposes that life courses are open to both individual and social shaping forces. This assumption, so self-evident to us today (but also challenged yet again) is the result of a long historical process of change, the transition to modernity.

Liberating the individual from all-embracing conceptions of the world in the Middle Ages was a basic condition of this process. In these conceptions of the world, one's destiny was always pre-determined – and in this sense *certain*. At the same time, it was inaccessible to individual action and unpredictable in its development. One could attempt to reconcile the gods through gifts and prayers, but ultimately one's actual life course was always determined by the unfathomable will of God and by strokes of fate (epidemics, cot death, war).

When modernity was accomplished, the idea gained ground that inner and outer nature could be controlled. People believed in the unstoppable progress of technology and in social participation through gainful employment, and all these notions had an effect on individual life courses. Where life had still been determined, first and foremost, by social class and local bonds, a new social

structure evolved, the ‘institutionalised life course’ (Kohli, 1986: 274). Life courses became predicatable and could be shaped individually and institutionally as life expectancy rose clearly and death was deferred to very old age. A normative program succeeded for leading the right life and for protecting it institutionally, as social security was introduced and established effectively on a large scale (Kohli, 1986: 277). Thus, the fiction was born that life courses could be organized safely and according to one’s own will.

As the individual was liberated from the fetters of the corporate state during the transition period to industrialized modernity, one was reintegrated into large social groups (classes) and division-of-labour patterns legitimized by specific constructions that take on the character of given by nature, for example gender roles. The inconsistencies between early modern notions that life courses could be shaped individually and institutional demands limiting the possibilities of doing so increasingly put the ‘institutionalised life course’ (Kohli, 1986) and the ‘status biography’ (Levy, 1996) under pressure. Basic certainties of male and female life course planning became doubtful, and had to be substantiated in both a normative and practical sense, as for instance women’s emancipation or the structural changes in working society show. With regard to individual life course planning, those are above all the basic certainties of *normal employee-employer relationships* and *professional development* as well as the *normal family* which become eroded and make the unquestioned reference to standard models of life course planning doubtful. A development which, from the perspective of modern theory, clearly fosters *uncertainty*.

As the thesis goes, such changed conditions for one’s own life-course planning also have an effect on patterns of biographical certainty. What these patterns are like will be shown in the following (compare also Zinn, 2004).

### **Fundamental Conceptual Assumptions**

What does ‘certainty’ mean – especially in contrast to the related terms ‘safety’ or ‘security’? While safety is a technical word (for example safety belt), security is a quite general term that means something like social security or feelings of security. However certainty stands for a more formal use. When I use ‘certainty’ I mean that somebody has clear expectations according to the future.

In this general sense certainty is a prerequisite for each action. Without a little bit of certainty at least, nobody can act at all. We always assume that we know how the world is, how we can act in the world, what can happen and what can’t happen. We know negative events we have to consider and those which are so unlikely as to not merit detailed into consideration.

As a sociological definition we can say:

*Certainty* always emerges when an unlimited and complex sphere of possibilities where everything seems possible is transformed into a level of expectations with a limited number of options among which a choice can be made and the consequences of which can be assessed; in other words: when “(unmanageable) contingencies” are redefined as “(manageable) complexities” (Bonss, 1997: 24).

In this process of redefining, the world is divided in a part which seems to be controllable or accessible to one’s action, and a part which seems to be uncontrollable and unknowable, where you can only hope and pray to God, but you cannot influence what will occur. What someone considers as probably happening and therefore has to be taken into account, and which events are really unlikely to occur and could consequently be disregarded, differs between persons. In the study, underlying this article, different forms by which people construct biographical certainty have been found. On the base of 20 qualitative problem-centred interviews with people in middle age (between 30 and 40 years old) and different biographical situations five ideal-types of biographical certainty modes have been developed (compare Zinn, 2004). To avoid some misunderstanding, it has to be noticed, that the typology is a typology on action patterns and not on persons or identity-types. In this view it’s an open question whether one is acting with reference to one action type or in different types, depending on the social domain, the biographical and historical time.

### **The Typology of Biographical Action Modes**

In the typology of biographical certainty, individual types can be distinguished according to the different problem references that have to be considered.

If one achieves certainty with regard to one’s own life, this always happens with reference to norms. All certainty constructions relate to culturally available models of the right way of life or notions of normality concerning, for instance, gainful employment or partnerships. Unexpected events in the course of one’s life are always ascribed, somehow, either to oneself as risk or to factors outside of one’s own sphere of influence as danger. Furthermore, all expectations are directed towards the future. They differ, however, in the specific time perspective. You can have – for example – expectations for tomorrow or a far future, and you can have very exact expectations about your life, for example to marry a special person and have five children or a really fuzzy idea, like to be happy in general. Finally, in order to be able to act at all, it seems to be necessary that a secure basis is constructed, in whatever way, for each action. The action basis is important to protect the actor against unexpected events. It thus follows the logic “what can I do when all things become worse?”

Having examined the problem references, from the empirical material it was possible to develop five ideal types of biographical certainty modes: traditionalization, approximation, optimization, autonomization and contextualization.

In the following, because of the limited space, only three (traditionalization, optimisation and contextualization) of the five action-types are presented by the first and the second problem reference, the reference to norms and the reference to uncertainty. For a more detailed description and the two other types (approximation, autonomization) which are also of high significance, see Zinn (2004).

### **The Traditionalization Mode**

In the traditionalization mode, certainty is based on the traditionalization of norms that seem to be given. Deviations and unexpected events are not envisaged. Accordingly, precautions are not taken to protect oneself in case they occur. But the example of SONJA<sup>1</sup> shows how notions of normality about marriage and having a family effectively interlock even where unexpected events occur, such as an unplanned pregnancy. She said:

SONJA: If you live together and have children – well, *I guess you're married*, and that's how it was with us when we met: we wanted to get married, we wanted to have children, too, and then *the kids just came before the wedding* or were in the making, and that was no issue any more, we just said, *now's the time to get married*, and *that was the right thing to do*.

In this mode, biographical uncertainties are seen as dangers. If it's impossible to integrate unwelcome events in a life guided by notions of normality they become biographical catastrophes. They are one's destiny and, as such, inaccessible to actions of one's own. Even if an unwanted event, such as a divorce, is seen elsewhere, it is out of the question in one's own life. ROSINA does not take into consideration the possibility of a divorce in her own case. Accordingly, she takes no protective measures. ROSINA, however, has accepted being financially dependent on her husband to a high degree.

I: You have the strong support of your husband, don't you?  
ROSINA: Yes.  
I: Have you ever thought what would happen if you got divorced?  
ROSINA: Yes, I'd be a welfare case.  
I: And that doesn't worry you?

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<sup>1</sup> The names in capital letters are code-names for interviewees.

ROSINA: No.

This 'no' proves that ROSINA does not really expect to be a 'welfare case'. Therefore, measures need not be taken.

### **The Optimization Mode**

The optimization mode does not refer so much to a clearly defined norm as it does in the traditionalization mode, but rather to a mechanism. In the labour market model, one's biography is the competitive struggle for success or failure. This notion is expressed, for instance, in one's concern "to always be among the top 10%" of one's colleagues (FINN) or, even more clearly, in the metaphor of the mammoth hunt, like SVEN pointed out:

SVEN: The risk of an accident, oh well, I think it's got to be dangerous sometimes, I sort of think in the direction of 'we are natural born killers', us men – we've simply got to go hunting and the strongest will shoot the mammoth, which can be a real victory only if some people in one's own ranks suffer injuries.

The labour market or competition model, however, is not limited to the employment system. It also applies to the field of partner choices, as the following example shows:

I: And what does it mean for you: to be a single?  
SVEN: Oh shit, a loser ... to come off worst in the fight for women, something like that. If you take a good look at this male competitive thinking ... But I also bumped into it, because I really thought, hey, I'm actually somebody who's a good talker, sort of, I'm not obese or anything like that, I go out a lot, get to know a lot of people ...

Uncertainty, in this sense, is perceived as an accident. As an unforeseen event it is judged as negative, as the consequence of imprudent or inadequate calculations. But in a world of competition failure, loss, or defeat are always possible. One might have been careless, even if one seems to have done everything right, thus finding oneself on the loser side. From the perspective of the optimization mode, insecurities are perceived as risks which, in their entirety, are not calculable or manageable because of accidents. Ultimately, certainty remains unattainable, as failure is implicit in the competitive struggle within the market model.

### **The Contextualization Mode**

A biographically open way of dealing with norms is a distinguishing feature of the contextualization mode. Depending on context, specific norms can be complied with, but also rejected. Both attitudes are possible, without a long-term commitment to a specific biographical model resulting from one or the other. Rather, both a normal family and a normal employment situation are conceivable as a temporary biographical orientation pattern. Which model is referred to remains embedded in a situational decision-making framework, like for example LUDWIG pointed out:

LUDWIG: I can think: how do I benefit from this or that for my future, but I can also try out: how do I feel about it, and that's what usually works out best for me.

What follows from that is not just anything at all. Rather, the outer description of a process (for example one's employment history) might well reflect a normal model (for example school, academic studies, doctorate). At the same time, the inner action logic can be a situational one which only becomes visible when an unexpected decision takes place, for example, if after doing a doctorate, you do not pursue an academic career, but fulfil your dream of being a gardener.

In the contextualization mode, biographical uncertainty with regard to an overall biographical project is an opportunity linked to dangers. No matter how accurately risks are calculated, the awareness prevails in the contextualization mode that things can always turn out differently:

LUDWIG: it's a risk I take, and then try and get on, jump into the cold water like, on the edge and pow! Down I go. That's the only way to do it, I think. Oh, you can absolutely keep an eye on things while taking this risk, but ultimately it's always a plunge into cold water. Not everything can be predetermined. If I'm protective about everything – then either nothing happens, or I failed to see something. That would be a nice risk, too, that would be okay.

In the contextualization mode, there is an awareness of the limits of rational risk calculation, where the logic of danger of the second order (Bonss, 1995: 80) applies. However, the awareness that things can always turn out differently is not decisive. What matters is the fact that this awareness leads to a specific reinterpretation of the situation on hand. Limited rationality is not always seen negatively as a lack of control, as it is in the optimization mode. Rather, unforeseen consequences get a positive evaluation. They make access to new and unexpected experiences possible.

**Conclusion: Biographical Certainty in Reflexive Modernity**

How could these results have been interpreted under a historical perspective of a fundamental change within modernity?

In a hasty interpretation the modes could be assigned to specific historical epochs: the traditionalization mode could be interpreted as a typical agrarian society in the middle ages and the optimization mode as a modern mode, disseminated in industrial societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, the contextualization seems to be a mode that fits perfectly to reflexive-modern or post-modern societies.

However, such an interpretation does not do justice to the complex social change that take place in modern societies. Rather all modes are proper possibilities or strategies to construct biographical certainty in today's societies. The different certainty modes impinge specific problems by shaping the life course in an uncertain world.

Obviously, the advantage of the traditionalization mode is to be seen in the radical reduction of complexity. Far-reaching precautionary measures do not take root in the present. What have to be dealt with are only the catastrophes and dangers that really occur. To that extent, such certainty strategies can be highly effective in giving orientation, even where an increase in catastrophic experiences might encourage the notion of a world getting worse and worse.

The optimization mode leaves it to each individual to create his/her biography successfully or unsuccessfully. That seems to be in line with Beck's thesis that all individuals must see themselves as planning departments of their own biographies if they do not want to be at a permanent disadvantage (see Beck, 1992: 135f.) Where success prevails or sufficient resources are available to cushion the impact of temporary setbacks, these are the modes in which the individual organization of one's life can be asserted against competition and given structures. Where high unemployment and high divorce rates do not drop off, individuals, male and female, who apply these modes might be exposed to considerable pressures if they are frequently forced to acknowledge their own responsibility for failure and have to deal with that fact.

In the contextualization mode the overall biographical development perspective has been abandoned in favour of individual biographical projects. The result is greater flexibility in dealing with unexpected biographical developments. The danger of fictitious notions about manageability (risks) is understood, leaving life planning open for decisions that go beyond the rational weighing up of risks. In this mode, however, the difficulty could arise that in many social groups and institutions life course and career patterns are still valid which cannot be disposed of in just any way one chooses. Thus, academic careers are only available to those who have obtained the relevant

**Table: Types of Biographical Certainty Constructions**

Problem reference:	Types of biographical certainty:	Traditionalization	Approximation	Optimization	Autonomization	Contextualization
Dealing with norms		Tradition <i>Reproduction</i>	'Ethics' <i>Readjust, Improvise</i>	Market <i>Calculate, Compete</i>	Emancipation <i>Development, Flexibility</i>	Situation <i>Situational reference, Contextualization</i>
Perception of uncertainty		Catastrophe <i>Fate</i>	Danger <i>Imperfection</i>	Market risk <i>Carelessness</i>	Developmental risk <i>Disturbance</i>	Second order dangers <i>Opportunities in dangerous situations</i>
Conception of time		Closed time horizon	Closed future <i>Approximation of an ideal, that is attainable in principle</i>	Open future <i>Additive-linear</i>	Open future <i>Development and lifelong learning</i>	Open future, project time <i>Episodes and lifelong learning</i>
Ultimate grounds for action		Given traditions	Value system	Competencies and skills of one's own	Personality and developmental competencies	Self-confidence, emotional rationality

qualifications, and certain occupational positions can only be reached if certain age limits are not exceeded. It follows that biographical possibilities in the contextualization mode are also patterned by others and given formal structures as by one's situational decision-making.

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