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Publication date:
2006

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Liversage, A. (2006). *The Interrelation of Trajectory and Identity: the re-education of a high-skilled immigrant*. (pp. 1-25). Akademiet for Migrationsstudier i Danmark, Aalborg Universitet.

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AMID Working Paper Series 51/2006

The Interrelation of Trajectory and Identity –the re-education of a high-skilled immigrant

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In this paper I first sketch the empirical context – high-skilled immigrants on the Danish labour market. I then explicate my methodological and conceptual approach to the analysis, before using an excerpt from one interview to analyse the interrelation between identity and trajectory shapes, as it is perceived to have unfolded vis-à-vis the field of the Danish labour market.

The empirical context: high-skilled immigrants on the Danish labour market

In Denmark, immigrants are three times as often unemployed as are “native Danes” (OECD 2001). This has sparked a number of different investigations, mostly using quantitative methods (See Ministeriet for Flygtninge, Indvandring og Integration, 2002, for an overview). One aspect is the employment situation of high-skilled immigrants. This is the departure point of this project, where I want to investigate the process of gaining or attempting to gain employment for high-skilled immigrants from East and Central Europe, as narrated from the perspective of the immigrants themselves in 19 life story interviews.

I have chosen this topic and approach for a number of reasons:

There is a need to differentiate research on immigrants and the labour market, as the group is very heterogeneous (Arbejdsliv 2000). For this reason, the case study is differentiated geographically – regarding Central and East Europeans, as well as socially – regarding people with academic degrees.

Even though high-skilled immigrants on the Danish labour market have been an issue in public debates, be it regarding “brain waste” (Gurregruppen 2002) or associated to discussions regarding the need for the import of skilled labour from abroad (Kornø-Rasmussen 2000), no extensive research has been devoted to the group.¹

¹ Before the investigations of Larsen, 2000 and Mørkeberg, 2000, little was known on the numbers of high-skilled immigrants in Denmark. For other material regarding high-skilled immigrants in Denmark see e.g. Ipsen og Mik-Meyer, 1999; Arbejdsministeriet, 1999; Signe

Educational background aside, some research has evolved around immigrants and refugees from East and Central Europe (see i.e. Schwarz 1998; Schierup 1988; Grüenberg 1997). East and Central Europeans generally seem to be a group who fare relatively well on the Danish labour market (Hummelgaard et al. 1995; Husted et al. 2001; Larsen 2000). Combined with high-skilled immigrants potentially having better resources for getting work in Denmark than the less well educated, it seemed a good starting point for also investigating immigrant “success stories”, the need for which has been called for (Arbejdsliv 2000).

Constructing unemployment as an a priori problem is often done from the point of view of the Danish welfare state, seeing it either as a financial burden, or as a problem for social cohesion. In contrast, this project turns the attention to the point of view of the immigrants in question, to how work and unemployment figure in their life story narratives.

I thus want to investigate the *processes* of getting into work over time, as narrated from the *subjective perspective* of these immigrants, including if – and in what ways – unemployment has been conceived as “a problem”.

Framework: the concept of identity

The conceptual framework for the analysis is the interrelation between *identity* and *trajectory*.

For the concept of identity, I draw on the work of professor of sociology, Richard Jenkins. In his book “Social Identity” (1996/2004) he draws on writers like G. H. Mead, Erving Goffman and Frederik Barth, to develop a concept of identity as the...

”...*internal* and the *external moments of the dialectic of identification*: how we identify ourselves, how others identify us, and the ongoing interplay of these in processes of social identification” (Jenkins 2000: 7).

According to Richard Jenkins, ideal-typically there are two – interrelated – modes of identification: The internally oriented *identification* of self, and the externally oriented *categorisation* of others. In this interplay identity is never fixed once and for all, but is always open for negotiation. It is in this interplay

Andersen, 2002; Ministeriet for Flygtninge, Indvandrere og Integration, 2002; Blume, 2004, Jacobsen, 2002; J. Andersen, 2002; Moes and Thomsen, 2002. For international comparison, see e.g. Iredale, 2001; Peixoto, 2001; Seifert 1996; Remmenick 2003a, 2003b; Brandi, 2001; Gottskalksdottir, 2000; Duvander, 2001.

one can investigate the mundane, but vital, issue of how identification – the dynamic processes of identity construction – in fact *works* (Jenkins 2004: 7).

Identity – “who we are” – in the first place depends on who we are *told* we are through primary socialization. As a perpetual process of becoming, identity develops through life in the interplay between identification and categorisation in social interaction. People perpetually *become*, even if only something similar to what they were before. In this process, primary socialization may be of great importance, but identity is never secure and fixed once and for all.

Jenkins argues that in much recent identity research the centrality of the *external moment* of categorisation has been underplayed (Jenkins 2004: 10 ff.)²

I have chosen Jenkin’s concept of identity because it is well suited for the empirical material: For capturing how external categorisations have been at odds with individual identifications as well as have had consequences for the individuals categorised. When these external categorisations regarding people’s identities – categorising them i.e. as “academics” or not – are made by gate-keepers on the Danish labour market, they have central bearings regarding *who* these individuals are able to *become* in the new national context.

Entering a job can be seen as changing group membership – crossing the boundary from unemployment into employment. Such group memberships, be it employee groups, ethnic groups or other groups, are not given a priori. Their constitution – and indeed who is seen as belonging to them – depends on the constructions and negotiations of boundaries.

Changing group membership may thus have implications for what Jenkins terms the *nominal* as well as the *virtual* aspect of identity: What an identity is called, as well as the experienced content of it. When crossing the boundary from unemployment into employment, the virtual content of one’s days is bound to change – but in different ways for different people. Similarly, the virtual content of nominal identities such as “black”, “gay”, or “immigrant” may vary greatly.

Methodological concern: status of the referential level of lived life

For the study I use as my method the *life story interview* – a form of interview where the interviewees, after a brief introduction by the researcher and of the topical interest, are asked to “...*tell their life stories*.” Questioning is kept to a minimum, and is predominantly based on the topic the interviewees themselves choose to focus on. (See Siig Andersen and Larsen 2001; Wengraf 2001: chapter 6).

² For a similar argument, see Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 70.

I have used this method to provide maximum freedom in self-construction, though my interest in labour market issues has naturally been one element playing a part in shaping the interviews.

A central debate when using this method has been the status accorded to the lived life of the interviewees in the subsequent analysis: A life story interview is a retrospective construction made in a specific interview situation, and the relation between a life “as lived” and a life “as narrated” is problematic indeed (see e.g. Riessman 1993). A surge in research related to the so-called “linguistic turn” in the social sciences has drawn attention to issues such as genres, metaphors, and scripts in the process of textual construction.

When making such investigations, the “lived life” of the interviewees has often been bracketed. The argument is that since what had “in fact” taken place in a life can not be ascertained from the life story interview anyway, this bracketing can secure an epistemologically sound basis for investigation and avoid the pitfalls of “naive realism” (May 2001a).

This, however, becomes problematic regarding what sociologically inclined researchers take as their topic of investigation. This is argued by the French sociologist and pioneer in using the life story interview, Daniel Bertaux, who insists on the need to pay attention to *lived life* and not only on the *told story* in a life story interview (Bertaux 2003a). Even though we are all able to tell a multitude of stories about our lives, we are still *accountable* (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 169) – for one thing to our prior embedding in time and space.

To make this point, Bertaux (2003a) uses his own biography to state that *where* he was at *what times* forms corporal particulars in his specific biography. Bertaux can for instance accountably narrate of having been in Moscow in 1991, doing a specific piece of research. Whether this research was good or bad may well be open to contestation, but Bertaux’s presence here remains a biographical “fact” to be correlated with other sources if need be. I, for my part, would not validly be able to make the same claim.

Bertaux argues that life story interviews, approached as narratives of peoples practices furthermore permit making visible what he terms...

...“*lignes de force sociales*”, these objective social relationships which are almost impossible to observe with other techniques, except participant observation. [...These] are all important for shaping social processes and the historical meta-process, as well as the courses of individual lives. But they are invisible. How to make them visible? Life stories as stories of practices, in which people can describe how they hit these invisible lines, how these lines prevented them from doing what they wanted to do or, on the contrary, provided them with unexpected resources” (Bertaux 2003a: 40).

According to Bertaux, life stories can shed light on the widely different social conditions in which people live and participate. And as Bertaux puts it: “...*If sociologists do not help their contemporaries to understand better the world in which they live and which they construct every day, who will do it?*” (Bertaux 2003a: 47).

It seems a related argument, when Richard Jenkins – himself an “*unapologetic social constructionist*” – insists that sociologists should explore the (socially (co)constructed) “*observable realities*”. According to him, preoccupation with the issue of representation, and the stance that all representations have equal validity, has led sociology into a.. “...*muddle in which too much research, rather than being ‘about’ whatever it definitively is about, evades its responsibilities by exploring ‘issues around’ its topic*” (Jenkins 2002: 90).

The argument is that the lived life of the interviewees *can* – and maybe even *should* – be central to the sociological analysis. But the narrativist baby should not go out with the bath water: Narrativist studies have supplied sensitive insights regarding the centrality of textual constructions and the epistemological challenges entailed when using life story interview. How to draw on these insights, but without bracketing the referential level, will be my focus in the further development of my analytical approach.

Metaphors for analytical approach

A head-on focus in “lived life” without a sensitivity to textual construction is certainly not unproblematic. This can be seen as the case in some of Bertaux’s own writings.

In a paper called “*the flare and the firework*” (2003b), he expands on the different analytical usages of biographical material – whether the referential level of lived life should be bracketed, or whether it should be of central interest in the analysis. In this way he addresses exactly the division line made between a “realist” and a “narrativist” approach to the analysis in biographical narratives (May 2001a; 2001b, see also Thomsen and Antoft 2002).

To illustrate the difference between the two approaches, Bertaux coins the metaphors of “the flare” and “the firework”. He argues for the use of biographical narratives as “flares”; a researcher should analyse a *number* of life stories from people belonging to what he calls the same “*situational category*”³ – people who have lived under the same life circumstances.

³ Bertaux argues that the biographical method is well suited for people who either belong to the same *situational category* or belong to the same *life world*. The former may not have direct contact to one another while the latter do. This study thus departs from my construction of a specific situational category (Bertaux 2003b: 3).

Flares are the bright lights that soldiers shoot into the night sky to illuminate an unknown territory. As a score of flares are sent up into the night, the soldier may gradually piece together a fair impression of what the landscape looks like. In a similar way, analysis across a body of life story interviews from people in similar life circumstances can be used as an excellent source of information regarding the different types of lives and the “landscape” that has surrounded these biographies.⁴

Contrary to this approach, the soldier may just turn his head to the sky, gazing at the light itself and viewing its colour and sparkle, but without paying any attention to the landscape it briefly illuminates. This is the “fireworks” equivalent of making a detailed textual investigation of – usually only a few – biographical narratives.

As well suited to bring forth the differences in these two analytical approaches as it may be, the metaphor of “the flare and the firework” is nevertheless problematic: it neglects the subjective and retrospective construction of these narratives. People’s stories cannot be used as unproblematic accounts that give straight views to “what the world looks like”.

One centrally important fact is the difference in *time frame*. According to the metaphor of the “flare”, a researcher can “look” at a landscape – all the flares illuminate the “same” landscape, and the researcher thus gets some kind of unmediated access to “looking” at it.

But the life told about and the telling are separated in time as well as in kind. A story of a life is not the life itself – among many other factors, the present-day ending point is vital to how the whole construction of one’s past is done.

An alternative metaphor – retina photographs

To better grasp this difference – but without resorting to wholesale bracketing of the lived life – I propose an alternative metaphor, that of *retina photographs*⁵:

⁴ As empirical exemplars drawing on this approach, Bertaux has investigated the lives in artisanal bakeries (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981); intergenerational continuity and change with a French middle-class starting point (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1997) or with a Russian pre-revolutionary elite starting point (Bertaux 1997). He has investigated the lives and strategies of people living in precarious life circumstances, as e.g. unskilled single mothers (Bertaux 2004) as well as the plight of French fathers who have lost contact with their children (Bertaux and Delcroix 1991). Of methodological publications in English, see Bertaux 1981; 2003a.

⁵ I am indebted to Christian Frankel, assistant professor at IOA, CBS, for the metaphor.

On July 29th, 2004, the New York Times published an article by Anne Eisenberg titled: “*Fleeting Experience, Mirrored in Your Eyes*”. The article was about scientists from Columbia University who have developed a computer-based way to extract detailed information from the images mirrored on the curved surface of the eye. As the eye acts as a natural mirror, the system can recover wide-angle views of the context surrounding people. From an old portrait of, say, John F. Kennedy, one would be able to extract information on the room he was in, on what people were with him, and even what he precisely was gazing at, the moment the photograph was taken.

In a similar vein, biographical narratives *do* contain information on the “context” they refer to, but it is mediated by the interviewee – it is not a landscape the researcher can gaze at directly as implicated in the “flare” metaphor, but depends on the eye which originally saw and interpreted the landscape. From the multitude of experiences, a few are used in the construction of the life story – and these “retina photographs” may be put forward as pictures in bright colour or in sombre black and white; they may be constructed in different ways depending on the person narrating and on the story in which they are a part. But *where* you were in your life, also has a central bearing on the pictures you can (and cannot) put forward.

Concrete analytical strategy

My analytical approach has been developed taking the empirical material as the point of departure. In many of the narratives life after migration was textually constructed drawing of similar metaphors. This concerned narrating of a struggle to “*find a path*”, to “*get back up*” after having “*fallen down*” from a former “*high*” position in social space.

Across the narratives, these were constructions with a *vertical axis* related to social status, where the goal was to return to a “*high*” societal embedding. There was also a *horizontal axis* which was related both to the passage of time and to approaching the goal. A few examples could be these:

- “I worked in the largest institute [in the home country] at a very *high* technological level, with good colleagues, very *highly* educated colleagues [...] and suddenly you have to *clean*, then you think: “*Argh, am I falling down or what? What is happening?*” [...] but I had to do some things to *continue my work, or my goal, or my life*”.
- “I thought it was a bit strange, because you thought you had completed your education, and then you had to *start all over*. (...) ...suddenly you are *set back* considerably”.

- “[Referring to getting acceptable employment:] “Maybe I cannot *get in directly*, but I can *move through back doors* and go quietly *up one step at a time* and *get to the top*.”

Such constructions of “life as a path” with a vertical and a horizontal axis are in full concordance with a general metaphor in the western world, where the future lies ahead of us – a general construction is that “the future will be better” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 22). Having had a *high status* tied to their academic education and often related work, these high-skilled people have *fallen down* after migration, concomitantly losing status and societal embedding. With this conception of social space, it seemed an overshadowing issue to *move ahead and up* – toward, as one interviewee put it above, “*my work, or my goal, or my life*”. Those were the stakes of the game.

The central focus on work, and the weight accorded to the efforts the interviewees had made to regain work, may also be related to the powerful public and political discourse in Denmark, where unemployed immigrants often are constructed as a problem and as a burden to Danish society.

Identity and the concept of trajectory

But how could these spatial conceptions of “life as a path” be coupled to the referential level of lived life and the concept of identity? Here I use the *embodiment* of human beings, which is central to Jenkins concept of identity. Jenkins takes *embodied individuals*, and not abstractions as i.e. “culture” or “society” to be the fundamental unit of analysis in sociology and related disciplines. This stance he labels *pragmatic individualism*. (Jenkins 2002). It is “in” the body (not partitioning off the mind) that identity is situated – it is hard to conceive of where else it could be. And it is interaction with other embodied individuals that makes up for much of what is “going on” – both in individual lives and on that larger scale often termed “society.”

The experiences of an individual over time are related to *where* one has been embedded over time. As Jenkins put it:

“...embodied individuals are the space-time coordinates of minds and selves and are thoroughly and reciprocally implicated in, and constitutive of, human relationships and the human world” (Jenkins 2004: 39).

Moving through time and space, from birth to death, each embodied individual can be seen as trailing behind her a trajectory – a “path” through space and time; a biographical history of the (interactional) settings she has participated in. This trajectory leads up to the present day ending point, and points ahead towards the future.

This (interlinked and changing) embedding in different settings is a way to approach the *temporal* dimension of social life, which so often is lost in the large-scale snap shots made in social research. One writer, who has theoretically attended to this temporal dimension, is the late French professor of sociology Pierre Bourdieu.⁶

Bourdieu and the concept of trajectory

In the following, I first want to introduce the concept of trajectory from the writings of Bourdieu. I then draw on the Swedish time-geographer, Torsten Hägerstrand, who operationalised the same concept in order to investigate embodied individual's changing spatial embedding over time.

I use inspiration from Hägerstrand's time-geographical diagrams in constructing diagrams for the subsequent analysis of one interviewee, whom I have called Vera.

According to Bourdieu, a social space of e.g. a nation state can analytically be divided into different *fields*, where different *games* are taking place. Within fields there are a variety of *positions*. These positions stand in relation to one another through dominance, submission or homology, dependent on the status and power available to the agents embedded in them. Access to such positions is dependent on various forms of *capital*. The power and mobility of agents – the players in the game – are dependent on what value is credited to their capital within the field in question. Any form of capital – be it knowledge of Greek or of advanced mathematics – only has value, because there exists a game and a field, where such a card can be used (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996: 84). Without possession of the relevant type of capital, an agent cannot be anything but “*filling*” in a field (Ibid: 86).

For an agent to engage in a game, this game has to have importance. What is of interest in different fields cannot be determined in advance, but has to be ascertained through empirical analysis (ibid: 102).

The concept of *trajectory* refers to movement from position to position through a field. Such movements “*have to be paid for by labour, by effort and especially by time*” (Bourdieu 1992: 232). The concept may be used regarding individuals, or ideal-typically about social groups (Jenkins 1992/2002: 143).

Social trajectories can have different *shapes*, and different present-day ending points – some ending in more or less powerful positions within various fields, some embeddings seemingly more stable over time than others. In this way, the

⁶ Jenkins has written an introduction to Pierre Bourdieu (Jenkins 1992/2002). Criticising parts of Bourdieu's writings, specifically regarding the concept of habitus, he nevertheless states that the concept and framework resonate with his own concept of identity, in part through the centrality they both accord to embodiment (1996/2004: 20).

concept of trajectory can be used for conceptualising the interface between an agent and a field, and how this changes over time – it ties together *where* individuals have been up to the present moment.

Hägerstrand and the concept of trajectory

To operationalise Bourdieu's concept of trajectory, I have turned to the Swedish geographer Torsten Hägerstrand (Hägerstrand 1978, 1982). A basic dictum of the *time-geography* he was central in founding, is exactly the indivisible embodiment of human beings: each individual is always situated in space; all movement in space requires time, and two individuals can never occupy the same space – one reason why two biographies can never be totally identical.

At the ending points of all trajectories “...at its tip – as it were – in the persistent present stands a living body subject endowed with memories, feelings, knowledge, imagination and goals” (Hägerstrand 1982: 324). Such an individual in the moment of the present is always on her way into a – perpetually indeterminate – future (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996: 259).

Anthony Giddens draws upon Hägerstrand as a way to interrelate agent and structure in his book *The Constitution of Society* (1984). He, as well as others, criticises Hägerstrand for having a *physicalist ontology* with little social theorising (see e.g. Åquist 1992, Gregory 1994). Much time-geography work has been devoted solely to research on various physical time-space restraints related to the physical capabilities of the human body regarding mobility and communication (see e.g. Carlstein et al 1978).

Hägerstrand's time-geographical approach – physicalist or not, and the works of the later Hägerstrand did indeed get more nuanced – called attention to the situatedness of interaction in space, and gave a graphic vocabulary to approach this issue. (Simonsen 2003: 159, Gren 2001).

I want to use his diagrams as an analytical tool to reconstruct the changing socio-spatial embeddedness of my interviewees. The diagrams I construct resonate with their own constructions of the stratified social space outlined above, as well as with Bourdieu's concepts of fields, positions and power. They are used as a way of interrelating different segments of the narratives with their changing positions in social space changing over time, as well as with the position of their present-day ending point.

Five basic trajectory types

As based on the *situational category* of the study, the trajectory embedding of all interviewees has first unfolded in Central and Eastern European countries –

and for a period specifically in the higher educational institutions here. Subsequent to migration their trajectories have all entered the Danish national space. After this transition, I have focused on their differential embeddings related to the *field* of the Danish labour market.

The form of the notation has been based on the various spaces my interviewees, according to their own account, had been embedded in after migration. Reconstructing this embedding with a trajectory notation thus became my approach to the *referential level* of lived life: in what periods did they attend what courses; in what periods were they unemployed; in what periods did they hold which jobs etc.

Drawing up their trajectories, and combining them with the narratives about the types of embedding in time and space, I could subsequently classify them into five main generic types (see Liversage 2005)

Three paths leading into the (better parts of) the Danish labour market:

- *Re-entry* – getting high-level work based on one's original qualifications
- *Ascent* from lower level jobs into higher level positions
- *Re-education* – taking a new education in Denmark

Two paths remaining outside the (better parts of) the Danish labour market:

- *Re-migration* – leaving Denmark altogether
- *Marginalisation* – remaining in low-level work or in unemployment.

Often, the empirical trajectory of one individual included elements from several of these types, and they sometimes shaded into one another, as for instance when a specific development with the passage of time was reinterpreted for instance as *not* being the expected path towards ascent, but instead a dead-in job leading towards marginalisation – a realisation that might prompt a change of actions towards e.g. either re-migration or re-education.

Use of narrativist tools

With this time-geographical notation as a way to depict people's path towards their present day ending point and a path towards "who they were today", as they constructed themselves to me, I wanted to investigate how this path was retrospectively constructed as having come into being over the passage of time. In doing so, I draw on some analytical tools from the narrativist tool box.

Firstly, selecting excerpts for detailed analysis, I paid specific attention to differences in the *density* of the narratives. When constructing a biographical narrative, long periods of one's life might be summarised in a few lines, while brief incidents could be narrated in great detail. The latter would thus gain

density and importance in the textual construction, as narrated time and narrative time would be approaching one another.

One type of textual construction which makes for dense passages is *dramatized speech* (Goffman 1986, Nielsen 2001). Here the informant dramatises the words (or thoughts or deeds) of herself and others. It is often used as a way to make the listener see the world from the perspective of the protagonist, by going back in time, and “replaying” a central situation for the listening interviewer (Clark and Gerrig 1990).

As another tool from the narrativist tool box, I distinguished between the *informant* and the *protagonist*. (Goffman 1986: 520).

The *informant* was the person I interviewed in a face-to-face interaction and who told me her life story from a specific present-day end point.

By contrast, the *protagonist* was the main character whom the informant constructed while telling her story. Thus it was the former self of the informant who only came into existence as a textual construction in the narrative: As the present-day *informant* told me how the *protagonist* – her former self - had been a young girl and a university student in another country, a migrant newly arrived to Denmark who spoke no Danish etc.. Thus the life story was also constructed to express how the differences between the *protagonist* of the past and the present-day *informant* of the interview situation had come into being. As a biographical narrative drew to a close, these the protagonist and the informant blended together as one.

This textual separation is central to capture the *changes* in the identity of the protagonist that are constructed as the story unfolds – as the protagonist move towards *becoming* the person she was at the time of the interviewing.

Below I will use one specifically dense passage from one interview to investigate the complex interrelation of trajectory and identity. I have chosen this passage from the interview with Vera because I found it well suited to illustrate the chosen analytical approach. In my material the path most often followed was re-entry. I have not used excerpts from these stories, as they mostly did not contain such dense personal turning points. That, however, seemed to be the case among the interviewees who did *not* re-enter their former occupation. Among these stories, my choice fell on Vera. I will now summarise her background, and present one edited extract from the life story interview with her. I have divided the extract into five sections, indicated by the use of roman numerals, to facilitate the subsequent analysis.

The story of Vera – a woman's turning point

Vera grew up in Czechoslovakia where she took a degree as a planning economist. While studying, she met her Danish husband-to-be, a visiting student. They got married, and right after her graduation, at the age of 22, she moved to Denmark. After studying Danish she quickly got a job in a travel agency to which she had been the sole applicant. She worked there for three years before it closed down.

The ensuing unemployment period changed into a maternity leave, as she gave birth to her second child. As the child grew older, this period of the protagonist's life came to an end. The following excerpt recounts a central change on her trajectory when in 1996 she left her (nominal and virtual) identity as an unemployed jobseeker, and entered the identity as a VUC⁷ student.

Vera's story - excerpt⁸

I: "My daughter started in day-care and then... I have looked for some jobs.| In the beginning it was at travel agencies, because that was where I got my first job, and I kind of tried to hold on to that, but I could not. And then it was like... sales-assistant or... like that. It was not jobs where I said: "I have a higher education", I never believed I could get that.|

Right in the beginning it was quite okay, because [my husband] had a good job. But that dissatisfaction slowly grew: "What is it really I want?"| Because I have applied for jobs, but I could not really get to where I wanted to.|

And I remember a time – some time before – I was at the Labour Exchange and I spoke to a counsellor. He proposed that maybe I should take some subjects [at VUC] and I saw that as a defeat: Like why should I start at that level when I have.... So I was not mature at that time.|

II. Then there was a sort of crisis where I missed somebody from my own country.| It was a period where I was a lot together with [a Czech girlfriend]. We were both on maternity leave, and we met a lot.| She was very negative – she simply did not like to be here, but she would not move back either.| And after a time I realized that she constantly bitched about the Danes and about Denmark, and about everything, really. It got on my nerves in the

⁷ VUC offers single, graded courses – both at senior primary school level and at the junior level of secondary school.

⁸ The following excerpt is based on the interview transcript, but it has been edited in order to condense the passage. In the conversion from oral to written discourse and the subsequent edition for analysis and presentation, I lean on the guide lines of Bertaux (1997: 256-257), see also Bourdieu (1999). When passages of text have been omitted, it is indicated by a vertical slash ("|") to obstruct the reading as little as possible. I use "..." to indicate pauses in the narrative. The interview was originally carried out in Danish.

end, and then I thought: Okay: I could feel that I was having negative feelings myself, and I simply did not want that. So I stopped seeing her.|

Then there was another thing. I had another girlfriend – she was not educated in Czechoslovakia but then on the other hand she just got started. And at that time she had just completed an education in marketing economics.”

III. And there was a job in [X-town]. They wanted someone to deal with sales and administration and export to the Czech market. And there was a description of what such a person should be able to do, and I thought I matched the job 100%, so I applied... And I did not even get an interview.... While my girlfriend, she got the job.

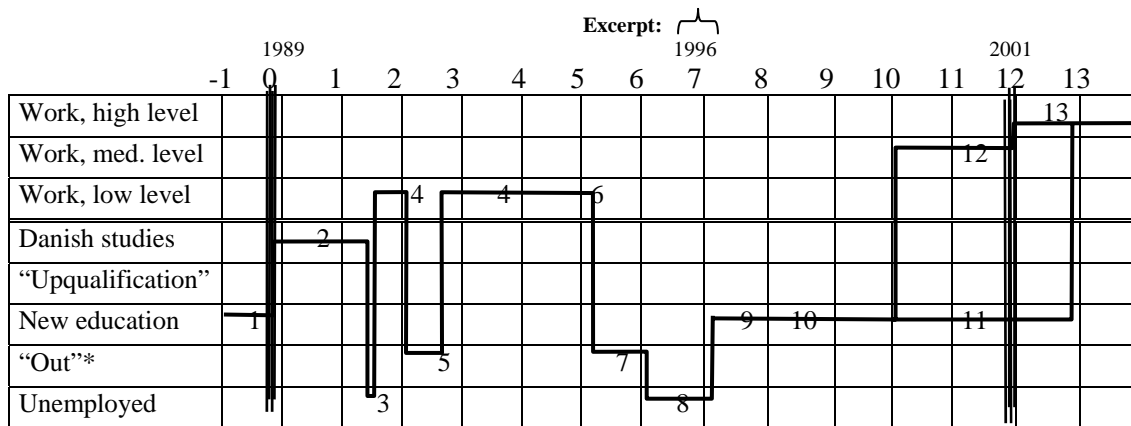
And then I thought: If they don't even invite me for an interview then I have to.... so... that was in a way the two things that really kicked me quite hard. It took me time to realize I had to start all over.| To take the decision: If I really want to live well here, and do what I want to do, then I do have to start all over.|

IV. Then I simply sat down and thought it through: “*What is it I want?*” And I realized that... something with economics and sales and marketing, that is the way I want to go.| [Then] I went to the employment office: “*Now listen to me: I want that and that and that*”. And [the counsellor] was very impressed.| He said, he could sense that it was what I wanted, so they wanted to support it, because I had kind of to... get going”.

Subsequent to the developments of this excerpt, Vera first took a VUC exam. For her further study she needed three years of German courses, which she took simultaneously, and thus compressed her VUC time into a single year. She then did a two-year education as a marketing economist. Subsequently getting medium-level work, she did a further part-time business degree, and progressed into high-level employment. She is presently project manager in an international telecommunications company. Her trajectory into the Danish labour market can thus be depicted the following way:

Figure 1: Trajectory of Vera

Educated in planning economy in Czechoslovakia
Age at migration: 22 years.



*Activities not oriented to labour market integration: Waiting for asylum, maternity leave, non-labour market oriented courses etc.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Academic education in Czechoslovakia. | 8. Unemployed |
| 2. Danish tuition | 9. VUC |
| 3. Six weeks of unemployment | 10. Marketing economics education |
| 4. Full-time work in travel agency | 11. HD, evening studies |
| 5. Maternity leave | 12. Medium level employment |
| 6. Miscellaneous travel agency work | 13. High-level employment |
| 7. Maternity leave | |

First I will look at the progressive unfolding of the trajectory, seen from the point of view of the *protagonist* of 1996. In order to interrelate identity and trajectory, I will focus on the following:

- Socio-spatial position vis-à-vis the Danish labour market
- Identity as constructed in the narrative
- Change over time in the above two processes

I approach identity by looking at the relations of the protagonist, attending to the interplay of categorisations of others and identification of self.

Passage I – initial state outside labour market

The excerpt begins with the protagonist embedded in a position in the home – thus socially and spatially outside the labour market. With the passage of time, she had recently made a transition from being a “mother on maternity leave” to being an “unemployed jobseeker”, as her daughter had recently entered day care.

At this time, the protagonist identified as someone who would be able to get acceptable employment based on her former experiences. Also, she explicitly did not identify as an academic. This may be related to her migration right after

graduation – she had never made the full status passage into professional life through time spent doing professional work. (Kupferberg 1999).

The protagonist nevertheless believed she could get *some* (decent) job based on her background and experience – after all she had worked for three years in Denmark, she was young and outgoing, and she considered her Danish as fluent.

In order to get a job you need to be favourably *categorised* by the gatekeepers guarding the boundary to the Danish labour market. Jobseekers may apply for jobs as they please, but cannot – short of self-employment – allocate jobs to themselves. Offering work is an employer's prerogative (Jenkins 1986:7). Attempting to cross the boundary into the labour market – and thus changing her socio-spatial position – Vera wrote applications to all sorts of low to medium level jobs: She made written self-presentations in her attempt to foster a relation to potential employers.

The jobs she aimed for were not the highest on the labour market. But nor were they the “lowest”⁹. For instance she did not apply for work in cleaning, which might have been more easily attainable. What she considered life of “the likes of her”, to use a Bourdieu expression, could not be reconciled with embedding in the position of a cleaner.

But the responses to her applications were silence; in no case was she categorised as being worth a closer look; she never made it through the screening process, and into the social space where the interaction between applicants and recruiters unfolds.

Prior to this, she had indeed been pointed towards an alternative path – towards re-education (passage I), but had refused. According to the informant, the protagonist at that time was not yet “mature” – a use of words that foreshadows subsequent developments.

Passage II – the lives of two friends

Vera then introduces the lives of two Czech girlfriends, with whom she has relations.

The first friend was also embedded outside the boundary of the labour market. Together on maternity leave, they drew a boundary vis-à-vis the (in their lives quite absent) “Danes” and the friend was “*very negative*” towards these. Through their interaction, Vera was gradually becoming negative, too.

⁹ In my use of “high” and “low” types of jobs, I draw on constructions of stratifications occurring across the body of interviews.

Vera did not elaborate on whether this negativity of the girlfriend seemed to be justified, instead stating that if the friend was not happy, she could re-migrate; she could “go home”: If she did not like her position, she could exchange it for one in her national space of origin.

Another girlfriend, with no biographical investment in former education, is narrated as one who just “got started”, entering and completing an education in marketing economics.

Passage III – the moment of truth

A specific incidence became a “moment of truth” for the protagonist: finally a job came along – a service-oriented, white-collar job dealing with the Czech market – where Vera, based on both her pre- and post-migration background – *identified* as matching “100 %”.

However, that was not how she was *categorised* by the recruiters in question. She did not even come close. Based on her application, she was not “*invited*” to present herself at an interview – and thus no relation could be forged. By contrast, her second girlfriend got the job and entered into the coveted position.

The two girlfriends can thus be seen as two “alter egos” – two different lives between which she was to choose herself:

Holding on to her *identification* as “employable”, she could well end up like her first friend; remaining stuck “outside” the Danish labour market with only two possible (spatial as well as social) futures: Getting increasingly marginalised and negative in the private home, or else leaving altogether – not a very realistic proposal for a mother with small children born in Denmark. That seemed to be the way things were moving for Vera, too, if she did not change her line of action.

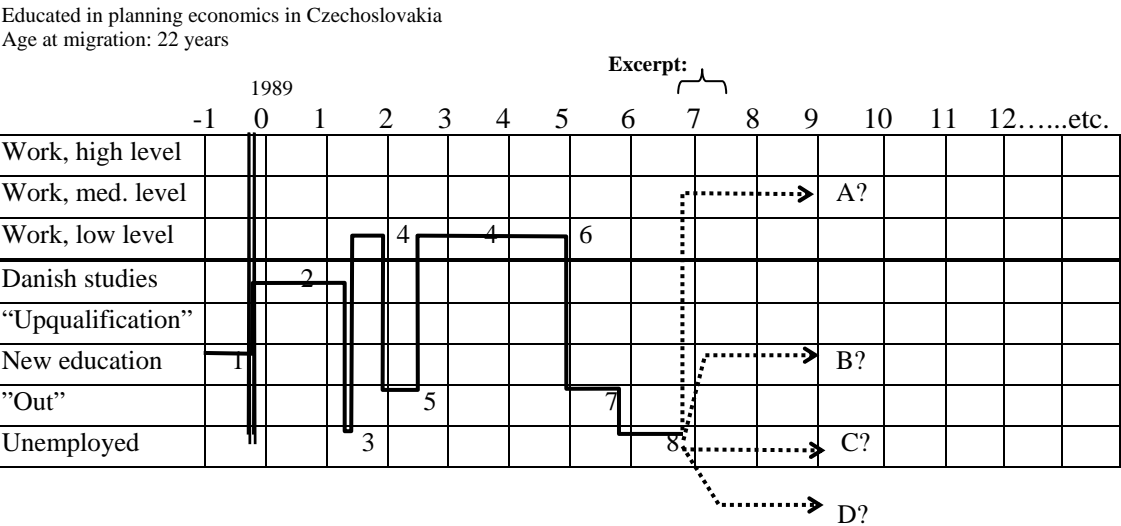
Or she could act according to the categorisations as “unemployable” and re-educate. In this way, she could work to acquire a new educational identity, a process requiring time and effort. Hopefully she could thus gain entry to the “inside” of work in Denmark, similar to her second girlfriend. But she could not be certain of the outcome of this lengthy undertaking.

The realisation of the gap between her own *identification* and the way she was *categorised* was – with a very physical imagery – an experience which “*kicked*” her quite hard. Referring directly to the projections of the protagonist at the time, she could not expect to gain some kind of direct entry into the job market. She instead had to “*start all over*” if in her future (i.e. in the present of the informant) she was to “*live well*”.

If she was to do what she “wanted”, she first had to do what she had explicitly stated that she did *not* want: she first had to subject herself to what she had considered an unjust regime disqualifying her entire past. By “*starting all over*”, she had to let go of her expectations of a normal biography, where education is an investment made in youth, and the benefits of it to be reaped in adulthood (Danielsen 2001, Kupferberg 1998.) She had to accept her years of former studying as null and void.

To return to the graphical depiction on Vera’s trajectory, the situation of the protagonist in 1996 can in fact be depicted like this:

Figure 2:
Projected trajectories of Vera, at the time of turning point in 1996



- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Academic education in Czechoslovakia. | 5. Maternity leave |
| 2. Danish tuition | 6. Miscellaneous travel agency work |
| 3. Six weeks of unemployment | 7. Maternity leave |
| 4. Full-time work in travel agency | 8. Unemployed |

Projection A: Getting a job based on present identity – path of (re)entry
Projection B: Re-educating in Denmark – path or re-education
Projection C: Remaining unemployed – path of marginalisation
Projection D: Returning to Czechia – path or re-migration

In 1996, the future of the protagonist was indeterminate. What shape her trajectory was to take was related to the actions undertaken at the time – and according to the narrative, these actions, in turn, were related to the projections of possible futures, graphically depicted above.

Passage IV – changing direction

With yet more embodied imagery, Vera “*sat down*” (which you often do when pondering crossroads) – to think her projections and her actions over. The protagonist asked herself: “*What is it really I want?*”

Strictly speaking, the question is an odd one: the protagonist knew that what she wanted was to get a job. However this question was related to her revision of her projections; within this new frame of reference and the new “realisation” of what was possible for her in the field of the Danish labour market. Instead of wanting something she was experiencing that she could not get, she needed to find something attainable to want in order to be able to act accordingly. How should she change her strategy in order to move on from her unsatisfactory position in social space?

It points to what Bourdieu has termed the “insoluble contradiction” in the relation between resistance and subordination to the evaluations dominating a society: it is the paradoxical situation that resisting this symbolic domination can be alienating, while succumbing to it can be liberating (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1996: 34).

In this vein, Vera’s resistance towards the nullification of her educational background left her increasingly marginalised. When she submitted herself to the “unjust treatment” of Danish society, she earned her entry into a good position.

To do so, she had to change her conception of her own identity, of the value of her past, and the future she was projecting for herself. Letting go of her past educational credentials was shedding parts of her identity – and when you do so, for a time, you may feel like being naked (Weick 1996).

Passage IV, after the turning point, is told with great agency: re-education did in fact give her a scope of control (Glaser and Strauss 1971) – the active choice between different educations. Approaching the employment counsellor she dramatised herself by saying, “*listen to me – I want that and that and that*”. This interactional context she could herself decide to enter, and here she could in fact make herself heard as well as seen; something which had been impossible with regard to the Danish labour market.

Dramatising that, she was here able to make the counsellor “*very impressed*” – she had a good “feel for the game” – her pro-active approach called forth positive categorisations. In this way she was supported in turning her new projection into reality. Changing her spatial context as well as identity when entering VUC in 1996, this became the first step on the path leading up to the present day ending point of the informant Vera – the international manager in a good, high position in the field of the Danish labour market, who could

confidently project an attractive future for herself vis-à-vis me in the interaction of the interview.

Discussion

In the beginning I posed the question of how trajectory and identity were interrelated. It seems that they are indeed closely intertwined.

In the interaction of the interview itself, the telling of a life story in its entirety could be seen as the *retrospective* construction of identity vis-à-vis me as the interviewer – told from a specific embodied position in time and space.

In telling this life story, the trajectory of the protagonist was constructed as it *prospectively* was developing within the story. In the present of the protagonist's past (say, in 1996) there was no certainty that things would turn out the way they actually did – different shapes were possible, and thus the subsequent shape of the trajectory was narrated as in part depending on negotiation and on struggle.

In these negotiations/struggles, trajectory shape and identity seemed contingent on one another. When the crossing of a specific boundary was negotiated, identifications and categorisations could be at odds. And the outcome of these negotiations was in turn central to who the protagonist was to *become*, and thus central to the further constitution of identity.

To hark back to Vera's example: initially, she identified as being "employable", based on her past – on "who she was", i.e. on her identity, which she constructed as strategically as she could in her written applications to various employers. But she was not categorised according to her expectations: The negative categorisations of the gate-keepers were consequential and beyond her control.

Unable to cross the boundary into a working position, she then changed her strategy and her projections for her future – from attempting a straight entry into the Danish labour market, and to re-education – in order to attain the same general goal.

But this change in her trajectory shape required yet more identity work. She had to change the value she attributed to her own Czech past, and leave this null and void, in order to gain a Danish future for herself. She also had to spend yet more years of that valuable and scarce commodity – her lifetime – outside the labour market, as she spent further years on education. She wryly commented that in all she had studied for 21 years. Furthermore, the protagonist was running a risk; it was uncertain whether it would indeed – in that uncertain future – help her gain work. Or whether she would "waste"

valuable years re-educating, and nevertheless remain unemployed (see Thisted 2003: 123-124 for an example of this).

Vera projected a way ahead for herself but found it to be blocked. This could possibly be interpreted to be one of the invisible “*lignes de forces sociales*” Bertaux mentioned above: As he said, life stories are “*stories of practices, in which people can describe how they hit these invisible lines, how these lines prevented them from doing what they wanted to do*”. (Bertaux 2003a: 40). Blocked on her way ahead she had to find another way – or else remain “outside” or leave the country.

The centrality of the screening process where non-natives gain a blanket categorisation as not worth an interview may indeed be a very central process in the constitution of the high immigrant unemployment rate, as discussed by Valtonen (2001). It certainly has personal consequences for the people affected.

The use of narrativist tools led me towards a focus on dense passages and dramatised speech. I found these to be much concerned with exactly the interrelation of unfolding trajectory and identity outlined in the above excerpt. In this example, it was a turning point which changed the protagonist – Vera “matured” and changed her mind regarding what to do.

To return to the metaphor of the retina photographs, such past experiences were presented to me as important, if I was to understand the present outcome – the present person in front of me, and how she had come thus far.

It is a stock knowledge among narrativists that the end point of a story determines its character. Where the interviewees were embedded today was thus of central importance. As Vera had been successful, she could extol the virtue and maturity of her former deeds. Had the end point been less happy, she might have lamented how she had wasted time on education twice over. However, in both versions, she would remain accountable to the referential level of her actions back in 1996.

That leads me to the question of whether Vera herself considered unemployment as a “problem”. Indeed she did – but it was not constructed as an economic problem, but as a problem regarding getting a *life*: without work she did not feel able to become a valued individual with fulfilling day-to-day activities, relations with co-workers, and attractive future possibilities. She wanted such a life, the right life for the likes of her – that was the stake in the game of her (working) life. Without work, she would remain an immigrant stuck *outside* “society”, isolated in the deserted space of the private home.

Work was thus seen as paramount, both as an issue of *belonging* – of being favourably categorised in the new society. And as an issue of *becoming* – to be able to become the person she indeed felt she was.

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© Anika Liversage & AMID

ISSN 1601-5967

Published by:

AMID

Aalborg University

Fibigerstraede 2

DK-9220 Aalborg OE

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The Academy for Migration Studies in Denmark, AMID, is a consortium consisting of researchers at research centers representing three institutions of higher education and two research institutes. AMID is supported by the Danish Research Councils of the Humanities and the Social Sciences.

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