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Incoherence matters: Life-stories after fundamental regime-change

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Life-stories are usually seen as showing considerable coherence even where they include turning points. More recent work has in contrast noted that “living” or “small narratives” do not follow this rule but contrastingly enable the pondering of unresolved life-events helping to develop understanding. This potential is particularly valuable in contexts of fundamental regime-change where changes of the value-system, such as after transition from state socialism to democracy, pose considerable challenges to narrative coherence. The article suggests reconsidering the question of coherence in life-stories and draws on two examples of individuals who experienced life in East Germany and German unification to argue that struggles for coherence in the life-story can be indicative of the lack of wider shared frameworks for the understandings of national events and historical problems.

Key words: regime-change; life-story; living narrative; turning points; coherence; meaning-making

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It is largely accepted that life-stories show considerable coherence, but more recent work emphasises that everyday stories, or “small narratives” do not follow this rule (Bamberg, 2006). Ochs and Capps (2001) argue moreover that “living narratives” production in conversation, which causes a certain lack of structure, makes everyday story-telling an arena for airing unresolved life events which is crucial to meaning-making. Taking heed from this argument I want to re-open the question of coherence in life-stories in the context of fundamental regime-change, here the end of East Germany and subsequent German unification which meant a transition to democracy and market capitalism. This transition entailed a change of the value-system by which many individuals had lived their lives, questioning decisions and actions once accepted as “normal” or “necessary” (membership of the socialist ruling party, a belief in socialist ideals, participation in political mass ceremonies). The challenges posed to narrative coherence by these changes is propounded by the emergence of discourses about the East German past that attempt to provide new frameworks for the telling of lives. This article will explore two life-stories to argue that coherence in life-stories should not be taken for granted or even considered evidence of “better story-telling”. Rather, an exploration of both coherence and seeming lack of structure can help shed light on the development of new frameworks for meaning-making at the societal level.

The article is based in a research project into the production of representations of the socialist past at two different types of institutions in eastern Germany. These were firstly a group of governmental and government-funded offices involved in the authoritative discourse of “Aufarbeitung” (“re-working”), which treats the GDR as a difficult historical period marked by state violence. It included, for example, a local office of the federal
Commissioner for Stasi-files (BStU), memorial museums to the Stasi and the local Office for Political Education (LpB). The second fieldwork setting was a regional daily newspaper, dubbed the Daily Paper. The ethnographic project combined participant observation in the working everyday with life-story interviews to explore how employees’ personal recollections related to the discourses they helped produce. The life-story interview asked for a biographical narrative about individuals’ “experiences with the state” to trigger reflections on both past socialism and present-day democracy.

Discourses about the East German past

In Germany the official discourse on the East German past is known as Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung (“re-working the past”), which defines the GDR as the “SED-dictatorship” (SED: Socialist Unity Party). Aufarbeitung includes historical research, education, musealisation and commemoration and is focused on political violence and the plight of victims of the State Security Police (Stasi). The discourse’s master-narrative of the SED-dictatorship, which although seemingly focused on the ruling party but more often than not applied to mean the “GDR as dictatorship” (Gallinat, forthcoming), presents a vision of East Germany as consisting of victims, perpetrators and by-standers. Within society this simplistic picture of the GDR has proven contentious as many individuals’ memories and senses of self suggest that life “back then” was considerably more complex (Fulbrook, 2005; Gallinat, 2011), whilst its moral messages about state violence and victimhood are difficult to reject. Ostalgie, nostalgia for the East (Bach, 2002), for example challenged such black and white portrayals of the GDR particularly in the 1990s, but it was soon disparaged as unreflective and immoral re-evaluation of a repressive state. Although in public discourse today the GDR is represented in many different ways (Saunders & Pinfold, 2013), the East
German past continues to give rise to intense reflection and heated debates in public and private arenas as actors work through what kind of a state and society this was, how they related to this state (the “system”, see Boyer, 2005), and what this means for their sense of themselves as moral and socially acceptable persons.

**Life-stories and memorable events**

Narratives are usually assumed to be chronologically and causally linear and based in a particular moral stance (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Especially life-stories have been considered as characterized by coherence (Bruner, 1994; Linde, 1993). To achieve “a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story”, individuals can employ a range of strategies according to Linde (1993: 3). These are provided on the one hand by local expectations and cultural norms (Rosenthal, 2004) and on the other they are limited by past experiences (Albright, 1994). Creating coherence, whether in life-stories or small narratives, thus requires considerable effort from the narrator and, as Ochs and Capps explain, the emotions associated with recollection might work against considerate composition:

> The dimension of linearity and moral stance address a central opposition that drives human beings to narrate life experience - the desire to sheathe life experiences with a soothing linearity and moral certainty versus the desire for deeper understanding and authenticity of experience. (2001: 56)

According to Ochs and Capps conundrums and unresolved life-events are therefore often deliberated in “living narratives”. These are created in everyday conversation in a characteristically non-linear fashion as interlocutors go along changing storylines, turning over ideas, to arrive not at a conclusive rendering but rather end without ending as another
aspect of life intervenes. According to the authors’ this open-endedness of everyday story-telling makes conversations “a prosaic social arena for developing frameworks for understanding events” (2001: 2).

Taking these considerations of how active meaning-making may create a seeming “lack” of linearity and coherence as a starting point, in the below I will explore two life-stories in relation to a) the telling of turning points and memorable events and b) the coherence of the overarching life-story. According to Rosenthal turning points are “points of interpretation that lead to a reinterpretation of the past and present, and also of the future” (2004: 50). They nevertheless do not necessarily detract from life-stories’ “startling consistency” (Bruner, 1994: 47). Rather, according to Bruner, tales of turning points and the reflections they cause are indicative of overarching themes in the life-story adding to the coherence of the meta-narrative. For the purpose of this article I identify particularly tellable events through the mode of telling: an engaged linguistic style, achieved through increased speed, more complex syntax and rhetoric, that serves to hold the listeners’ attention and delay turn-taking (Ochs & Capps, 2001; also Halverson, 2008). As such they may also fall under the category of “performative narratives” which Schiffrin describes as “oft-told stories in which characters behave in ways emblematic of their general roles, and plots re-create major themes of the life story” (2002: 318). The two life-stories are taken from the two spheres of the project: the institutions engaged in Aufarbeitung, which have a very clear understanding of the past GDR as dictatorial, on the one hand and the local newspaper, which avoids presenting definitive understandings of East Germany giving rise to more open-ended presentations that cater for the Daily Paper’s varied readership, on the other. First is Fuhr who manages a local BStU office. The second is the story of Gross, a
Senior Editor at the *Daily Paper*. Though born in different decades, both had a similar upbringing in that they attended state schools, joined the socialist children’s and youth organisations and were delegated to the further school EOS which enabled university study. Here their paths diverge, but more crucially they tell their stories in very different ways.

*A Bildungsroman: The head of Tillberg’s Commission for Stasi-files*

The BStU manages the vast archives of *Stasi*-files, and maintains a representative function as a moral guardian with regard to memories of the “SED-dictatorship”. When reflecting on his life in the interview Fuhr therefore notes that he did not have the kinds of experiences that his role could personify. Eastern Germans who have taken up this position were often dissidents and/or victims, which means that in addition to their particular motivation for this work, their life experiences also speak to the master-narrative of the SED-dictatorship. Fuhr feels that this does not hold true for himself.

Fuhr was born in the 1960s, his parents worked for the GDR state. He does not say what they did specifically but we can assume they were members of the SED. Due to his parents’ position “within the system” many opportunities were open to him, such as political roles in the youth organisation FDJ. However, the outspoken young man often encountered boundaries in these roles and also observed “unfair” situations that troubled him. As a result he withdrew from political functions several times just to find himself drawn back in as contexts change. The arising narrative sea-saws between engaging with the socialist apparatus and withdrawing from it, which step by step increases the distance between the narrated self and the East German state leading to regime-criticism and eventually a first step towards resistance.
In this interview eleven events are recollected in more detail and linguistically marked as significant (see appendix). Many follow Labov and Waletzki’s structure of abstract, orientation, complicating action and coda (1967; Smith, 2006). The way Fuhr begins the narration of his life is indicative of this very clear structuring and of the life-story’s theme:

**abstract**
(1) I started school in 1969. And that’s when I think experiences with the state began.

**orientation**
The school record of the first semester in the first year

**Complicating action**
notes that “Steffen has difficulties fitting into the class collective”.

**evaluation**
I had not been aware of that. I had just added things up but that I then get a reflection like this I hadn’t expected. But I realised that there was something that was normed and that I didn’t fit into that norm.

**Complicating action**
And I thought about that, even as a little boy, what do I do. Do you try to fit that norm or do you stay the way you are.

**resolution**
And I decided to stay the way I was.

**coda**
Which over time ... led to certain ... reflections.²

In this turning point narrative the young narrative self comes to a dividing line where he takes occasion to reflect on his position in society. The narration begins with an introduction
that links the event to the theme of the interview, “life-story in relation to experiences with the state”, and it ends with a coda that foreshadows future developments. The child’s decision is thus forecast as having relevance for later life. The theme of this well-crafted, performative narrative is Fuhr’s sense of not quite fitting into the socialist state. This theme occurs several times more in the life-story which is consequential given the here presented childhood decision not to try to change.

The next tellable event (2) concerns Fuhr being invited to deliver a speech at the school assembly, which the proud young man then finds heavily censored leading him to reject giving it. This narration is told in an entertaining manner that relays the young man’s bewilderment at finding himself so strictly policed in a situation that he had perceived as a chance to shine. This leads the narrator to recollect “several bad experiences” that led him to refrain from taking further positions within the FDJ (3; 4a, 4b). In each case the consequences of the experience are explained to the listener, as in the below. Here Fuhr has finished the first of two illustrative stories regarding vocational training, he recapitulates and leads into the second one, which has explanatory character:

*Resolution* (4a) ... So that I withdrew there too, from that system, and the class [at the vocational training school], and said I don’t play along anymore, I just won’t answer certain questions, because I realised that others were hard done by on my behalf.

*Coda* And I didn’t take any other political role either.
Given the arising theme of a slow withdrawal and increasing distance to authoritarian structures it is surprising that Fuhr volunteers for the longer three years army service. However, there is little detail about his time at the army, instead we very quickly come to the next turning point narrative. When Fuhr feels unwell one morning he sees the medic:

**Complicating action**  
(6) And he said, “well, your stomach is poorly, the digestive acid is imbalanced. If you continue like this, you’ll damage the gastric mucous membranes”. He asked what I did all day, whether I exercise, if I have anything to balance out the stress. I said, “no, I read a lot and I don’t really do any sports”.

**Resolution**  
And then he said: “well, Herr Fuhr, you need to get out sometime, you need to go and have a beer, you need to let steam off, and, I’ll take you out of service for a week so you don’t need to see your superiors”.

**Evaluation**  
That was very interesting that he did that.

The use of direct speech and the amount of detail provided give the narration performative character. It is evaluated by the term “interesting”. This reflects the narrator’s interest in the fact that the medic, an army employee, takes action to protect a soldier from his
superiors even if temporarily. The evaluative term appears several times more in following narrations, always when things happen that the narrator considers unusual behaviour within the authoritarian state. From here Fuhr switches to his studies, where the longest single narration follows (9). The evaluative term “interesting” appears here three times. The event takes place during the “red week”, an assembly meeting at the university where students were informed about current state politics:

**Orientation**
(9) We were in a large lecture hall, all three faculties together. And up front someone did a speech, and none of the students there opened their mouth. In one such situation I lost it.

**Complicating action**
When the Professor had finished his speech, I said that surely he didn’t think anyone believed any of what he had just told us. It didn’t relate to reality. Lots of murmuring in the hall. Afterwards a lecturer who had sat next to the professor approached me. I thought, goodness, what is she going to say now.

**Resolution**
And she said: “Herr Fuhr, I would like you to do your thesis with me”. And I said: “what makes you say that?” “Well”, she said, “you are the only one who dared say anything today”,

**Evaluation**
found that interesting. [...]
Fuhr narrates this exchange in direct speech relating the vividness of the memory of this important moment when he is asked to do a thesis on a censored topic. He goes on to describe the period of research focusing on the one hand on the limited-access special collections at the library and secondly on incidences where the end of the GDR appears to be foretold. Fuhr relates three such events consecutively momentarily leaving the chronological order of his life-story behind as he moves from early 1989 back to 1987 (11a-c). These three short narrations are again marked by reported direct speech, increased pace and discourse markers such as “I remember” (Ochs & Capps, 1997). Although at one point Fuhr suggests that he experienced “1989 at the demonstrations” we hear no more about that autumn and the opening of the inner-German border from his personal perspective. Instead, when he returns to the topic he notes that he saw the very beginning of the demonstrations in 1988 in Leipzig, where he also observed arrests. He then turns to the final event that he tells in more detail, which takes place at the contested last undemocratic elections in the GDR in 1989. Insisting on using a confidential booth, which could already cause suspicion, he strikes out all the candidates on the ballot paper. Fuhr evaluates this as his first ‘real action’ against the authorities. His move to Tillberg and future career are explained summarily, no further detailed narrations follow.

Taken together the very first narration of the year one school report and the ‘first real action’ of dissidence provide the framework for a life-story of personal development from “ordinary citizen” to “regime-critic”. Eleven longer narrations lead slowly by slowly to a growing dis-enchantment with and criticism of the authoritarian system to a moment of protest. Very few of them are turning points in the sense of leading to a tangible change of course. Rather they are “causally linked events that explain a transition” (Schiffrin, 2002:}
(318) aiding the meta-narrative’s coherence. To this contributes further the large number of performative narratives, eight of eleven narrations, which as oft-told stories recreate major themes according to Schiffrin (2002). All stories thus have a purpose that is made clear by the semantics used and each individual narration is causally linear, and has a clear beginning, middle and end. The overarching global principles that structure this narration are chronology and themes. The themes concern almost exclusively experiences that lead to further knowledge about the state. Only two strings of shorter narrations step outside of this double structure. One of those are three stories that are related by the theme of encounters with the *Stasi*. The other are the three “prophetic” moments where the end of the GDR moves into sight. Many narrations (narratives 1-7, and the prophetic narratives 11) cast the remembered self as a conscious observer and learner who notices things in his environment, at times more than others (3), which with time lead to a change in perspective on the state. The self cast here is thus not unlike the naïve, yet developing, protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*; a story that tells of growing criticism of an authoritarian regime clearly aligning with Fuhr’s present-day work.

*A string of experiences: Senior editor Martin Gross reflects*

Martin Gross is in his mid-fifties and trained as a journalist during GDR times. This training had considerable political content and journalists were required to be party members. The media were heavily controlled. GDR-time trained journalists’ continuation in the profession after unification has thus been contentious for many former regime-critics. Like other East German papers the *Daily Paper* was bought by a western German publisher in 1991. A number of western German staff joined the newspaper to work alongside the existing
eastern German colleagues whilst management decided who would be kept on. Martin Gross joined the *Daily Paper* from another East German news outlet during this period.

Gross was born in the nineteen-fifties. He always wished to study journalism but gaining access to a place became a major struggle for him. He experienced the events of 1989 and German unification with mixed emotions having held many socialist ideals dear but noticing problems with aspects of political rule. He however makes the transition to a different type of journalism with ease, as he says, although he remains critical of some of the new realities. The life-story includes nineteen longer narrations of memorable events. The vast majority of these lead to reflection about the GDR and the narrator’s position towards the state but several also concern current discourses on this past and the consequences of today’s market economy. The meta-narrative of the life-story is structured first chronologically with some focus on Gross’ path into journalism but evaluations of events lead to strings of inter-textually linked narrations.

The first experience Gross highlights in the interview on his life-story ‘in relation to experiences with the state’ is his delegation to the further EOS school:

abstract

(1) For me that was of course my first experience. Because I had a first class average but wasn’t suited for a delegation to the EOS.

*AG: Right?*

Yes, because my social background was *intelligentsia*. 
Complicating action So and one of the first experiences that I then probably didn’t work through consciously was that I was told “If you register as recruit to become an army officer, that you want to become an officer at the NVA [National Peoples Army] later. Then you’ll get your place at university, then you’ll get your place at the EOS”.

Evaluation I found that a bit dubious. Well, anyways.

Resolution I then only got that place at the EOS due to my father’s intervention. He presented personally at the school and the party secretary and God knows who.

This recollection leads directly into a narration of his “second experience” (2) concerning the strict rules at the EOS such as a ban of West German TV. This leads to the first of several longer reflections of the remembered self’s position towards the socialist state:

Evaluation (2) Erm, I found that a bit narrow-minded or so.

Coda But never mind, you accepted it.

Evaluation Because you’re someone who needs to learn to live within the circumstances in which you grew up. You’re not a regime-critic at the age of fourteen.

External clause Which I never was by the way, I have to say.

Gross evaluates the schools’ stance as something he viewed critically but provides a coda that does not seem consequential. He explains this seeming conflict switching to the passive
third person “man”, translated as “you”, suggesting that this “arranging” oneself in the system was a shared experience. He then provides two explanations for this seeming contradiction, the second one of which (external clause) forms a conclusion which returns the narration to the life-story. The next episode (3) is introduced explicitly as “the next break” and now concerns the career guidance to study financial economics when maths was a weakness of his. The narrations that follow address the theme of accessing a degree in journalism. They are presented as moments of struggle and followed by considerable reflection (4). Gross then talks about his first work experiences as the moment where his “engagement with the GDR [really] began”. Here he offers two illustrative narratives (5a, 5b) to exemplify this mental transition to thinking more deeply about the political circumstances of life in the GDR.

abstract (5b) The first time that I really doubted was at a party meeting,

Evaluation that was quite funny.

Orientation It was quite early on, there had been this decree about the introduction of Intershops in the GDR.⁶

External clause Let me think when this was, so I don’t talk rubbish. [...] beginning of the 1980s, right.

Orientation I was still at the foundry then but that doesn’t matter.

Orientation There was this party meeting at the foundry. And there were just ordinary workers. And this decree about the opening of Intershops was explained at this party meeting that happened
monthly. [...] 

*Complicating action*  And one of the workers... erm... comrades criticised this decision. Because he associated this with the introduction of two classes in society. So people who have relatives in the West and can somehow get access to the money and others who can’t. And that with that you create a privileged stratum in society that stands above those who don’t have those relations.

*Resolution*  And this guy was then quite quickly expelled from the party. And he was put through a party-process because he didn’t agree with the line that the highest party-leadership had laid out.

*Coda*  There.

*Evaluation*  And there I started to doubt for the first time about the sense of it all. This unity of criticism and self-criticism that was provided in the constitution of the SED and everything.

*Coda*  Well, anyways.

This narrative is told by Gross outside the chronological structure he had previously followed. It links thematically to previous narrations of moments where he started to think more critically about the GDR which he however had first suggested was later. He then struggles to locate the episode historically and marks one of his introductory comments as irrelevant (second orientation). The evaluations and coda seem somewhat at odds with each other. The story is introduced as “quite funny”, which, given the episode’s unpleasant
outcome, appears to be a cynical remark but the target of this cynicism remains unclear. The concluding “there” marks the resolution as significant yet what actually makes this significance also seems uncertain. Some of this follows in the evaluation, which chimes with the abstract that this episode caused the narrator to seriously doubt “the sense of it all”, as Gross reflects on how the party committee’s decision contradicted key-ideological positions.

The narration is however then closed with the clause “Na, ist ja egal”, translated as “well anyways” in the sense of “it doesn’t matter”. Gross marks another three narrations and reflections with “egal”, which give a sense of wavering or of losing track of the overall point of the meta-narrative at least in the narrator’s own estimation. Although marked linguistically by the amount of detail provided and the explicit evaluations of this event as important and funny, this narration seems underdeveloped. The wavering evaluations seem “tagged on” to a narration which flows well in its middle but otherwise appears unstructured. And although highlighted, the event is very clearly not a turning point.

Until this point individual narrations, though detailed, do not show performative aspects. This changes with narration eight, which concerns Gross’ standing up to the local party committee. Having just completed an unwanted four week internship at the regional party office to receive a place at university in journalism, he is asked by the committee to go on to the party university for a further three years of training:

*Complicating action* (8) And that was an idea that I really couldn’t get used to. So I said: “Well, comrades, not like this.” I say: “You promised me, I do a year here to get some more experience … and then you sent me to study journalism”. I say: “Nobody ever said anything about
the party-university”.

[...] And I said: “Listen to me, you can try if you like”, I say, “but you promised me. And I insist on that”. [...] 

The committee eventually meets his request and Gross evaluates this moment as a point where he realises that there was flexibility within the system. He goes on to reflect:

_Evaluation_ It wasn’t as if the entire system came down on you. This system was always also people. People who also tried to somehow manage within this system. [...] So I didn’t throw the idea of socialism out, I still thought, alright. But the people that work on this aren’t always the best. That’s what I thought to myself. And that was also a point where I said, well, there is much that needs changing here, so.

This narrative is characterised by considerable detail in particular with regard to Gross’ conversation with his superior relayed in reported direct speech. This is the first time in the life-story he uses reported direct speech. The relatively uninterrupted and fast-paced retelling suggests moreover that these details stuck in the narrator’s mind. This may be because of emotional upheaval at this event where Gross challenges an authority for the first time. It is also likely that he has told this story of his “standing up” previously so it has taken on performative features. However, he begins to waver again when attempting to relate this episode to overarching questions of his relationship to the state. Several resolutions are tried out as Gross appears to be actively thinking through the episode’s consequences in the context of the interview.
Now that Gross has gained access to training in the coveted journalism programme further detailed narrations in the life-story interview concern a variety of different issues including: his introduction to cabaret (9); entering university (10); the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification and surrounding experiences including his move to the *Daily Paper* (11, 13); GDR-time local (non-televised) talkshows he moderated (12); post-unification experiences concerning cultural change (14, 17-19); the post-unification talkshow he moderated (15); and GDR-time journalism (16). Whilst the first eight narrations fall under the theme of the narrator’s relationship to the East German state and his slow realisation of problems, the later narratives do not follow on. Rather, they appear to be events that were significant to the self at the time that are retold as such and only through contextually-determined reflection related to the interview question or the wider research project (“the East German past today”) in an attempt to create coherence in the meta-narrative. For example, narratives nine and twelve about writing cabaret and moderating GDR-time talkshows are instances of success that allowed Gross to realise his passion for writing and comedy. He relates both stories to the project by using the experiences to criticise present-day versions of East German history, a topic that is external to his life-story (though relevant), but present in the interview due to the research project’s focus. His narration of being certified to practice cabaret on his first attempt (9) falls under the self-aggrandising theme of academic success. It mirrors some other smaller narrations that appear elsewhere.

In the latter part of the life-story, where Gross turns to experiences during the upheaval of 1989 and German unification, both causal and chronological linearity are increasingly left behind. There is a sense of the narrator being swept away by his recollections. This and the continued struggle to evaluate these experiences is evident in narration five where Gross
moves from a negative experience (17) of the changes the GDR’s fall brought directly to a positive one (18):

**abstract**

(17) I had, that might be of interest, an interesting experience then.

**Orientation**

My brother was a lathe operator and vocational trainer. And when he realised there was no future in that plant, he applied. The big company Nestle were looking for a regional sales representative [...] He got himself a suit and drove to Berlin for an interview.

**Evaluation**

And he told me a story that moved me a lot then.

**Complicating action**

He walked in there and … “I walk in there, there sits such a posh bloke” and whatever, and I say to him: “to save us both time’, now my brother speaking, ‘to save us both time, I’ll tell you a little bit about myself.” [...] He says: “I was a member of the party, I was in the FDJ, I was in a combat group. I was a vocational trainer.” [...] You know what he said? He said: “We had someone before you who had studied economics. Exactly the kind of person we need. But when he told me that he never had a career because he didn’t want to join the party, I said to him that we have no use for people with such little motivation. You’re exactly right for us”, he
said.

Resolution And my brother became the regional sales rep for Nestle.

Evaluation These harsh differences in perception. In the media it was all about the SED and whatever. [...] But this differing perception between the SED-dictatorship on the one hand in the media, and the evaluation from a business perspective.

[... further illustrative narrative follows]

Evaluation & Coda I found that fascinating. That were experiences we had for the first time. [...] Experiences like that allowed you to get to know the system bit by bit. [...] 

Abstract (18) And a second decisive experience.

Orientation I had met a Canadian in 1989. [...] So we became friends quickly, also with my wife.

Complicating action And of course he returned our invitation inviting us to his' in March 1989. [laughter] And I say “brilliant”, I say, “you can only do that because the guests will never come”. He lived in Montreal.

 Resolution And what can I tell you the second big journey we made after the Wende was to Montreal in 1991.

Orientation It was all still so new. I think unification was in 1990, October 1990. And in 1991, in May, we took eight days holiday. That was a
time when my wife and I didn’t dare take longer because we
didn’t know whether our jobs may not be gone.

[... they stop-over in Toronto where the friend’s son hosts them]

Complicating action (18a) And he said: “But tonight [... we’ll go out for a beer”. [...]

Evaluation And now I had a decisive experience.

Complicating action I sat in 1991, with a Canadian who was a complete stranger to
me, on the fourth floor of a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. And
we drank Guinness. [...] And suddenly I had a terrible realisation.

Resolution You sit here six thousand miles away from home, in Canada, in
Toronto, on a balcony on Chinatown and no one cares. It’s
completely normal.

Evaluation So, something that two years earlier had been completely
unimaginable. [...] And the fact that nobody cared, that it was
normal. That left me a bit stunned, because I suddenly realised
what “right to free travel” meant.

Here “bad” experiences with the new order, which seems arbitrary in its treatment of
individuals who had supported the “SED-dictatorship”, lead directly into a narration of a
“decisive” positive experience, where a moment of reflection in 1991 brings a realisation of the limitations of life under the previous regime. A turning point narrative according to
Rosenthal (2004), but one of uncertain consequence. Gross summarises the narrations as
experiences that allowed learning about the new system.
In comparison then the meta-narrative of Gross life-story is considerably less well developed than Fuhr’s especially regarding coherence. Both, in narrations of single events, where evaluations often move in a variety of directions, and with regard to their interlinking into a wider life-story there is less linear certainty. At times the significance of a story or reflection is added in the aftermath as the narrator seems to get lost in his thoughts or feels the need to address the interview question or position himself vis-à-vis wider discourses on the East German past. Moreover, the life-story is peppered with a greater number of themes, some of which lead to the telling of seemingly contradictory experiences. Notable is moreover that significant life-events continue beyond 1989 and German unification, in contrast to Fuhr whose detailed narrations ended with the very beginnings of the changes that were to come.

Conclusion

Narrations always differ since people have idiosyncratic ways of telling and some are better story-tellers than others. However, both narrators here are university educated and work professionally with texts. Gross moreover writes cabaret, so knows how to tell a good story. Indeed, individual narrations are well told. The issue of coherence arises primarily when trying to make their meaning in relation to one coherent meta-narrative explicit. The significance of each telling is not only clearer in Fuhr’s life-story, but seems self-evident, as it was for three other managers working in Aufarbeitung. In all cases life-stories developed like a Bildungsroman on life in a dictatorship in which themes of authoritarianism, curbing of opportunities, withdrawal from political life were explored in relevant episodes (Bruner, 1991). These life-stories’ composition-like character suggests that rather than merely being
good story-tellers narrators here have “a point to make”, as Oliveira put it (1999: 40). This point is provided by these individuals’ work environment, which is the morally laden discourse of Aufarbeitung. It provides the scripts, morale and purpose that support the development of causal linearity to such a degree that stories almost seem over-determined. To this speaks also the lack of post-unification narrations in Fuhr’s case, when arguably the issue of “life in the dictatorship” was resolved. This realm of discursive production moreover demands telling, as individuals will have had to account for themselves through their GDR-time biography when taking up post or working with victim associations, which supports the development of performative narratives that speak to the discourse’s master-narrative of the “GDR as dictatorship”.

Gross in contrast even acknowledges the lack of a strong over-arching meta-narrative when he unites his many stories in the latter part of the interview with the comment that “these are all such experiences” (of what?, one may ask). In this less pre-determined life-story, which reflects that of other interviewees from the Daily Paper and of clerical staff, certain events are reflected as conundrums. They appear significant enough to the self to be told but their meaning remains opaque as they are left unresolved or the interview itself is used to think through the experience in protracted reflection. This uncertainty suggests a lack of a clear framework for the understanding and telling of these occasions. Whilst Aufarbeitung presents such a framework, especially within the context of this interview, the subject positions it offers - of victim, perpetrator, by-stander - are too limiting to allow for comfortable self-identities for individuals like Gross who cannot lay claim to any kind of GDR-time resistance. However, the realities of state violence, which presented very forcefully in stories of Stasi surveillance in the media in the 1990s and since, and narrators’
own, at times difficult experiences with authorities, also need to be acknowledged. This backdrop of considerable ambiguity over understandings of the past GDR as state and society explains the seeming ‘incoherence’ of Gross narration. His wavering, yet engaged, narrations highlight the struggles for understandings of both a past where life was complex and one’s position within state and society ambiguous and a present that gives rise to new kinds of difficulties. The life-story interview is used to think through these experiences, thus providing a prosaic arena for “developing frameworks for understanding events” (Ochs & Capps, 2001: 2), similar to everyday conversations, only that these are national events and historical problems.

This seeming lack of coherence thus points to ongoing struggles for meaning after fundamental regime-change. These struggles not only apply to the individual level but are interlinked with larger processes of change in the value and discursive frameworks by which stories about lives can be told after the fall of state socialism. In such contexts we need to question both lack and presence of linear and causal certainty, instead of taking the latter for granted or potentially dismissing the former as lack of skill. The above suggests that there is considerable merit in applying lessons learned from “living narratives” about meaning-making in conversation to larger stories to gain insights into the very development of collectively shared frameworks for understanding pasts and presents.

Notes

1 The research was supported by an ESRC grant (RES0061-23-0035).
2 To maintain informants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used for personal names, places and institutions unless they are generic titles (such as BStU).
3 As these are long-practiced rhetorical habits they also apply in interviews even though here disruption is less likely.
In the GDR eighteen months of military service were compulsory. Individuals could volunteer for an additional eighteen months which could allow access to hard-to-reach professions.

These were shops which sold West German products to GDR citizens via a third currency that could be gained in exchange for West German Deutschmark.

Interviews are dialogical situations (Collins, 1998; Bamberg, 2006). I do not have space here to expand on this.
Bibliography


### Appendix – overview of life-stories

*Steffen Fuhr*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biography</th>
<th>Memorable events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1960s</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>POS school</td>
<td>1 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; year school report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 FDJ Speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOS school</td>
<td>3 ‘Several bad experiences’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>4 a Observes unfairness in teaching x1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 b “-” x2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>5 Digestive trouble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Indirect encounter with <em>Stasi</em> #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Introduces free speech at FDJ meetings and warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>8 Precarious situation at FDJ meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 Speaks out at assembly; offered Master’s thesis</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA dissertation</td>
<td>10 Access to classified West German literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 a Prophetic moment #1 regarding coming end of GDR;</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 b</td>
<td>Prophetic moment #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 c</td>
<td>Prophetic moment #3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Elections 1989 ‘first real action’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Wende**

Works as clerical assistant BStU office

Becomes head of local BStU office

Summarily explained.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biography</th>
<th>Memorable events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Born in 1950s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school</td>
<td>1 Refused delegation to EOS; granted when father intervenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EOS school</td>
<td>2 Strict rules at EOS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics studies, withdrawal, work as</td>
<td>3 Career guidance to study economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>untrained labourer</td>
<td>4 Work for newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5a Realities of this work causing ‘serious engagement with GDR’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5b Expulsion of colleague from party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles to access journalism</td>
<td>6 Receives poor mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Loses post at newsletter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training at party college</td>
<td>8 Stands up to superior to demand delegation to university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work at regional party office</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writes cabaret</td>
<td>9 First cabaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studies journalism</td>
<td>10 Difficult entry exam</td>
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<td>Works as journalist</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderates ‘talkshows’</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Wende</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 a</td>
<td>Neighbour’s changed behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 b</td>
<td>Family event, family members changed values</td>
</tr>
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<td>Taken on at the <em>Daily Paper</em></td>
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<td>post-<em>Wende</em> talkshow</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Story of limitations of journalism in GDR</td>
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<td><strong>Post-Wende</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Visit to Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Shopping experience</td>
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