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## **Contextualizing the self: The emergence of a biographical understanding in adolescence**

Tilman Habermas, Neşe Hatiboğlu

### Abstract

In adolescence remembering the personal past and understanding what kind of person one is intertwine to form a story of one's life as the most extant, informative, and flexible form of self-representation. In adolescence the striving for self-coherence translates into a quest for global coherence of the life story. We suggest that contextualizing is a fifth means for creating global coherence in life narratives besides the cultural concept of biography, temporal, causal-motivational, and thematic coherence. We present three kinds of contextualizing in life narratives, the temporal macrostructure, socio-historical contextualizing of one's life, and hierarchical and linear segmenting of the text and life. These three forms of contextualizing *in* life narratives by their authors are complemented by three forms of contextual influences *on* life narratives analyzed by researchers, namely the historical, personal, and communicative situation in which they are recounted. Contextualizing is exemplified by the life narrative of a young migrant.

Bert Cohler achieved a unique identity as a psychologist and psychoanalyst with an understanding of his disciplines as basically interpretative sciences which can learn from neighboring fields in the humanities. He was deeply influenced by his early experience in the psychoanalytic Orthogenic School in Chicago as well as by the broad interdisciplinary programs of the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago and Social Relations at Harvard. These institutional and intellectual contexts offered Cohler horizons of which he made unique use, to become his own brand of 'life course social scientist' (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000) who took a genuinely interpretative approach to individual lives.

Bert Cohler's masterpiece "Personal narrative and life course" (1982) inspired one of us (Tilman Habermas) to turn to the life story not only as an object of clinical dialogue and description, but also, in the form of narrative, as an object of systematic psychological research. Cohler effortlessly weaves social theory, history, psychology and psychoanalysis into an integrated argument, or better, a vision of an entire research program.

Cohler pointed out adolescence as the developmental phase in which socio-cognitive development opens the possibility to access cultural forms such as the diary (Bernfeld, 1931), to autobiographical self-presentation, and, more generally, to the format of the life story and biographical thinking. Although Erikson (1968), inspired by his teacher Bernfeld, elaborated the life story as an instrument for psychoanalytic understanding and as the most mature form of psychosocial identity that developed in adolescence, only Cohler actually linked the attainment of an integrated subjective identity, a feeling of coherence and self-continuity, to adolescent

cognitive maturation which allows an understanding of personal and collective history (1982, p. 220).

Here we pick up two concerns of Cohler's paper and elaborate their significance for the life story and its development in adolescence: coherence and context. We first discuss the development of life story coherence in adolescence, then, we suggest *contextualizing* as a fifth device for creating coherence. We illustrate the characteristics of a well-developed, coherent life narrative in young adulthood with extracts from a life narrative by a young woman with a migrant background.

### **Coherent life narratives develop only in adolescence**

Cohler (1982) linked both the intelligibility of a life narrative as well as its function to provide a subjective sense of self-continuity to the compatibility of the form of the life narrative with "socially shared expectations that stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and in which the meaning of expected and eruptive life events is understood in terms of socially shared definitions of the significance and timing of these events (p. 205)." In previous research, we elaborated on Cohler's concept and attempted to define the formal properties of global text coherence of life narratives in terms of their temporal, causal-motivational, and thematic aspects (Habermas, & Bluck, 2000). Global temporal coherence allows listeners to place events at specific times in life. Global causal-motivational coherence explains and motivates changes in life, showing how the narrator attempted to lead a life guided by values. Global thematic coherence is created by implicit themes and explicit comparisons between heterogeneous elements of life, pointing to underlying constancies across change. We measured these three aspects of global text coherence in life narratives in three different ways. To do justice to the global character of global coherence, we rated each of these three aspects on the entire life narrative. We defined three rating scales for how well the reader is temporally oriented in the narrator's life, for how well the life narrative transmits a sense of how the narrator has developed, and for how well the narrator succeeds to create implicit and possibly also explicit thematic coherence across heterogeneous events. To identify some of the specific verbal means that contribute to the three aspects of global coherence, we coded several sets of local indicators for each aspect, including temporal indicators and autobiographical arguments that link local events to distant parts of life (e.g., biographical antecedents or consequences) and to the development of personality (Habermas, 2011; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). Finally we measured the temporal macrostructure, which we will explain below.

Following Cohler's insistence that narrative coherence relies upon a shared social understanding of what is a good life narrative, we defined a fourth aspect of global coherence as the consistency of the life narrative with a shared cultural concept of biography. Specifically, we suggest that there is a shared skeleton of life narratives, consisting of a set of biographically salient life events and their normative timing (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). We measured knowledge of the cultural concept of biography by comparing judgments of biographical salience and age norms for selected life events with a norm established by a group of young adults (Habermas, 2007). Berntsen and Rubin (2004) termed this normative biographical skeleton a *life script*, stressing its normative and linear temporal nature.

In the past decade several studies have substantiated Bert Cohler's claim that while the ability to narrate specific events or stories is acquired between early and mid-childhood, the acquisition of the life story format is a later achievement of adolescence (Bohn & Berntsen,

2008; 2013; Habermas & Paha, 2001; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008). This development has been confirmed longitudinally over an eight year period (Köber & Habermas, 2014). Others have shown the emergence across adolescence of the use of autobiographical arguments also in other text types, namely in narratives of single critical life events (Chen, McAnally, Wang, & Reese, 2012; Gysman & Hudson, 2010). In single event narratives, autobiographical arguments link the specific event to earlier or later events in life and to the narrator's personal development (Habermas, 2011), thereby integrating the event into the life story without narrating an entire life. We have thus identified verbal means which people use to construct continuity in their lives. However, Cohler's claim that a coherent life story is used for establishing and maintaining a subjective sense of self-continuity (cf. Habermas & Köber, 2014; Prebble, Addis & Tippett, 2013) remains to be tested.

### **Contextualizing as a fifth aspect of global coherence of life narratives**

Drawing on other texts is a fundamental mechanism of interpretation. In life narratives, persons draw upon earlier or present experiences, to understand past actions. Narrative is a prime cultural tool for contextualizing and understanding human action. To understand an action, which by definition is motivated, it needs to be embedded in a story (e.g., van Wright, 1971). Context is a requirement of narrative, which is fulfilled by the orienting section. And, re-contextualizing the results of actions in a final evaluation is also a normative property of narratives (e.g., Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This internal contextualizing of the plot is framed by an external contextualizing of the communicative situation, which is reflected in the narrative itself by its abstract and coda.

We present three internal contextualizing devices which enable narrators to reflect the contexts of their actions and their lives (evaluative elaboration of beginnings and endings, social contextualization of life and text segmenting). Consequently, we also present three contexts external to narratives that influence them (history-culture, the present situation in life and the present communicative situation). We exemplify the role of contextualizing with a 15-minute life narrative told by 24-year-old Ebru, a Turkish-German young woman whose family migrated to Germany before she was born. This situation renders the cultural context more salient, and forces individuals to choose more consciously cultural contexts and values to identify with.

### **Internal contexts in life narratives**

**Narrative beginnings, middles, and endings.** Following Aristotle's (1987) dictum that coherence in tragedy is created by embedding the plot in a structured beginning and ending, and Cohler's (1982) suggestion that the same may be true for life narratives, we analyzed how beginnings and endings of life narratives are structured to contribute to global coherence (Habermas, 2006). We judged the maturity of beginnings and endings by the degree of elaboration and by age differences. Mature beginnings started with birth, indicating date and place and, sometimes, a narrative about the circumstances of birth, foreshadowing later developments. Mature endings led to the present and involved both a retrospective evaluation as well as a resulting outlook onto expectations and plans for the future. Our ordinal scales for the maturity of beginnings and endings showed a cross-sectional (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; Habermas, Ehler-Lerche, & de Silveira, 2009) as well as a longitudinal increase between late childhood and young adulthood (Köber & Habermas, 2014). Since beginnings and endings are defined temporally, we also defined the middle section as basically determined by a linear chronological sequence, deviations from which need to be explicated to keep the listener

temporally oriented (cf. Genette, 1982). Temporal linearity increased strongly between late childhood and early adolescence (Habermas et al., 2009), but marked deviations from a linear order increased across adulthood (Köber & Habermas, 2014), which we interpreted as a sign of life narratives being narrated more artfully later in life.

We termed this structure of beginning, middle, and ending the *temporal macrostructure* of life narratives. The quality of the components of the temporal macrostructure correlated most with temporal coherence compared to causal-motivational and thematic coherence, justifying our choice of name (Habermas et al., 2009).

The prominence of causal-motivational and thematic coherence is evident in the beginnings of Ebru's life narrative that starts with birth and the family context:

*I was born into a very crowded family. My mother, father, paternal uncles and aunts, we were all living together in one house. Being the first child in the family, being the first grandchild, I was a terribly spoiled child. I was born in Düsseldorf in 1986. I really was the very special child in the family. My paternal grandmother still tells me about my childhood. I was quite lucky to be born into a crowded, nice family.*

The beginning is highly elaborated, setting the theme for later life. Ebru starts with birth, providing both year and place of birth.

**Social contextualization of life.** Another way to contextualize a life is to embed it in a family constellation, a family history, a socio-economic and socio-cultural situation, and a historical situation. The initial context cannot be directly remembered but is learned from others or is reconstructed. An individual's social and historical contexts may be used to define their identity (Strauss, 1959). Historical context, however, is mentioned in everyday life narratives only if historical events have strongly impacted the person's life, typically a war (Brown, Hansen, Lee, Vanderveen, & Conrad, 2012).

During adolescence, initial family constellation, social-economic context, and family history are mentioned increasingly in life narratives (Köber & Habermas, 2013). This increase is rendered possible by the adolescent's developing understanding of society and the contextual variables related to socio-economic status (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005; Furnham & Stacey, 1991). Only in adolescence does the understanding of economics begin to encompass the abstract levels of the economic system (Berti & Bombi, 1988) and of historical developments (cf. Barton, 2008). The growing appreciation of the role of the wider, non-immediate social context is reflected in an increasing use of non-agentive linguistic constructions in life narratives across adolescence (de Silveira & Habermas, 2011).

Re-reading Ebru's opening sentences, we see that there is no birth story in Ebru's narrative, but the social context of her birth is used as a formative experience. The listener understands that being the first-born, and the first to be born on foreign soil, renders Ebru especially valuable to the entire extended family who has recently migrated. Consequently, the listener understands why she had been such a special child to so many people in her family.

*Then I started kindergarten. I didn't know German well because my family used to watch Turkish TV and only spoke Turkish. There were only a few Turkish people in the neighborhood. Now there are more, but there were only a few in those years. I was the only Turkish child in kindergarten, and since I didn't understand German well, I couldn't make any friends. I began to learn the language little by little only later when I went to school. [...] The situation was more balanced in primary school. I made many Turkish*

*friends, and I had a number of German friends, too. I was also beginning to understand German. Accordingly, I started to get rid of my troubles there.*

In this passage Ebru explains the social and historical context of her upbringing and uses it to explain her very personal problems of social isolation.

*Then I enrolled in the Gymnasium in fifth grade [German grammar school; this still is exceptional for children of migrants]. I had great difficulties in the first years because I started to have problems with the language due to the higher linguistic requirements there. I failed seventh grade. My mom and everybody were angry at me. I mean, that was the worst part of it, because my paternal grandfather and uncles used to say: "Dear girl, you are the oldest child in our family, you know, you have a number of cousins and a sister to follow in your footsteps. Therefore you should choose a good path in life so that they can see you as a role-model." I was under a lot of pressure. Back then I realized the significance of school to some extent. I started to understand what my mother, father, and grandfather were trying to tell me. I realized the importance of school, and I started to study really hard. [...] I always wanted to study, and I knew that you could achieve something in life through education.*

Ebru's narrative continues with migration-related language problems and educational difficulties. She uses the value of education in her family as a context to describe the personal meaning of failing and its consequences. The significance of her standing in the extended family recurs. We can assume that the general social and historical situation of the family determined the role of education for upward social mobility. Ebru narrates how a specific event, her family's reaction to her failing seventh grade, motivated her to identify with a family value, which in turn is explained by the social context. Explaining a central value by what one learned from a specific experience is an autobiographical argument that links temporal information with an enduring defining feature of personality.

**Text segmentation.** Life narratives are segmented, so that larger segments provide contexts for more focal parts (Passoneau & Litman, 1997; Shaojun Ji, 2008). Segments can be specified in terms of text types and in terms of temporal extension and inclusion. Life narratives contain three types of texts: single event narratives, chronicles, and arguments (Linde, 1993). Single event narratives may contain contextualizing information about the particular event reported. Chronicles and arguments provide the larger context to specific episodes. In order to establish continuity, single stories are connected by chronicles which summarize the major events of a given period and thereby provide context for stories and link them. Dorthe Thomsen (2009) calls chronicles *life story chapters*. Arguments are a-temporal and allow narrators to take a distanced, third person, perspective on their lives (Linde, 1987; Rosenthal, 1993). Arguments may explicitly link single events with each other and with the global structure of the life narrative by announcing, summarizing, evaluating, or explaining (Schütze, 1984).

Personal memories have a nested structure (Neisser, 1986), with more specific events embedded in extended events, which in turn are embedded in life phases (Conway, Singer, & Tagini, 2004). Life narratives are also segmented thematically and temporally by nesting less inclusive in more inclusive segments (Rosenthal, 1995; Schütze, 1984). Segment borders are signaled by paralinguistic devices such as changes in pitch (e.g., Ozcan, 2012). However, specific episodes are not necessarily bracketed by chronicles. Rather, episodes with a turning point are often used to demarcate transitions between life phases (Rosenthal, 1995; Strauss, 1959; cf.

Thomsen, Pillemer, & Ivcevic, 2011). In two large-scale studies of life narratives, half of the turning point-episodes coincided with conventional, normative life transitions (Clausen, 1995; Lehr, 1976). Repeated events serve to describe what was typical for an extended period of time (Habermas & Diel, 2013).

The use of segments to narrate extended periods of time and the use of arguments increases steeply across adolescence. Thus specific events are more and more selected over this period not just because they are in themselves memorable, but because they can exemplify or explain (Chen, McAnally, & Reese, 2013; Habermas, Diel, & Welzer, 2013).

Ebru provides a good example of the use of a turning point event to describe a global aspect of her life narrative.

*[...] Later on, I lost two of my closest friends. They were two Turkish girls with whom I used to play football. It was a traffic accident. [...]. One day, on our way to football practices, they were run over by a car and killed. This is the worst thing that ever happened to me. I asked myself about the meaning of life. I thought things like 'Such an event happens out of the blue', 'will I die too?', 'I could have been there too'. Then, as I passed through my adolescent years, I found religion, I found myself in God. I started to perform the prayer; I started to fast. [...] Religion is very important for me. The most important thing in life is religion for me.*

Ebru uses a turning point event to segment her life. She explains how she found religion and a worldview, which implicitly ties her identity, rooted in a very personal experience, to the culture of her parents and family.

### **External contexts of life narratives**

Contextualizing is thus a device for creating global coherence in life narratives. At the same time, life narratives are always situated in, influenced by, and geared towards multiple contexts.

**Historical context.** As demonstrated by Erikson in his case studies (e.g., 1958) and more systematically by Elder (1998), historical, cultural, and social contexts strongly influence the actual course a life takes. The influence of historical circumstances can be studied by comparing cohorts, or by studying the impact of sudden political changes on the life course, such as Barbara and Winfried Junge's long-term film portrait of the students in two East German school classes between 1961 and 2007. In addition, the actual form of narration is conditioned by the historical, cultural, and social context. This is shown in the history of the literary genre of autobiography, which is a relatively recent development of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Holdenried, 2000). Cohler (2007) provided a highly illustrative study of how the form of life stories changes historically by comparing ten published autobiographies by gay men, two of whom were born in each decade between the 1930s and 1970s. He demonstrated how gay emancipation and the HIV-epidemic shaped not only the lives of gay men, but also the way they narrated their lives by following, for example, a cultural master narrative of the coming out experience that emerged in the 1970s.

Providing yet another example of how cultural narratives shape individual life narratives, Cohler (2008) contrasted autobiographical accounts of Shoah survivors written in the immediate aftermath of the war and over half a century later. The earlier personal accounts reflect the absence of a public narrative about the Shoah, while the later narrative reflected the influence of a specific public model of redemption narrative. Comparing diaries written by two adolescents living in Poland during the Shoah, Cohler (2012) showed how the ability for

autobiographical reasoning, emerged in adolescence, and was used to cope with deteriorating chances for surviving the German program to kill all Jews.

Back to Ebru, her family's migration story plays a crucial role in her life narrative. The German attitude and policy toward immigrants significantly shaped the second generation's life course.

**Personal context.** The narrator's present situation in life defines their perspective on their personal past, shifting as life is lived and as concerns, values, and identities change in response to both normative developmental milestones and transformations triggered by non-normative events (Cohler, 1982). Josselson (2000) demonstrated how the childhood memory of a wedding changed over three reminiscing occasions across a total of 22 years, depending on the rememberer's maturation, and how the meaning of the memory of a first love relationship changed across 35 years (Josselson, 2009). Schiff (2005) compared an Auschwitz survivor's memories 38 and 51 years after the Shoah. While the memory itself remained fairly stable, its interpretation and evaluation changed, depending both on changes in how the dominant culture dealt with Auschwitz memories and on personal changes in the narrators. Massie and Szajnberg (2005) interviewed 76 individuals at age 30 whose development had been well documented during their first five years and who had been interviewed at age 18 by different researchers. They compared the participants' memories at 30 with the earlier observations, again showing how childhood memories are selected and formed by present concerns. In addition, they noted how childhood memories at age 30 seemed to be much more accessible and extensively narrated than at age 18, when the present had been more predominant.

Education and religion seem to act as the two most important perspectives in Ebru's present life. She merges the two to explain her choice of career and her perspective on her future work as a psychologist:

*[...] I was dying to become a psychologist because I saw it as an occupation which paralleled religious principles, helping people, passing on my knowledge to others. Therefore it was the occupation closest to my thoughts. Now I am very happy about the internship, and I think this occupation has the potential to satisfy you a lot. Thank God, I have achieved my goal, I am very happy about it.*

The narrative ends in the present with Ebru finishing her university studies in Psychology. She, thereby, creates coherence between present concerns, past experiences, and future aspirations as well as with her enduring world view. This is the most elaborate form of ending, which both evaluates the past and bases her outlook on the personal future on life experiences. Additionally, looking at the entire narrative, we see that the narrative follows a chronological order and displays a mature temporal macrostructure.

**Communicative context.** Finally, the specific situation in which personal memories or a life story is told influences the selection and evaluation of narrated events. Narrators tune their narratives to listeners' knowledge, values, and interests. The relationship to the listener motivates more or less self-exposure, and the communicative aims guide the way narrators present themselves in life narratives (Cohler, 1982; Pasupathi, 2001).

Ebru knows that she is talking to a Turkish psychologist, and she is talking to her in Turkish. This possibly motivated her to stress the cultural and the professional issues more than she might have if she had told her life to a German who is not a psychologist. In that case she would have had to explain more about Turkish culture.

## Conclusion

We chose a young adult's life narrative to exemplify the role of narrative in adolescence because in retrospect developmental processes can be better explicated. Ebru's life narrative exemplifies how adolescents learn to shape their identity by rooting commitments in highly personal experiences via autobiographical reasoning, in failing seventh grade and in the death of two friends. To objectify the self by acknowledging the role of social context is a highly mature form of autobiographical reasoning that helps in personally choosing values and establishing ego identity. The resulting values, education and religion, might as well have resulted from a carry-over of infantile identifications with parental values, i.e. a foreclosed identity. But the life narrative clarifies that they have been adopted in an active exploration of the meaning of personal experiences. Had we granted more than 15 minutes to Ebru to recount her life, she might have clarified further whether her turn to religion was also a way of identifying with her parents' cultural heritage. Ebru's narrative appears to indicate that her religiousness is not traditional, but self-chosen.

Thus adolescence is the phase in life in which the earlier development of language acquisition and of narrative competence (Miller, Chen & Olivares, 2014) is further elaborated into the highly specific ability to construct a story about the individual's personal development across life. The life story requires integrating memories and self-concept into a coherent overall account. Adolescence thus brings a new biographical quality to individuals' speaking and thinking about others and themselves. This ability allows them to recognize the influence of their own familial, socio-cultural, and historical context. At the same time, the ability for constructing the life story in itself appears to be a historically specific requirement, which involves culturally specific shared biographical norms and concepts. The basic ability develops across adolescence and provides individuals in adulthood and old age with a tool to give direction to their lives as well as to accommodate to the chances and hazards of life.

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Tilman Habermas is Professor of Psychoanalysis at the Department of Psychology, Goethe University Frankfurt.

Neşe Hatiboğlu is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Psychology, Goethe University Frankfurt.