

Three Rating Scales for Global Temporal, Causal-Motivational, and Thematic Coherence in Life Narratives

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I. Overview

1. Temporal orientation (Temporal coherence)
2. Developmental consequentality (Causal-motivational coherence)
3. Thematic coherence

What is crucial for the rating of a narrative on all three scales is not any individual text extract but the overall impression gained while reading the entire narrative.

1. Temporal orientation

This rating scale shows how well the life narrative enables the interviewer to get his/her bearings timewise. There is a good temporal orientation if either an account is given of the events in their chronological sequence or if the narrator provides precise details of the point in time (in terms of calendar time), his/her respective age or the like. As a listener one is, however, not temporally oriented if one cannot recognize at all when and in what order the events took place.

Should it, in the course of the narrative, come to an intervention on the part of the interviewer, only the part before the intervention is rated.

Rating scale:

- 1 – One can never tell when and in what order something occurred.
- 2 – One can almost never tell when and in what order something occurred.
- 3 – One can often not tell when and in what order something occurred.
- 4 – One can partly tell when and in what order something occurred, but partly one cannot.
- 5 – One can mostly tell when and in what order something occurred.
- 6 – One can almost always tell when and in what order something occurred (for awarding this rating it is sufficient if there is an orientation through chronological narration without concrete details about the time being given).
- 7 – It is always crystal clear when and in what order something occurred (in addition some points of time are named here).

¹ The thematic coherence scale was written anew in version 2 and refined in version V 3.0.

2. Developmental Consequentiality

This rating scale shows how clearly the significance of the individual events for the development of the narrator's personality comes over. What is relevant here is whether one can recognize how the events named have given rise to insights or changes in lasting and generalized attitudes and modes of behavior.

A life narrative is to be given a low rating when no development of the personality at all is manifest. High ratings mean that the development becomes clear through the events narrated in their turning-points and motives.

The examples are given for the sake of a rough orientation; however do not rate any individual text extracts but the overall impression gained by reading the whole story.

The following is a practical way of proceeding: First the entire life narrative should be read marking the passages where a development is described. Subsequently one should ask oneself: "How much do I know about what makes up this person and how he/she has developed?" This global impression should then be verified once again on the basis of individual text extracts.

Rating scale:

1 – No development of the personality at all becomes clear, merely superficial changes.

„I went to ... Primary School, from there I then went to ... School, that is a grammar school in Nordend and then I went to a sports school to ... School, after year seven.“

[The importance of changing schools for the development is not gone into.]

2 – No development of the personality becomes clear, merely changes in preferences, specific attitudes or habits (which grown-ups would not count as personality changes).

„...then we were always at some friends' place who had a herd of cows (...) in the cowshed (...) and that also rather persuaded me that I like animals, well that I love animals a lot.“ (370, 56)

[The development of the love of animals is described in a logical way, but it is a question of a change in preferences that grown-ups would not call a personality change.]

3 – A development of the personality is claimed but not substantiated or a development of personality is described but not designated as such.

„I was at a grammar school for girls, which is interesting because it already left a mark on your relationships with the opposite sex.“ (6, 23)

[It is not explained in what way attending the girls' grammar school has marked her relationships with men.]

[Best girlfriend makes disparaging remarks about her] „because after the Christmas holidays I thought a bit about it, noticed why am I friends with her and then I started to split up a bit with her and to do my own thing because I noticed I was totally dependent on her.“ (364, 143)

[Describes herself becoming more independent, without calling it a development going beyond this specific relationship.]

4 – A development of the personality is basically substantiated by the events described, but it is not elaborated upon.

„... this girls' school, it leads to you being a bit cut off from life, from the world.“ (6, 79)

[The effects of attending the girls' school are named, but they are not comprehensible because a more detailed description is missing.]

- 5 – The development of the personality becomes clear on the whole through some of the events described, not however to a full extent.

„... since I've known him (boyfriend) I love Germany. I'm very happy here because he comes and visits me very often and we experience a great deal together.“ (243, 363)

[The change in an attitude which is relevant through various situations is described in a comprehensible way, the description of the effects appears, however, superficial.]

- 6 – The development of the personality becomes clear through some of the events described, but is not always comprehensible down to the smallest detail.

„As she (the new schoolmate) is so open and honest and direct and doesn't attach much importance to other people's opinions I've also changed a bit myself... , that I'm definitely somewhat less shy than before and dare to say my opinion and to stick to it....“ (147, 361)

[The change of personality through the new girlfriend becomes clear. For complete clarity, however, the description is not detailed enough or not substantiated by examples.]

- 7 – The development of the personality becomes clear in its turning-points and its motives.

Birth of the sister → jealousy „...for that I was often told off and I was in fact totally unfair, didn't see things as they were, either, I always felt at a disadvantage and then my mother always tried to reason with me (...) and that permanently restricted me, that I always try to get to the bottom of things and I'm always asking myself: Are they really the way you now feel them or are they perhaps emotionally exaggerated.“ (139, 20)

[It is very clearly set out how her own behavior and the reaction of the mother influence her behavior today.]

3. Thematic Coherence

The rating scale shows how much the individual elements of the life story are thematically connected. Thematic similarity of different parts of the life narrative can remain merely implicit or, however, be rendered explicit. Implicit thematic coherence can arise from thematic similarities not named but which offer themselves to the listener/reader. These are ascertainable if one can subsume individual episodes under generic thematic categories (e.g. “Life is great.”) or if one is able to find themes or motives recurring through various episodes (e.g. the life story continuously revolves around friendships; e.g. motive of intimacy or power).

A thematic connection can, however, also be named explicitly. Thus various episodes can be connected with one another through a self- (“I'm a fighter.”) or a life-metaphor (e.g. “My life has been a series of ups and downs like a roller-coaster.”), or through a (life) theme or motive (“My life is very much marked by my occupation”). Often, explicit thematic coherence is established by a statement at the end of the story. However, thematic coherence can also result from a summary or evaluation at any other point in the story.

It is crucial that ...

- a) a connection is established between episodes that are heterogeneous with regard to content,
- b) the description of connections abstracts from a concrete similarity (for a counter example see the second example below),
- c) the thematic connection is plausible.

NO explicit thematic coherence is rated if...

1. ...statements or metaphors concern only a single episode
 - The self-metaphor “I am a fighter” for example only establishes explicit thematic coherence if it relates to different situations or areas of life. For story 38, segment 9 it does not create thematic coherence as it only concerns one relationship narrated in one episode.
2. ... named similarities only concern highly concrete analogies between different situations and no abstraction is made.
 - For example 261, 94ff.: [Description of the family’s flight from Ghana to Burkina Faso] “(...) we lived there for two or three years, nothing different from Ghana, it was all the same, school, the same friends because they [also] flew from Ghana to Burkina Faso”
3. ... named life themes are not comprehensible or plausible, e.g. because they are not proven by concrete events
 - For example 78, 105f: “(...) since then life really changed (...), attitude to life changed to a very happy feeling” → it remains unclear how this attitude is manifested, so that this feeling does not link different episodes

Summary:

Hence there is no thematic coherence if the individual episodes (whether implicit or explicit) are completely disconnected (value 1) or if only one theme is addressed (value 2). Medium thematic coherence implies only implicit connections between episodes (values 3 and 4). If episodes heterogeneous in content are explicitly connected in a comprehensible and logical way, this is coded as high thematic coherence (at least value 5).

- 1 – Between the individual episodes narrated no connection is discernible.
- 2 – Only one theme is addressed, which is why the connection between the episodes is not abstract but concrete.
- 3 – With some episodes differing in content it is possible to recognize a common motive, theme or a thematic category.
- 4 – Through episodes heterogeneous in content, thematic or motivational similarities can be clearly discerned, which are not, however, explicitly named.
- 5 – There is a basic attempt to establish a connection between heterogeneous episodes, between most episodes, however, the connection remains unclear or is exclusively implicit.

“... from 7th to 10th grade, that was kind of a wild time” → the narrator narrates how he disrupted lessons and misbehaved with his peers (938, 144)

[Thematic coherence is established between two heterogeneous areas (school and peer group). However, no attempt is made to link more episodes]
- 6 – Between many heterogeneous episodes a connection is established, but in part the connection remains unclear or is exclusively implicit. When in a not very variable life story (in which for example it is only a question of the working life) a logical connection is explicitly established, then that is also rated here.

„... and you see, my life is very much marked by my occupation“ (27, 314)

[This appropriately summarizes the preceding description of exclusively his/her working life. As it is a matter of thematically similar episodes, no 7 was given here.]

7 – Between the various heterogeneous episodes there is established a connection in a logical and comprehensible fashion. A 7 is only given when a connection is also established between episodes about different areas of life (e.g. private and working life).

[All three examples are taken from one story and altogether justify a rating of 7.]

[Mother has a stroke] „I was always on my own when such situations came, had to sort it all out, get us out of the mess.“ (27, 168) [Refers to previous episodes about relationships with parents.]

„Actually I'd always been lucky with therapists, for a while it was always okay, then I'd had the feeling it's sorted out and then came something serious again and I was back to square one.“ (27, 284) [Summarizes sections about various therapies.]

„Actually I'm only now really alive, with all that life is about. After a very, very long run-up.“ (27, 408) [Combines things recently told with things previously told.]

[There is both a connecting of thematically similar episodes (as in the first two examples) as well as an establishing of a connection between all episodes by drawing a conclusion at the end about the entire life story. The term “run-up” in the last of the three quotes integrates the first two quotations.]