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## Reversed "Betrayal Funnel." A Case of a Children's Home Inmate Who Suffers from Being Disloyal to Her Alcoholic Family

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**Abstract** This paper attempts to examine biographical consequences and costs of growing up in an alcoholic home and to scrutinize the development of biographical identity of an adult woman (Natalia) who lives with conviction that as a teenager she "dared" to bring into question the "normality" of her own family when escaping the collective alcoholic trajectory of her family through attempting suicide and entering a children's home. Consequently, she is still guilt-ridden since she feels responsible for destroying the facade of a (false and illusionary) positive family image and for being the one who managed to get out of the collective trajectory of suffering. On the basis of the concept of "betrayal funnel," as described by Erving Goffman, it is shown that Natalia was sort of "framed" in "reversed betrayal funnel" by a school psychologist – who probably intended to help but her activities turned out badly in the long run. Furthermore, it is argued that her subjective definition of the course of events in her life results not only in a (subliminal) nagging sense of guilt (strengthened by a negative "me" image created by her family) and her obsessive responsibility for her parents and siblings but – in spite of a fulfilling and meaningful life – it still impedes all her attempts to work the trajectory potential through. This has a strong influence on her current world of everyday existence, her personal identity, and biographical orientation.

**Keywords** Autobiographical Narrative Interview; Trajectory of Suffering; Alcoholic Family; Children's Home; Guilt Feelings; Biographical Work

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When contrasting "an idealized picture of an American family" with an alcoholic family, Norman K. Denzin claims that:

it is not a haven of rest, a harbor of love, a place where holidays are celebrated with feasting and days gone by remembered with fondness. The alcoholic's family is a nightmare of confusion, terror, pain, guilt, anger, and ugliness. There may have been good days in the past, but that past has long since been forgotten. (1993:230)

This miserable and disastrous image is also (re)created in the autobiographical rendering of Natalia –

a thirty-six, well-educated woman, an adult child of alcoholic parents, a sister of two brothers (both alcoholics and criminals), and a mentally unstable sister.<sup>1</sup> Although nowadays she claims to live a normal life with her husband and a teenage daughter, it seems that her past experiences still cast long shadows on her everyday life existence and biographical orientation. It is remarkable that Natalia voluntarily responded to a letter of a researcher asking former foster children to tell the story of their life.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of her autobiographical narrative interview is the main goal in this paper.

However, before scrutinizing Natalia's biographical narration, the meaning of a "single study" (Becker 1966:xviii) should be emphasized here. Howard S. Becker in his "Introduction" to Clifford S. Shaw's *Jack Roller* highlights the value of personal documents within the field of sociology by saying that

[i]t describes to people the way of life of segments of their society with which they would never otherwise come in contact. The life history, because it is the actor's "own story," is a live and vibrant message from "down there," telling us what it means to be a kind of a person we have never met face to face. (1966:xiv)

Moreover, he claims that among other advantages "the life history more than any other technique... can give meaning to the overlooked notion of process" (Becker 1966:viii). Clifford R. Shaw adds that one's own story reflects one's own "personal attitudes and interpretations, for it is just these personal factors which are so important in the study and treatment of the case" (Shaw 1966:3). Thus, the find-

<sup>1</sup> We learn later in her narration that there was another sister who died at the age of two.

<sup>2</sup> See: Golczyńska-Grondas (2014).

ings to be presented in this paper are based on the theoretical and methodological background rooted in the tradition of Chicago School of sociology and are combined with the linguistic knowledge concerning the production of talk and narration, that is, on the research method developed by Fritz Schütze (Kallmeyer and Schütze 1977; Schütze 1981; 1983; 1984; 2004; 2008a; 2008b; Prawda 1989; Rokuszewska-Pawelek 1996; Kaźmierska 1996; Riemann 2006). He argues that:

[i]n the autobiographical narrative interview method the researcher relies on the informant's accounts, his or her own presentation of the flux of events and their interpretation; nonetheless, very restricted ways of data collection and narrative constraints (naturally occurring obligations to condense, to go into detail, to close the narrative form), as well as carefully worked out rules and stages of data analysis enable the "quality" control. (Schütze 2008a:16, see also Kallmeyer and Schütze 1977)

### An Unfolding Trajectory of Suffering – From a "Normal"<sup>3</sup> to Alcoholic Family

Undoubtedly, the dominant process structure<sup>4</sup> in Natalia's biography is that of a "trajectory of suffering." Primarily, the very concept draws from Anselm L. Strauss and Barney G. Glaser's research on

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the definition of being "normal" draws on Goffman's distinction between those who bear certain stigma and normals, i.e., between individuals who "possess an undesired differentness" and those who "do not depart negatively from the particular expectations." This means: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character (e.g., alcoholic addiction), or tribal stigma (Goffman 1990a:5).

<sup>4</sup> Process structures of a life course (or structural processes) are specific modes of experiencing one's life rendered in characteristic verbal forms. Schütze identifies four of them: 1) biographical action schemes, 2) institutional patterns of the life course (phenomena of life and family cycles, career patterns, etc.), 3) metamorphoses – unexpected and surprising development of creativity, and 4) biographical trajectories (discussed in the main text) (Schütze 1981; 1983; 1984; 2008a).

dying patients (Glaser and Strauss 1964; 1968; 1980; see also: Strauss et. al. 1985). Following this line of thought, Riemann and Schütze underline the "night side"<sup>5</sup> of the social reality usually neglected within the field of sociology and carefully examine disordered and painful experiences that hinder control over one's life. They explain further:

we have in mind social processes structured by conditional chains of events that one cannot avoid without high costs, constant breaks of expectations, and a growing and irritating sense of loss of control over one's life circumstances. One feels that one is driven, that one can only react to "outer forces," that one does not understand anymore. (Riemann and Schütze 1991:337)

Ursula Apitzsch and Lena Inowlocki emphasize that in the process of trajectory: "the deepest suffering within such disorder arises from the removal of the basis of co-operation, solidarity and reciprocity in interaction" (2000:60). This ordinarily implies chaos of expectation, orientation, and relationship both to one's world and one's identity but also feelings of despair, self-alienation, and estrangement. While exposed to long-term suffering, an afflicted individual loses the capacity to act intentionally and passively reacts to overwhelming outer conditions. Interestingly enough, in spite of the chaotic nature of the trajectory process, it has its inner dynamics and sequential organization (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 1996).

Natalia in a very clear and distinct way describes in her narration the dynamics of the (collective)<sup>6</sup> trajec-

<sup>5</sup> The very notion of the "night side" of human life comes from Berger and Luckmann's book: *The Social Construction of Reality* (1991).

<sup>6</sup> I use the term "collective trajectory" while talking about suffering that affects all members of the family, disorganizes their life, and leads to amoralization (i.e., lack of moral order in social interaction, cf. Garfinkel 2002).

tory process of her family powered by a developing addiction to alcohol that progressively creeps into her family life, takes control over their everyday experiences, and destroys moral foundations of their existence (cf. Garfinkel 2002:35-38). Her rendering markedly shows disorderliness of expectations, a loss of sense of reality, and a breakdown of their relationship that intensifies and spreads over various realms of life.

Already in the very beginning of the story line, that is, in a narrative preamble, Natalia summarizes her life and announces that she comes from a pathological family and therefore, ended up in a children's home:

[g]enerally I come from a pathological family, which is why, uhm... I ended up<sup>7</sup> in the children's home. Though for five years, so it was not so terribly long. I was very lucky anyway cause, uh... I knew people who were in the children's home almost since birth, so it wasn't so bad... uhm... (see: "Transcript of Biographical Interview with Natalia" in this issue of QSR, p. 117, lines 23-26)

It is important to note that in the preamble the informant usually deals with an overall gestalt of his/her life (Schütze 2008a:16-17). In Natalia's case, the overall shape of her biographical experiences is very much affected by being a child of "pathological" parents. She grew up in a typical working-class family (but was not from the very beginning affected by alcoholism) in a large Polish industrial city where the father was a breadwinner and the mother took care of the children. Potentially, her parents could

<sup>7</sup> It is of key importance that Natalia is not saying that she was sent or forced to go there. Natalia's linguistic choices seem to be very crucial for understanding the overall biographical gestalt.

live a "normal" life within the frame of the state socialism. Moreover, Natalia claims that her father was very skilled manually and was seen as a valued worker, he could always find a job. These foggy recollections of "normality" are very important frames of reference in her life history that are used as a pair-part of her constant comparison<sup>8</sup> between her "dirty" and "sloppy" home and other "clean" and "well cared for" settings (see the discussion below).

Natalia's description of the growing (collective) alcoholic trajectory potential seems to be almost a textbook example. At the beginning of her rendering, we find a portrait of a normal, ordinary, and modest family<sup>9</sup> that she stored in her memory as a child:

[b]ack in the 80s it was rather uhm... the conditions were so, maybe, maybe there were not too much in the shops, but the conditions were good enough that this care was... and the money... it was enough. I remember we used to go to the cinema and for ice cream and... and generally it was, it was okay. (p. 117, lines 27-30)

Further, she focuses on the developing alcoholism of her parents and illustrates the downward spiral of the trajectory process in a very transparent way:

[h]owever, it **got worse a little**<sup>10</sup> when my parents started to drink, started to abuse alcohol, my mom, my dad. Dad was a very skilled worker, so when they

<sup>8</sup> We may find a lot of contrast sets in her extempore storytelling that help her reflect on and understand her biographical and identity development (i.e., to do – still unfinished and biographical work).

<sup>9</sup> It is very intriguing to compare Natalia's case with other cases collected by Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas in her research project. For instance, with the autobiographical rendering of Edyta who has no other frames of reference (nice past memories) that would enable her to build contrast sets and consequently, to start her biographical work.

<sup>10</sup> All parts marked by the author in grey are then discussed and/or are especially important for the analysis.

fell into such uhm... alcohol benders, where normally nowadays a man would automatically lose a job, my father always came back. And s/ so he was welcomed with open arms because he really was a good worker and reliable uhm... well mm... Such, mm, alcohol binges, carousals, **were becoming heavier more and more often**, sometimes it used to be so that my parents kept drinking for three weeks uhm... sometimes it used to be that they were drinking for half a year let's say, but well uhm... such uhm... the moment when uhm... this started - this alcohol appeared quite more often it used to, and **it got worse and worse** uhm... My dad... uhm... in 88 or 89 went to prison for two years. (p. 117, line 30 to p. 118, line 3)

A couple of lines later she adds:

[a]nd then it all began, it all began to fall apart, although earlier there were such situations, that if perhaps social care had been more often interested uhm, in depth and probably earlier, everybody would have ended up in children's home and this may have been better for us. Because of all the family, to be honest, that's the only real home I have ((cries))... (p. 118, lines 10-14)

It goes without saying that her parents go through different stages of alcohol addiction – consequently, their dependence on alcohol becomes stronger and stronger (the trajectory dynamics intensifies) and afflicts more and more spheres of their world of everyday existence (the trajectory spreads). Their daily routines seem to concentrate on uncontrollable heavy drinking leading to self-destructive practices. In the above-quoted passage there are many formulaic verbal expressions that are typical for the trajectory of suffering (Schütze 2008a:26). They render the trajectory dynamics and the growing disorder in their life (see: statements marked in grey). Natalia talks about the incapacity of her parents to handle everyday issues, to take care of their children,

and to control their life. This means not only financial deterioration, harsh life conditions but also emotional corrosion of her family, leading to a severe trajectory trap with its peak phases after her father is sentenced for 2 years in prison.<sup>11</sup> The informant says that then: *my mom completely lost it, uhm... lost probably... a sense that she is a mother, that she has a family, that she has children, and that these kids really have only her at the moment* and she became a nanny for the younger siblings while her mother went partying hard<sup>12</sup> (p. 120, lines 11-25). Once Natalia and her siblings were left alone for 2 or 3 days and were playing with their friends coming through the window. They set fire and the police came. Their grandma (mother's mom who many times was doing her best to call her daughter to order) finally reported, either to the social security administration or to the police, that they had been left at home unattended. Accordingly, her siblings were placed in children's homes for some time and Natalia was sent to her grandma (father's mother) living in a village. This is one of these experiences that, in the long run, might weaken her ties with the family and deepen her sense of self-alienation associated with the feeling of "not fitting into" the family unit.

Although Natalia was treated unkindly by her grandma (as she puts it: *grandma needed someone to take care of the hens* [p. 121, line 12] and argues that she was "accused" of being very much like her mother) and missed her siblings very much, she got very unused to dirt (p. 121, line 30). [As we already know, this is a repeated motif in her rendering that occurs

<sup>11</sup> Natalia suggests that both parents were involved in the production and sale of bootleg alcohol and were caught red-handed but her father took the blame.

<sup>12</sup> Short literal quotations and expressions of the informant are written in italics.

in many contrast sets: dirty and run-down family home vs. clean and well-groomed grandma's place or later children's home. In the former place her everyday life is described as chaotic and unpredictable, while in the latter it seems to be ordered and stable.] Ironically, after her father had been released from prison and took her back home, her life was not back to normal but deteriorated significantly. It was extremely hard for her to stay again with her parents going on extended alcohol benders, to be exposed to the parent's fights, to live in a devastated flat, to see her brothers "going off the rails" and descending into a life of crime. As a result, she came to a conclusion that she cannot live like this any longer. It might be because she has already tested the bitter-sweet fruit of a different way of life – the phenomenon that Alfred Schütz called "homecoming" (1990:106-119). This experience deepened her loneliness, self-alienation, and a sense of being relevant to nobody. Additionally, her stay in grandmother's place equipped her with alternative, "better," patterns of everyday routines. After a 2-year absence and separation from parents, Natalia returned home and contrary to her expectation that things would have got better, they had got even worse. She says:

I hoped that when I get back it would all be well and at last this family of mine/ but I already, uh, I could see I couldn't live like this. I freed/ I/ for two years I was gone and I just stopped to accept things, it was very very difficult for me... (p. 121, lines 33-35)

Her intimate relationships with parents and siblings, in the meaning of being able to share the sense of common time and space, as well as to experience certain things in the same way and define them within the common horizon, had weakened

dramatically. Schütz claims that those who had left and those who had stayed do not share the same frame of relevance and cultural patterns any longer and adds that for an arriving individual: "the home to which he returns is by no means the home he left or the home which he recalled and longed for during his absence" (1990:115-116). However, during her stay with her grandma, and in spite of a negative relationship between them, Natalia could experience a "precarious new balance of everyday life" (Riemann and Schütze 1991:349-350; see also: Schütze 1997:25) and, at least for a while, was able to escape from the trajectory of suffering, get out of the family chaos, and live a relatively calm life, whereas her mother and siblings were progressively going the downward path. Consequently, their biographical experiences and orientations have become completely different. Additionally, her former experiences at home gained another meaning (Schütz 1990:115) and she learnt that other ways of everyday existence were possible. Her system of relevance and schemes of interpretation certainly changed, to some extent. Thus, Natalia felt that she was not the same person, neither for herself nor for those who stayed at home. Paradoxically, she came back into her family as a stranger and became a stranger to herself. This nagging feeling of not "belonging" to the family and painful estrangement unquestionably added to the trajectory power. Moreover, some further difficulties were piling up, being probably perceived in a more radical and dramatic way due to her adolescence. All of these painful experiences of being controlled by "outer" overwhelming forces (homecoming experience, deteriorating alcoholism of her parents, developing alcoholic and criminal careers of her siblings, as well as her puberty) cre-

ated a "cumulative mess" in her life (Strauss et. al 1985; Corbin and Strauss 1988).

What we learn about her childhood and the teenage years is that her home was dirty, mother did not take care of her children, she and her siblings were wearing filthy and ill-fitted clothes, had unwashed hair, et cetera. But then, after drawing the listener/researcher's attention to the fact that she regrets that no social institution protected her siblings and did not put them in a children's home [because of all the family, to be honest, that's the only real home I have ((cries))... (p. 118, lines 13-14) and only just me... as the only one of this six (p. 118, lines 29-30), Natalia introduces the background construction (starting on page 118, line 28 and ending on page 119, line 21). Here, she deals with the death of her 2-year-old sister because of purulent meningitis.<sup>13</sup> This happened when parents left their children unattended and were out for the whole day. Natalia (being 8 at that time) and her brothers were observing the little girl catching her breath and dying slowly. What might be puzzling is her statement that:

among the siblings actually just I, I do live, say, not for today, but just so normally as a normal person. I have a regular job, I have a husband, I have a home, I have bills that I have to pay, which is not cool but, but that's the way life is. While my older brother is in prison, my younger brother is in prison, and my still younger brother is still in prison. My one sister is married but this is nothing good, and - certainly nobody would want to meet her at night because she is aggressive, causes trouble. (p. 119, lines 23-28)

<sup>13</sup> The background construction was, to some extent, forced by the narrative constraint to go into details. Natalia mentions here for the first time that there were six children in her family and must explain to the listener what had happened with one of the kids.

The quoted passage in which Natalia evaluates her life and argues that it is "normal" and, furthermore, in which she juxtaposes her everyday existence with her siblings' delinquent careers outlines an overall biographical structuring of the whole life history (and implicitly exposes certain sources of obstacles in her biographical work). The informant compares her brothers' "bad," morally degenerate, criminal careers to her "good," neat home today. But, this contrast set may formally resemble (auto)biographies of many Holocaust survivors (see, e.g., Rosenthal 1998) and probably other life histories of people who were the only ones to get out of the collective trajectory trap, while others did not. Ordinarily, the awareness that *actually just I* (have survived or live a normal life) strongly influences their personal identity and shapes their biographical orientation. Thus, their life is soundly marked with (subliminal) deep guilt feelings and shattering pangs of conscience that they did not do enough to save or help the others. All of these struggles may be discerned in the above-quoted passage and in many other places of Natalia's rendering.<sup>14</sup> She still must grapple with the feeling of guilt for having a warm, normal home and a sense of self-blame and remorse that she failed to "rescue," or at least protect, her siblings.

### **A Suicide Attempt – A Desperate Biographical Action Scheme to Escape the Trajectory Trap and to Find Out if Somebody Does Care**

One of the most intriguing segments and one of the most traumatic episodes in Natalia's extempore nar-

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, a passage quoted in concluding remarks (in the transcription it is p. 124, line 28 to p. 125, line 2).

ration is a recapitulation of her suicidal attempt at the age of 14.

However, before analyzing this passage, I would like to refer to Harvey Sacks' works in which he meticulously analyzed phone conversations of suicidal persons with the Suicide Prevention Center. He opens one of his papers with a quotation in which after being asked to tell "Why you feel like committing suicide?," a suicide person sighs twice and answers: "Well, it is the same old childish reason that everybody wants to commit suicide." But, the call-taker inquires further: "Why is that?," and the person searching for help says: "You want to find out if anybody really does care" (Sacks 1987:219). Sacks underlines that ordinary people really do not know how to "translate" their motives into the "professional" language of psychology. I believe that his considerations may throw some light upon Natalia's predicament and her desperate attempt to confirm if she is still an important member of her family unit.

Now, let us return to the course of Natalia's life history. When she returned home after her 2-year stay at her grandma's place, she was a teenager (about 14 years old) and – what was already discussed above – she found herself in a position of a homecomer who could not accept the way her family lived any longer and who experienced the disruption of her family relationships since both her parents and siblings lived their own (respectively, alcoholic and alcoholic-delinquent) lives. Once more referring to Sack's considerations, we may say that "essentially automatic ways of finding that others care" (Sacks 1987:224), or less dramatic devices for considering one's relevance for the family (cf. Sacks 1987:221),

that is, the sense of being missed and awaited, do not work in her case. It seems that nobody even noticed that she was back home. Therefore, she went further and made a desperate attempt to make them take notice of her and decided to commit suicide. She recapitulates:

and I remember that (((with hesitation in her voice))) no, I don't remember at this point yet, so I don't remember for sure, but it all got one thing on top of another... and... and these quarrels... such fights, it's probably, I mean adolescent age also played a role, I mean once, umm... enough of this all... enough of this life here in this house of drunkards (((strong emotions))). And... well I didn't want, uhm... again these lice, this dirt and and generally such old habits of the family that, uhm... I don't know. Once I don't really remember the reason yet, that was the last straw and I had swallowed some pills that I found in the cabinet and decided to poison myself... which was not very reasonable but well... In any case, I decided to take my own life... I think my dad found me but I'm not sure... it could be so, I was probably only half-conscious ((grunts)). I, uh, was taken to hospital to [street name], and there I had gastric lavage but from this hospital, but I didn't return home because I didn't want to. (p. 121, line 35 to p. 122, line 11)

Let us have a closer look at Natalia's account. First of all, she does not deal with the causes behind her suicidal attempt explicitly and in a detailed way. This enigmatic way of recapitulating events is characteristic of the trajectory process. We may only presume why Natalia had decided to kill herself. It was not only a multiplication and mutual intensification of traumatic and painful biographical experiences, growing self-alienation, fear, and anxiety in everyday life situations, or typical for the stage of adolescent times inner turmoil and distress (undoubtedly strengthening one's disposition for getting hurt),

but there was probably something else – something Natalia wants to blur either because from her current perspective this seems to be trivial, footling, and meaningless (e.g., disappointed love), and now she might be ashamed of it (especially, in the eyes of the listener), or because this was something too painful to be recapitulated, something she still has not worked through (and therefore, may lack vocabulary for its description). We know for sure that in her adolescent years she felt alone and unattended. She was overwhelmed by duties and responsibilities and overburdened with the task of taking care of herself and her siblings. Consequently, Natalia could have been paralyzed by tiredness (Schütze 1996:124) and exhausted by permanent instability at home, both being the consequence of coping with problems which were beyond her horizon of understanding and which were out of her control. Besides, in the aftermath of her homecoming experience (after acquiring different patterns of dealing with everyday life), she underwent a dramatic change in her personal identity and biographical orientation that influenced her interactions with significant others and intensified her feeling of anomy and of being excluded from the daily life existence of her family. Natalia aimed to take her own life; being emotionally isolated, or even separated, from her parents and siblings and morally disoriented. At that time, the informant was not a fully rational and circumspect individual but a lost teenager standing on the edge of the precipice. She became strange to herself and could not believe any longer that things could be changed and could be normal again. While struggling with her unbearable inner turmoil, she had introduced a desperate and dangerous biographical action scheme to escape the trajectory trap and attempted to commit suicide.

Paradoxically, after trying to kill herself, Natalia noticed that – again using Sack's terminology – a unit, parent-child or brother-sister (cf. Sacks 1987), in which there are people who should provide help, support, and care does not work properly. The answer to her question "If I am still relevant to my family and if anybody really cares?" was in fact: "Nobody cares." It might also be argued that instead of giving an expected answer, Natalia's significant others (through their activities) posed another question "How dare you do it to us?" We must remember that her suicide attempt ruined an illusionary "good," or at least "adhering to the norm," picture of her family and therefore, they could not maintain some sort of "reality falsification" (i.e., "we are an ordinary family") any longer. Consequently, members of the family unit – those who were entitled to help her in an ordinary way (cf. Schütze 1997:41) – turned their backs on her and made her feel guilty. It seems that under these circumstances Natalia had no other choice than to go to a residential institution.

To sum up, we must bear in mind that, in general terms, mutual trust in her family is breached and consequently, the constitutive order of events in her everyday life (Garfinkel 1963:209) is unsettled, for it is commonly believed and presupposed when in need, people (especially significant others: family members and friends) should support each other (cf. Schütze 1996:144). This "background expectation," ordinarily manifesting itself in the reciprocity of perspectives that constitute moral order (Garfinkel 2002:35-38), is not fulfilled and brings about chaos and uncertainty. This is usually a very painful experience that fuels and intensifies the unfolding trajectory process.

Taking the methodological and theoretical perspective of conversation analysis (especially, the concept of adjacency pairs and conditional relevance), we may treat Natalia's action as one item of the adjacency pair (an ordered set of two turns in conversation: e.g., question-answer, greeting-greeting, accusation-denial), that is, a question: "If somebody cares?" to which she does not receive a proper response (the second item of the adjacent pair should be a positive answer and an offer of help<sup>15</sup> is absent), but instead another question is asked: "How dare you do it to us?" Consequently, the basic property of conditional relevance is violated, and this means that the social order is destroyed (see: Schegloff and Sacks 1973).

### The (Unintended) Destructive Role of a Professional "Event Carrier"

After her suicidal attempt, Natalia comes to the children's home with the erroneous (probably imposed and supported by a school psychologist) belief that it would help her pass through adolescence to adulthood smoothly and reshape her complicated traumatic life situation. However, she is still too young to be able to act circumspectly and reasonably. More importantly, her trajectory process is in its peak phases: she feels totally strange to herself, knows that she cannot trust her capacities anymore, and does not understand her own strange reactions to outer events (Riemann and Schütze 1991:350). Besides, she feels abandoned by her family. Thus, she is not fully aware of her real life situation, cannot anticipate destructive "side-effects" and poten-

<sup>15</sup> There is a background expectation (see: the main text above) that if the need arises, people should help each other (Schütze 1997:41).

tial consequences of her (own?) choice, as well as circumspectly plan her future. [Still, the question remains to what extent the school psychologist influenced her decision.] Her desperate attempts to regain control over the life course paradoxically turn into their reverse (cf. Schütze 1997:17).

A cursory look at her life history does not capture that she is still conscience-stricken for having chosen to live at a children's home of her own free will and for having left her family. While talking about the process of decision-making, she presents herself as a rational, active, able to bear responsibility adult individual, not as paralyzed by outer circumstances, affected with suffering and traumatic memories, disoriented, and lacking agency (in Margaret Archers' sense, see: Archer 2000) teenager. A detailed analysis of the quotation below reveals two significant features of her biographical identity and biographical orientation. Firstly, she defines herself as *an outcast in the family*. Secondly, she says: *I found myself in the children's home* – still, rather bringing to the forefront her active role in the process instead of saying, for instance, that "she was sent to children's home."

And... I don't know I am a bit of **an outcast in the family**, frankly speaking I don't feel very cool with that. Although I would not want to identify with my/ that is, I will never renounce my family and I will always help anyone if there is such a need. But I can't live like them. I just cannot and that is, it seems to me, that is the reason why **I found myself in the children's home**. (p. 120, lines 6-10)

It becomes apparent from the way her experiences are presented that from her subjective point of view she is greatly troubled by the knowledge of having

acted improperly, and excessively tormented by a sense of guilt. Again, she juxtaposes her "successful" life in the children's home (being looked after, being clean, having a place to do her homework) with the fate of her brothers engaging in delinquent behavior and being addicted to alcohol, as well as her sister being afflicted with mental health problems. It goes without saying that Natalia cannot come to terms with the fact that she managed to find her way out of the woods and her siblings did not. Her current life, to a large extent, is focused on compensating for being a "bad" daughter and sister, a "traitor" to the family. There are a lot of traces in her rendering that show how her self-image and self-awareness are negotiated in interactions with her significant others – Natalia takes their point of view into account and believes that she is seen and defined as *an outcast* (see the quotation above) or *the black sheep* (see the quotation below). Natalia says:

[w]ell, but I am such such uhm... perhaps the black sheep of the family of mine ((laughs)), because everything I do is the opposite way than everyone would want, would wish. (p. 128, lines 24-26)

When in the questioning part of the interview the researcher suggests that the way Natalia entered the children's home is rather unusual, the informant starts to recollect the role of a school psychologist:

N: Someone helped me... it was a school, uhm... psychologist, from this school here uhm...

A: The one you went to, mhm?

N: She, she took care of me. I don't know actually, to tell the truth, I wonder how she found herself this hospital. Perhaps I before made a contact, maybe she just saw that something was happening, honestly I don't remember. **I had then such a tough time** in

my life, **that some things I missed**. But that - I know that when I came to this hospital so from her uhm... I had such support and care. And she took care of everything, she helped me with everything and I found myself just then dir/ directly in the children's home. (p. 137, lines 24-31)

In all probability, a committed school psychologist was putting her heart and soul into her work dealing with Natalia's problems. In the informant's own words, she was the one who *took care, helped, and supported* her. However, the school psychologist's attempts to provide help seem to be of temporary character. Supposedly, she did not follow Natalia's life course then and did not monitor the development of her career later on. This might have resulted both from a different ideology behind psychological counseling in communistic Poland (and implicit faith in state-socialistic education), as well as a status of school psychologists who – in those times – were mostly trained in pedagogy, not in psychology. Interestingly enough, in the above-quoted passage we may find the phenomenon of fading-out practices, that is, language mechanisms that allow informants not to recollect, not to remember, and/or not to focus on painful or hurting experiences (Schütze 1992:187-208; 2008a). There are typical markers (highlighted in grey) of disorder in her life and of the unfolding trajectory of suffering. It is noteworthy that we do not learn in detail about the causes of Natalia's suicidal attempt and she does not make it clear in the interview. This might be another indicator that she is still not able to practically work upon the trajectory dynamics.

The role of the school psychologist as an "event carrier" should be explained in a more detailed way

here. In Schütze's understanding, "events carriers" are other "dramatis personae beyond the story carrier" (Schütze 2008a:21) who have an influence on a person (informant), as well as effect a change in his or her life course and self-conception. They usually turn up in one's life for a moment, yet, the consequences of their actions might be of great importance. Some of them may bring about a positive change in one's world of everyday existence, some others may (at least in certain aspects) destroy one's life attitude; still, others may do him or her a disservice. It is important, however, to distinguish between those who purposely wish to spoil one's life (these might be called biographical destroyers) and those who intend to help but unintentionally or "in good faith" devastate one's life (those who do an ill turn). The latter case is to be found in Natalia's rendering. Her account gives us an illuminating insight into such a case. Although, in all probability, a school psychologist who talks to and takes care of Natalia after her failed suicide attempt acts in good faith and with every intention to provide support, her help turns out questionable.

### Reversed Betrayal Funnel

An important question presents itself: Was 14-year-old Natalia really a person who could deliberately make a final decision on coming to a children's home or was it already somehow institutionally fixed? The point here, however, is not to establish the objective truth but to examine Natalia's understanding of her position and life situation in those days and its consequences from her own point of view. For this reason – guided by the well-known sentence of William I. Thomas: "[i]f men define situations

as real they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572) – I wish to focus here on Natalia's subjective point of view and its influence on her schemes of reference, everyday life attitude, biographical orientation, and personal identity. It would be claimed once more that Natalia considers her stay in the children's home her own choice. She still feels blamed for everything that went wrong in her family. As a result, she constantly attempts to redeem her guilt and alleged "sins": she takes care of her ill mother, tries to save her dying father by all means, or makes every effort to regularly visit her brothers in jails in remote parts of Poland. It is important to note what and how Natalia describes events following her admission to the hospital after a suicidal attempt:

I didn't return home because I didn't want to. Well, but this was very hard for me ((cries)).... **because my family absolutely turned away from me...** (p. 122, lines 10-12)

It becomes clear that in the eyes of her parents the decision to go to the children's home was directed against them. Moreover, it seems that in their conviction, Natalia bears the blame for an eventual "confirmation" of the pathological and "abnormal" status of her family. The reason for this might be that they believe that their daughter in collusion with the school psychologist betrayed them and thus, questioned their arduously maintained (yet, illusive) image of a "normal" family.

In ordering and understanding the course of events and associated feelings in Natalia's life course, the concept of "betrayal funnel," as described by Erving Goffman in his illuminating book *Asylum* (1991),

seems to be of much help. Goffman analyzes a sequence of steps in the moral career<sup>16</sup> of individuals that ends with their separation from the outer world in mental hospitals. Over the course of this process, so-called pre-patients pass through the "betrayal funnel" as people they usually trust (i.e., family members and friends) collude with professionals (usually psychologists and psychiatrists) and report their "abnormal" behaviors. Besides, they are never fully aware of potential consequences of their entering the mental hospital and practices which are meant to deprive them of their "old" identities (cf. Goffman 1991:128-132).

Generally speaking, whereas in the case of being drawn through the "betrayal funnel" it is a family member (pre-patient) who is deceived and seduced by his relatives (complainants) colluding with health professionals to place him or her in a mental hospital, and who is gradually stripped of his or her former identity and personal dignity (his or her "abnormal" status is fixed), in the case of being entangled in the "reversed betrayal funnel" (as illustrated in Natalia's account), there are relatives who believe that they were betrayed by a young girl (daughter and sister) who supposedly cooperated with a school psychologist and "willingly" entered the total institution (the children's home), and thus, unquestionably confirmed "pathological" character of her family. To get a more detailed insight into the process of being moved along the "reversed betrayal funnel," the series of stages in the moral career of a mental patient constituting the "betrayal funnel"

<sup>16</sup> Goffman defines moral career as "the regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others" (1991:119).

(described below in points "a"<sup>17</sup>) and sequence of events in Natalia's life history (discussed in points "b") will be juxtaposed. Still, it should be emphasized here that in the "betrayal funnel" it is rather the person placed in the total institution who is stigmatized (Goffman 1990a), while, paradoxically, in the "reversed betrayal funnel" that are rather those who stayed outside the total institution who are seen as "abnormal."<sup>18</sup>

1. a) The betrayal funnel usually starts when the family notice worrying abnormal behavior of one of its members and observe recurrent symptoms of a mental disorder that are ignored by the afflicted person; b) Natalia grows up in an alcoholic home and during her formative years she is an eyewitness to the excessive drinking of her parents and sees how their lives go completely out of control, which is thoroughly ignored by them and "unnoticed" by social institutions. Her family's collective trajectory of suffering results in distortions of the normative life cycle. 2. a) Family members are more and more worried about the suffering individual's strange behavior and become exhausted while trying to live normally and/or get rid of an awkward family member; b) Natalia is extremely mentally tired and physically drained because of struggling with her alcoholic parents, mothering her siblings, and dealing with harsh reality while still being a child and then – a teenager. It becomes apparent that her

<sup>17</sup> Points "a" are based on Goffman's book *Asylums. Essays on Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1991: 128-132).

<sup>18</sup> It must be remembered, however, that stigmatization may afflict both sides; in the case of "betrayal funnel," the family of a mental patient, and in the case of "reversed betrayal funnel" – the person who "has placed her- or himself" in the total institution may be deeply discredited by other members of a society.

everyday life is controlled by a conditional chain of outer (often terrifying) events. 3. a) Then, ordinarily, relatives or friends turn to professionals for help; b) Natalia tries to commit suicide that might be interpreted as "the search for help" (Sacks 1987, see also the discussion above). 4. a) Consequently, external agents step in, although a pre-patient is still not fully aware of real intentions of his or her relatives. All believe that they act in the suffering person's best interest; b) A third agent (a school psychologist) is involved in Natalia's case – again, a professional helper believes that she is able to save her from the influence of her alcoholic family. 5. a) Soon afterwards, relatives and health professionals "hatch a plot" against the afflicted individual to deprive him or her of decision-making rights and abilities. A so-called "alienating coalition" is established. This leads to a serious breach of trust and self-alienating processes; b) Natalia – probably being influenced much by the school psychologist – "conspires" against her parents in order to get out of the pathological milieu. In other words, Natalia is likely cast in the role of "a complainant." Therefore, she is cursed by her family and treated like a "betrayal." 6. a) The next step is the decision to place the afflicted person in the mental hospital for treatment – usually, without consent of the suffering individual; b) Natalia goes to the children's home – in all probability, against her parents' will. And finally, 7. a) one's "abnormality" and mental illness is confirmed. This, in turn, involves stigmatization and definition of an individual as "not quite human" (Goffman 1990a:6); b) An ultimate confirmation of "abnormality," that is, an uncontrollable addiction to alcohol and pathological behavior of her parents.

It might be assumed that Natalia came to the children's home "under misapprehension purposely induced by others" (Goffman 1991:125). Furthermore, it seems that she was not provided with a realistic picture of what her real situation was and how it might influence her future life (cf. Goffman 1991:130). There is little doubt that along with entering the children's home, Natalia loses the trust of her family. It is likely that taking the perspective of her relatives (i.e., "me" images in the sense of George H. Mead [1934]), she attributes the fault of the erosion of the family to herself and believes to be disloyal to her parents. Consequently, in Natalia's subjective understanding, she is (this issue was already discussed above) *an outcast in the family* and *the black sheep of the family*. It seems that this "looking-glass" effect (Colley 1922:184) – that is, the imagination of what others believe we are and think of us – continually shapes her life and constitutes her personal identity. Yet, it is intriguing that Natalia who so desperately wanted to break free from the family, even now, cares so much about their opinion and her image in their eyes. We must remember, however, that they still play the roles of "significant others" in her biography and therefore, as Berger and Luckmann put it: "occupy a central position in the economy of reality-maintenance and are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity" (1991:170). Besides, an intriguing hypothesis put forward in this volume by Sylwia Urbańska saying that apostasy from one's family is not really possible seems to be right. Paradoxically, in the case of Natalia, the family is not a shelter but a sort of a biographical trap. Therefore, she is not able to work her trajectory through and see herself as "a positively developing, unfolding,

unique identity" (Schütze 2008a:6). To put it short, despite having a good life nowadays (beloved husband and daughter, bachelor degree, stable job, plans to build a house), she is not capable of shaping her life to a satisfying degree, yet.

### Concluding Remarks: An Overall Biographical Evaluation and Unending Biographical Work

There are a lot of contrast sets in Natalia's rendering (mentioned a couple of times above) in which she constantly examines the differences between the course of her life and her siblings' unfolding trajectory, as well as her current "decent" life situation and her sibling's delinquent careers and a fateful logic of events in their lives. She believes it is because of her stay in the children's home that she managed to get back on the right track and constantly highlights its positive role in her life course. While talking about visiting her brothers in the prisons, she says: *they made a choice. Because I could also have chosen in fact...*<sup>19</sup> (p. 125, line 11). One of the most impressive comparative evaluations may be found in a pre-coda part<sup>20</sup> (starting on page 123, line 25):

I think I am a good mother... I understand my daughter, I can get along with her - communicate with her, even though she may be now at such an age, so rebellious because she is now 13 years old. I love her very much and she loves us too, me and my husband.

<sup>19</sup> This is probably a desperate endeavor to cope with one's enormous guilt-feelings by blaming the others and accusing them of being not circumspect enough.

<sup>20</sup> It is consistent with the grammar of the storytelling. Schütze says that in the (usually) extensive pre-coda part "we quite often find argumentative commentaries of balancing the pros and cons of one's life and biographical work in general, and therefore, they deal with the global story line and the overall biographical shape of the life history of the narrator" (2008a:20).

She is taught that there is a lot of love at our home, that she does not have to hide away any secrets, she is open, she tells us about everything and... I didn't have that, didn't have such understanding, I had no such love. This children's home gave me the direction, the fact that I completed a lot of different schools, and that in the end I am a fairly educated person, maybe not so super-extra, but I did the ba/ Bachelor degree. I am somehow oriented at the future – we're trying to build a house, we will see how it goes (((jokingly))) because bank loans are very expensive I don't know, well, I think very differently from my parents now and I regret that I couldn't do anything for my family, my brothers and sisters so that they would be in the sa/ the same situation as me. (p. 123, lines 25-35)

In this passage Natalia not only describes a close and loving relationship between her and her daughter (she had never had one with her mother) but also repeats how much she owes to the children's home (new schemes of interpretation, system of relevance, patterns of behavior, biographical orientation, a general attitude and perspective of her life, good education, etc.). It is, however, intriguing that she always juxtaposes "positive" sides (being taken care of, living in a clean place, being helped with homework) and consequences of being a foster child with a "negative" picture of her parents' life that, in her view, determined her siblings' fate (no love, no understanding, no care, only punishment). This strong contrast, together with a marker of compunction (*I regret that I couldn't do anything for my family*), might serve as an argumentative device to prove that allegedly her choice to enter the children's home was reasonable and a right one (now, she lives a "normal" life, while all of her siblings fell by the wayside and began delinquent careers). This might also suggest that she still struggles with "not-yet-fully-worked-through" (Bartelt 2012:115) bi-

ographical trajectory of suffering, powered by her (subliminal) guilt-feelings that she was the one who was able to escape the predicament. These feelings are of key relevance for the understanding of the development of her personal identity and biographical orientation.

To illustrate her "bad-family" thesis (see the notion of *Belegerzählung* [Schütze 1983]) Natalia talks about her two-year younger brother (currently sentenced for felonies) who was wetting the bed because of, as she believes, anxiety as a child and *suffered such terrible harm* ((cries)) (p. 124, lines 19-20). Natalia wishes to prove that her brother was *a sensitive kid* (p. 124, line 15) but was raised by alcoholic parents and in a bad neighborhood, and tells the story how they, as kids, were taking care of stray dogs – feeding them, giving them water, and looking for shelter (in fact, their fate appears to be similar). But then she adds:

[a]nd really my younger brother, who wanted to help animals so much when he was little, now he doesn't think rationally, doesn't think normally, and each such stay in penitentiary ((sniffs)) assures him that there is no other life than life in such a criminal world. (p. 124, lines 29-32)

The informant illustrates here a dramatic downward spiral in the life course of her brother who being "pushed by outer forces" (alcoholic behavior of his parents and its consequences), lost his chance to lead a normal life and became a dangerous, unpredictable criminal. This is a sharp contrast to her own biographical unfolding.

Natalia ends the first narrative part of her interview with the following evaluation of her life history:

N: I really just, well, I am just a bit... some people say that I am such a mother hen because... because I'm really able to withstand a lot. **Only it hurts me the most that they were not given the chance** these, these sib/ these siblings of mine. It's not cool. And - I still keep in touch with all them, although I don't - I don't go to these prisons because, well, I have my life, I have a grandma who is already/ who according to/ to whom I'm responsible to help, cause when I needed this help she helped me too. And I try as I can, so I don't go somehow, so terribly often over to these prisons simply because I'd have to spend every free weekend to go somewhere all over Poland and visit brothers who really, well, they made a choice. Because I could also have chosen in fact... I rebelled, it cost me a lot, because I don't know, perhaps only God knows how many nights I cried the whole night through... cause **I felt rejected** and when there is/ I don't know, whatever this grandma would be, whatever this father would be, one loves them and wants such uh... such acceptance from them so that... whatever, they would stick to us... I don't know what else I am to say... (p. 125, lines 4-15)

In this coda part, again, we may find empirical proof that Natalia still experiences a devastating feeling of "being driven" by fate, still suffers a lot, and has some difficulties in doing biographical work, for instance, in "re-evaluating, re-vising, re-seeing, and re-judging" (cf. Strauss 1969:100) "one's past and future in order to yield a sense of seamless continuity of identity" (Strauss 1993:99), or to put it in slightly different words: "to achieve a sense of biographical continuity and wholeness about one's identity" (Corbin and Strauss 1990:366-367). Though Natalia puts a lot of effort into doing biographical work and into coming to terms with her past traumatic experiences, yet, she cannot fully understand the mechanisms of her trajectory dynamics. She is not aware, or does not want to admit to herself, that

the trajectory exerts its destructive power over these areas of everyday existence that seem to be ordered and stable. Furthermore, she cannot accept the fact that she was the only child who was able to get out of the alcoholic family trap (*it hurts me the most that they were not given the chance*) and therefore, had an opportunity to learn (in the residential institution) how a "normal life" looks. But, she cannot agree openly that she is still assailed by a feeling of guilt and therefore, she is incapable of doing successful biographical work that not only involves cognitive processes but also key changes in one's attitude towards everyday life and certain actions aimed at the transformation of one's life situation (Strauss et. al. 1985; Kaźmierska 2012). Moreover, her deep and careful reflection on her life course is hindered by the feeling of being disowned and rejected by her family just after her "betrayal" (a suicide attempt and entering the children's home), by not being able to understand the mechanism of this process, and by certain misconceptions of her identity (cf. Schütze 2008a:6).<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, in spite of a lot of biographical work already done by Natalia, she is not capable of seeing herself as a complete individual and her self-image is still fragile. It is mainly because, subliminally, her painful experiences of being, on the one the hand, rejected and treated as a "traitor," and, on the other, being the only child "drawn out of the alcoholic abyss," still may exert its trajectory potential and may entail the risk of unexpected biographical disorganization.

<sup>21</sup> One additional thing that may restrict her biographical work is her husband's incomprehension of her will to support her parents and siblings all the time (probably, in his understanding, at the expense of their own family).



This may also explain why Natalia volunteered for the interview – in her case, this might have been additional desperate "search for help." In the face of the listener she could, at least halfway, understand both the development and sources of her suffering, as well as evaluate and balance her life, to some extent. We may only hope that the very process of the storytelling, at least partially, performed its therapeutic function (see: Rosenthal 2003). It is, however, remarkable that (probably falling back on her hus-

band) Natalia is able to develop new biographical action schemes and develop some sort of balance in her life circumstances. Yet, I believe that turning to a biographical counselor or a professional psychologist might be of great help for her since there are several issues that are not worked through in her biography and may come to the forefront whenever additional biographical difficulties appear. This means that there is still some potential for setting the "arrested" trajectory dynamics in motion.

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