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## Precariousness of everyday heroism A biographical approach to life politics

### **Abstract**

It is a special challenge for an individual to be the hero of his/her own life in the social conditions of reflexive modernisation. Autobiographies are not only descriptions of what happened during the life course, but they also reflect individual capacity to construct cultural identities in reflexive and reflective ways. To reflect on one's own success, personal gains and losses have to be compared with the competitive capacities of other community members of the hierarchically structured society. Reflexive capacity is the demand to become a conscious self and culturally identified member of a social group. Self-identity is reconstructed and coped with in light of meaningful others during certain transition periods in the life course. Life-political meaningfulness is checked by overcoming personal difficulties in order to manage life-challenges further. Self-respect gives the resources needed for overcoming alienating experiences, for controlling the risk of social exclusion and for mastering one's own life successfully. Narrative identification of self tends to produce life-heroes. But the problem considered relevant here starts from reflecting altruism with reflexive monitoring of the self. The question is whether heroic episodes of life can be narrated so that heroic everyday deeds are emphasised in autobiographies. Or is everyday heroism present only in precarious moments which escape ego-centrism because this kind of heroism can be placed only at the social margin, where surviving a difficult situation obliges one to turn unselfishly toward another?

### **Keywords**

Everyday hero, autobiography, reflexive self-identification, life politics, altruism

### **Introduction: narrating everyday heroism in reflexive modernity**

Everybody is the hero of his or her own life story. Everyday heroism is, however, a special challenge for an individual; and it becomes more and more challenging in the conditions of reflexive modernisation. This is the starting point for dealing with how the reflexive capacity of an individual is used to construct a precarious but heroic

identity for socially discriminated members of society. Certain autobiographical narratives and biographical episodes are taken into consideration here, not only to describe what happened during some individual life courses, but going further, to contemplate how the phenomenon called everyday heroism is processed and constructed by identity-political means at the margin of society.

This article approaches the problem of everyday heroism from a phenomenological perspective by interpreting autobiographical data and episodes of spontaneous altruism in everyday deeds where the other is met. The aim is to clarify how individuals make sense of their cultural identity and define their presence in their own social world (see Roberts, 2002: 20). To weigh personal gains and losses and to compare one's own social success with the situation of other members of a certain community, both reflexive and reflective individual capacities are needed. Reflectivity helps individuals to become conscious members of social groups. Reflexive monitoring of the self (Giddens (1991) is needed for transitions in the life course, when the personal identity is reconstructed and the cultural membership categories defined anew. To manage life challenges, life-political strategies are developed, especially for dealing with difficult situations. Overcoming alienating experiences nourishes self-respect, and in this way the resources for controlling the risk of social exclusion and mastering one's own life can be increased. This motivates individuals to use narrative strategies for constructing heroic self-identities from successfully experienced happenings in life.

The focus of this article is not on finding and analysing evidence of everyday heroism as such. Rather, the problem-oriented constructive approach implies that empirical episodes of life happenings as well as extracts of autobiographies are used as illustrative testimonies to the fragility of everyday heroism. This phenomenon is taken into consideration to point out that to interpret everyday heroism as a reflexive construction which enables the self to recognise the other in unselfish deeds, conceptual displacement between egoism and altruism is needed.

To understand another side of everyday heroism, *altruism* has to be reflected upon by reflexive monitoring of the self. The problem considered here is: can heroic episodes of everyday life be narrated so that altruistic deeds are emphasised in autobiographies? Or is everyday heroism present only in precarious situations that pass by momentarily? If this kind of heroism escapes ego-centrism, it can be found only as placed in the social margin where *the other* is met. Then we can assume that surviving a very challenging situation obliges one to turn unselfishly toward another so that everyday heroism becomes understandable as a fragile phenomenon.

This article deals with the above questions by interpreting autobiographical data. Both miniature autobiographies and episodic stories picked up from newspaper articles were chosen with the intention of discussing how delicate is the process of becoming an everyday hero. Narrated heroic experiences are related to personal and social challenges met during certain socio-historical changes. The precariousness of everyday heroism is associated with the liquid formation of identity as a social process which less and less is, according to Bauman (2000: 2), either fixed in space or bound in time, although the definition of the situation of the self has become a lifelong effort.

### **Are there everyday heroes in the society of individuals?**

The present cultural-historical epoch is diagnosed according to the reflexive tendencies of individualisation in the welfare societies. The cultural dynamics of life politics are connected with the reflexive capacities of individuals to increase pleasure

creatively by competitive means. Bennett's (2005: 58-65) term *active audience* refers to the consumer's competence to produce an identity by adopting a creative life style. It is important in a progressive society to prefer the innovative capacities of individuals. Competitiveness of the society is improved by finding the distinctive qualifications of the best people. Most successful individuals are mentioned as inspiring examples and life models for others. Competitiveness also refers, evidently even when evaluated in social terms, to increasing inequality between individuals. Not all competitors can be winners, some are runners-up, the least successful being losers.

The society of individuals, as characterised by Elias (1991) and with comparative terms also by Simmel (e.g. 1999), is a construction, the interpretation of which starts with thoughts on how the quotidian sociality of everyman becomes constructed in deeds of everyday life. Familiar settings of quotidian *aesthetics* (Lefebvre, 1971: 24) are understood in humble and solid ways as far as the insignificance of routines is taken as granted. The everyday life of ordinary people is not, in general, seen as interesting in the sense that it could offer exciting heroic examples. Rather, it seems to be filled with common-sense routines, taken-for-granted practices and seen-but-unnoticed aspects of the habitual life order as, for instance, Featherstone (1992: 159-160) has remarked. The relatively stable fabric of daily life is necessary for the personal upkeep of the individual. The normalcy of the life course includes compiling, maintaining and reproducing the figuration of typical social activities. Keeping up with the continuation of life may be hard enough in managing difficult situations, but usually it is not exciting enough to bring forth a heroic ethos.

The mundane fabrication of everyday practices is necessary for survival but alienating in the sense that the continuation of routines tends to make life safe, although monotonous. Routines are carried out without thoughtful orientation, in other words without fixing one's consciousness on these doings. This is why, referring to the Marxist way of analysing the use-value relation to wage work, estrangement from the self as a conscious being can be interpreted as a marker of instrumental orientation.

Heroic life, in contrast to everyday life, is marked by excitement and extraordinary deeds (Featherstone, 1992: 160, 164). Grandiose, superior capacities are demanded from real heroes. Virtuosity and courage are heroic qualifications, as is endurance. A hero is ready to respond to challenges, to take risks during his adventures and to struggle in an effort to succeed in performing demanding tasks. He concentrates all his capacity on achieving the extraordinary goals set for winners. Referring to Campbell's (1990) well-known slogan, the hero returns from his/her adventure "filled with force which will bring blessing to his/her nearest". A hero liberates those shackled by subordination. Stories of heroism feed the imagination of those living in the slavery of routine work and dreaming of having some superiority.

Mysterious, transcendental and metaphysical aspects of heroic episodes are traditionally seen worth being narrated, whereas the familiar course of everyday life is perceived and described only in the context of some meaningful events or through trivialities in fleeting moments which come and disappear almost without our awareness. But as Lefebvre (1971) points out in his classical interpretation, modernity made everyday life increasingly visible; and as several authors have discussed (see e.g. Chaney, 1994: 194-203), everyday situations have become imaginary stages for aesthetic performances and spectacles inside postmodernity. This age is receptive to popular stars as *icons of identity*. Representatives of everyday heroes are celebrated at the stages of publicity because of their likeness with anybody, even though they are expected to be capable of extreme courage.

Let us glance at a story of everyday heroism in a challenging situation when this challenge was not faced consciously, nor met with uncertainty. The heroine was thrown into these circumstances by accident, without her prior consent.

'It was a reflex', says Emma Paju, a 27-year-old actress who was walking on a seaside street near Helsinki City Theatre in October 2004, when she noticed that two men dragged a third man - unconscious, maybe drunk – and suddenly threw him into the cold water. Emma ran to the place, jumped into the water and brought the poor man up to the shore. Another woman helped her while the two men sat on a bench, indifferently watching what happened. Some days later this episode was described in a newspaper article (Helsingin Sanomat (HS) 15.10.2004) when Emma was rewarded with a special prize, 'The Flame of Life'. In this context Emma wondered how things like this can happen. She also remarked how valuable the daily work of nurses, policemen and rescue workers is. 'I cannot think of the life of any person as worthless', Emma concluded.

This story inspires to discuss further the problems of caring sociality as related to selfish individualisation in the age of reflexive modernisation. The precariousness of life conditions is argued to be increasing in many life arenas where continuation of social commitments has so far been expected to be the normal situation. Uncertain tendencies are now put forward in working life, family relations and career expectations. There is ambivalence concerning the political choices and postmodern ethical values of members of contemporary communities (Bauman, 1993). It is a popular argument that, to guarantee the rationality of competitive ethics - as far as interest partners can put their trust in fair play, social cohesion has to be conditioned based on a commitment to keeping equilibrium in social affairs. The idea of accumulating social capital is based on this argument. Our sociality tends to be increasingly instrumentally rational in the sense that utility equilibrium is preconditioned before sociality (equal partnership) begins. In these conditions we have to ask whether unselfish deeds are possible or plausible in the sense of *being for*, which Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics* (ibidem) has seen as being the basic moral value of human life. The answer can be sought in exceptional situations that compel people to use human reflexes without having time to rationalise their behaviour. Exceptional situations like natural catastrophes bring out the human spirit of sacrifice in a heroic way because it is a question of saving life in extreme conditions.

### **A methodological note: why interpret everyday heroism in autobiographies**

Interpretation of oneself as another (Ricoeur, 1992) is much discussed within the narrative genre. In an interpretative process, when narrating what happened to oneself, the present author sends the narrator to the past to find the person who experienced something meaningful in order to remember what was internalised. We can see the act of telling one's own story as emancipating, and even more as empowering, when it enables someone to become a conscious subject who knows how to live a better life.

It seems that the tendency toward life-political individualisation fits well with late-modern self-actualisation. No wonder that soft methodologies called *autoethnography* (e.g. Ellis and Bochner, 2003: 209-214), narrative studies of lives or even performance studies (e.g. Alexander, 2005: 411-441) are increasingly in

demand. The self is not only reflected in a public place but increasingly, as Alexander points out, public scenes and performances are used culturally to see the self as reflecting him- or herself. This means, as Alexander (ibidem: 423) sums up this tendency, an act of seeing the self both through and as the other.

Personal narratives can be used for many interactive, interpretative, reflexive and self-creative purposes. In any case, in contemporary society, with its tendencies toward fragmentation and toward competing with the increasing demand for rational consciousness, narrative strategies are means of constructing individual identity in flexible ways (c.f. Roberts, 2002: 21-22). This situation makes involvement of the therapeutic aspect in the autobiographical genre very understandable. Although the orientation here is close to critical participatory view or creative analytical practice (see Denzin, 2005: 933-958) my aim is not to introduce specific devices for biographical analysis. The focus is neither on soft means of managing emotions (Hochschild, 1991) nor on adoption of confessional applications of embodied autobiography (Coffey, 1999). Identity politics is not taken into service of representational pedagogy (Giroux, 1994) or critical performance ethnography (Alexander, 2005: 427). Instead of advocating emancipatory discourses as such I try to make understandable why everyday heroism is necessarily precarious as a phenomenon which is almost invisible and found only in almost unnoticed processes. Altruistic episodes are taken into consideration in contemplating the construction of caring identities in deeds that are included only fragmentarily in the narration of everyday heroism.

### **Heroic life and heroic narratives in publicity**

In contemporary competitive society, heroes are admired. Heroism is publicly celebrated in performances, programs and media-narratives. The luckiest fellow competitors are celebrated - although sometimes envied - not only because of their competencies in managing the occasional incidents they face, but also because special capabilities make them superior to everyman.

Competitiveness also means an ability to make the proper choices which are demanded socially from an emancipated, empowering and enabling individual. The conception of social equality has now turned more and more towards social participation and contribution; in other words, everyone is expected to have and give a share in the costs and benefits of society. Political democracy has progressed by means of group solidarity into a determinative factor of the welfare society and a significant denominator of civil rights. As they adjust to the requirements of the competitive society, individual choosers try to occupy the best possible social positions for themselves in the course of their life span and in comparison with their social groupings. Life situations in present society tend to become risky and precarious. It is demanded that everyman learn how to succeed, because opportunities to win and threats of loss are met by everybody as daily challenges.

It is commonly believed that *fortune* is involved when decisions are made about whether one is a prototypical winner or remains in the background. Thematically, the boundaries between the extraordinary world of heroes and the quotidian spheres of ordinary men are well defined; but in practice the limits are blurred and shifting from moment to moment. Everyday heroism is an interesting topic because a "dialectical tension between alienation and self-liberation" (Gottdiener, 1996: 144) lies within this problem sphere or hides in the process of constructing this phenomenon. According to Lefebvre, an intellectual mentor of the present critical research on everyday

culture, this means that chances both for self-conscious, meaningful creativity and for the institutional pressure of passive adoption to the power of commercialism exist, in principle, in the everyday practices where routines take place but also the work of art is realised (see Lefebvre, 1991: 182-183, 190-191, 203-206). Lefebvre (ibidem, 130-137) points out that only by perceiving everyday life in its familiar, trivial and inauthentic guises do we become receptive and reflective for mystical or metaphysical criticism of everyday culture. This may make us more aware of the popularity of different forms of cultivating narratives for superhuman characters of heroes.

The principles of heroic life and everyday life are discussed here in order to frame the problem sphere. The term *precariousness* demonstrates fragility and uncertainty as to whether heroic deeds can be *narrated* by ordinary people in the context of everyday life. The basic questions concern: a) how life-narrators appreciate happenings as being worth taking into consideration, b) which episodes are processed as containing de-alienating qualities, c) how the hero of one's own life is enabled creatively and d) how caring for another is taken into consideration in the problem of everyday heroism.

To deal with this subject, episodes on reflexive heroism are taken from media publicity to exemplify situations in which people meet the challenge to act *for the other*, even when risking their own lives. Other data used here consist of autobiographies collected with the intention of ascertaining how people describe their life as a symbolic journey from social discrimination to a heroic effort to master one's own life. One idea is to see how social *identities* and their demarcations are related to the concept of *the other* and how, in this way, boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of social membership are constructed and shifted when reflected in power and domination (see also Ragnerstam, 2004: 212). Seeing social (cultural) identity as processed reflexively in the narration of life contains political implications. This kind of politics of identity demands sociality as does discursive construction of the *self*. It makes understandable how the flexibility and liquidity of the society of individuals substitute for the class society based on socially fixed identity positions (Bauman, 2000). It does not, however, explain as such how and why the demand for everyday heroism is increasing.

### **Interpreting autobiographies on everyday heroism**

A collection of autobiographical data was planned under the rubric "Once discriminated, incipient heroes - or prosperous heroines" (Ahponen, 1997: 107-118) with the intention of taking individual experiences of social discrimination, marginality and exclusion into consideration in the interpretation of biographical narratives. A core idea was that every narrator of an autobiography is a hero of her or his own life. The focus was on social and symbolic barriers that must be overcome to get from difficult life-conditions where some kind of discrimination was experienced. The aim was to follow the strategy of resolving difficult life-situations in reflexive ways and to see how a successful life-career results from the foundation of experienced social discrimination. When the study started, the aim was, to adopt the terms of Greimas (e.g. 1987) which are used so often to interpret heroic narratives (see also Ahponen, 1997: 114), to pay attention to individual gains and losses, narrated in autobiographies, as well as the roles of mentors, enemies, accompanying persons, mediators and by-passers of the wanderers on the terrain of life. The intentional interpretation of autobiographies concerns how the subjects are presented in these

texts or, comparatively, how *the self* performs as an actor on the stage of life. The researcher is also interested in what kinds of narrative conventions are made to construct a context for the process of *writing up* the experiences (e.g. Denzin, 1989: 21-22, 31-32; Roberts, 2002: 7-8). Problematic experiences can be, to use a Denzin's (ibidem, 33) expression, meaningful as epiphanies or moments of revelation for the subject. This aspect refers to de-alienating strategies in the processing of the reflexive self.

After being interviewed in a nationally distributed newspaper (HS 16.3.1997) and later in a regional newspaper (Karjalainen 7.10.1997) with the intention of introducing the idea of studying "discriminated heroes of everyday life", I received 12 autobiographies. Eight of them were written by women, four by men. The longest autobiography consists of 130 single-spaced pages, the shortest miniature stories were 2-3 pages. In addition, 8 self-publications (one written by a woman, the others written by men) were supplied in this context. In one special case a woman's life-story was narrated by her husband. The response to the invitation was not very active although some stories were eloquent and appealing. The contacts and accompanying notes gave the impression that the idea was received as inspiring. Only the contents of non-published autobiographies are further interpreted here, but self-publications are also worth discussing briefly. After the motivation behind their publication was checked, the research problem was processed again and the focus shifted from discriminated heroes of one's own life towards the possibility to narrate the phenomenon of everyday heroism in a specific social context.

Self-publication of an autobiography means a strong effort to obtain publicity as a life-hero. Telling of one's own story is motivated by a conviction that lived experiences are meaningful and worth telling in public. The authors of self-publications trust their talent to narrate the story in an interesting way even though they have not passed the critical selection processes of publishers. Although printing practices have developed so that it is easy to formulate and modify book-like copies electronically, success in marketing of publications is not made easy. Without going through the critical screening process, it is difficult to convince the audience that a story is worth telling publicly as containing a distinctive message.

Self-publishers present themselves as heroes of their own lives by describing their experiences. Those stories were not, however, motivated exactly according to the intention of this study so their contents were not analysed further. The non-published autobiographies were written after the writers read the invitation to participate in the study, and their focus was on the theme "from discrimination to heroism in everyday life". In this sense *an autobiographical contract* (see Lejeune, 1989) - a reflexive commitment between the author and the reader was taken into consideration to evaluate how the invitation was understood by the participants. The personal orientation, including questions of who is speaking to whom (I speak to you) and how the self is presented through its others (c.f. Marcus, 1995: 47-49) to the reader, is an important aspect in the interpretation of the writing convention in a biographical research (Roberts, 2002: 8).

Most of the authors of the autobiographies were in late middle age. The development of Finland from a poor rural country toward a rapidly changing modern welfare society was reflected in these individual life stories (cf. Ahponen and Järvelä, 1987: 68-86; Roos, 1987: 151-161). After reading the stories carefully the core themes were structured and one writer chosen for the role of key informant. The pseudonym *Urho* was given to this male author, born in 1931, whose story is related as a case to experiences of the other authors as well as to the general social consideration of how society has changed during his lifetime. Through their autobiographical experiences, individuals are constructed as social beings, as

Roberts (2002: 88) says. Quite much is discussed about how changes in society are reflected in individual stories when story-tellers are seen to represent different generations, as classified according to age, gender, level of education, occupation and family career (e.g. Heinz and Kruger, 2001: 29-53). A conscious attitude towards the cultural spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*) is also emphasised when specific generational cohorts are constructed (e.g. Edmunds and Turner, 2002). In the context applied here it is meaningful to construct figuration of sociality through individual experiences instead of categorising socially institutionalised age markers (cf. Heinz and Kruger, 2001: 32, 42). The intention is to understand processes of individualisation as increasingly contingent upon modernisation. This implies a tendency for the boundaries of previously fixed social markers to become flexible and for identity positions to multiply.

Roos is a pioneer in the use of life stories with the intention of describing qualitatively how Finnish society has changed since independence in 1917. Roos (1987: 153-157) connects the "dramatic changes" of the society to his typology of Finnish generations, which was formulated in the middle of the 1980s. Independent Finland has now reached human longevity in comparison with the individual life career. The great social transformation of this society can be reflected in the individually experienced life course. Finland as a society represents a heroic success story in its innovativeness, especially when the stage of democracy, values indicating self-expression, and creativity in inventing high-modern technology are taken into consideration (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Florida, 2005). Here, however, the changing society is a context of the individually experienced life-histories.

When going through the autobiographical data, I put special emphasis on signs of everyday heroism. Aspects of social discrimination and possibilities for emancipation during different life phases were taken into consideration. Unlike Roos (1987: 153), who interprets autobiographies as "telling the truth", I do not emphasise the realistic character of these life stories. I see it as more important to interpret how people subjectively narrate themselves as heroes of their own lives than to discuss the truthfulness or authenticity of the narratives. The basic aspect is how individuals give coherence to their lives in the autobiographical writing process (Denzin, 1989: 62) when they interpret their personal and social challenges. This means that *biographical illusion* (ibidem: 61) is not taken for granted. According to Denzin, this illusion means that the general social structure is illustrated directly through an individual life and the narration of life gives a realistic picture of what happened. The realistic genre also includes the fact that transition periods of life are interpreted within the framework of the dimensions of social changes that occurred simultaneously. In this way Roos (1987: 158-159) has classified typological changes in social security, work conditions, education, personal relations and the increasing importance of individual happiness.

For categorising institutionalised age markers, these dimensions or life spheres are usually seen as socially fixed. When social conditions are connected to the structural context in a determinative way, no space remains for the voluntary capacity of individual agents as community members to act using their life-chances to change the institutionally conditioned structure of society. When they spoke about a trend toward destandardisation and individualisation of the life-course, Heinz and Kruger (2001: 41-42) remarked that the institutional life-markers have become more flexible than before. It is sensible to consider how the social context of life is reflexively filtered into individual experiences. Autobiographical data, however, offer a possibility to see the other side of sociality in an effort to ascertain how the reflective capacity of conscious individuals affects the way in which socially given opportunities and structural restrictions are subjectively interpreted. This kind of constructive aspect



was pointed out by Weber when he defined power as the ability to act otherwise than expected, even against the will of others. Just in this sense, concepts like generation consciousness or an *active generation* (Edmunds and Turner, 2002) are challenging; they refer both to the need for social cohesion and to the demand for conscious activities on the part of individuals and nuclear group agents who influence structural changes by producing *key-experiences*.

In accordance with individualisation, the tendency toward increasingly institutionalised lifestyles is discussed, not in purely structural terms but by paying attention to processes in which the rationality of people is conducted from outside of the subject by commercial and managerial means (see e.g. Beck, 1992: 131-137). The life space of choice-making consumers, enjoyed by means of increasing commercial use of leisure, is like a playground (e.g. Cahill, 1994) where successes and failures are calculated by instrumental means according to ordered preferences in cost- and benefit-like operations. Performed qualifications are tested through the use of information channels. "I know that I live because I am visible as being connected to the network of communication". This is a watchword for an "individualised" person living through the social demands of the media society.

There is polyphony of voices and cacophony of *talking heads* in the media-formatted publicity. So many sensations and extreme cases make it difficult for narrators of life stories to be distinguished from others who are competing for space to create a heroic image among their equals. If you have no listeners, is your story worth telling? You may succeed in having a large audience for a short moment, which allows you to taste public admiration; but the risk of being forgotten tomorrow is included in the publicity of the popular media. According to de Certeau (1988: 8), overproduction of authority leads to devaluation of authority. Overproduction of authors and performers means that an ordinary storyteller is left in silence among the public like the everyman named nobody (de Certeau (ibidem: 2). Comparative overproduction of popular heroes in public may lead to the decline of heroic ethics (cf. Featherstone 1992: 175-176) because stories of popular heroes are increasingly consumed. If heroic deeds are valued according to how much publicity is given them, then the most popular heroes celebrate, as Gottdiener (1996: 140) notes. He refers also to Featherstone (1991: 270) to continue how the *aesthetics of everyday experiences* tend to manipulate images by commercial means. Popular culture is useful for advertising which "reworks desires through images".

The autobiographical genre implies an illusion that bringing of personal secrets and intimate affairs into the public eye is valuable as such. The tension between intimacy and publicity nourishes our seeking of sensation. The autobiographical genre is a pathetic form of narration. Life stories attempt to undress the inner self in descriptions of how self-identities are reflexively organised and life-political processes are oriented toward self-actualisation. Life-stylistic choices are justified by the promise of full personal satisfaction. Like traditional confession, public confession of intimate secrets can be understood as being purifying. It is often thought to be rewarding to complain about how personal failures and experienced injustices were caused by unfair competitors when they tried to attain to the same life chances. Whether based either on successful happenings or failures, biographical narratives are increasingly used to construct life-political programs and procedures. In principles according to which everyday heroism are internalised by the subjects of serious life stories, priorities are not, however, given to public rewards and sanctions. The authors will identify themselves by evaluating the meaningfulness of their self-realisation.

## Life-political supply and demand for autobiographies

When Giddens (1991: 224, 231) speaks about how reflexive mobilisation of the self produces self-identity as a subjective achievement, he points out that the emergence of life politics and the reflexive project of the self in lifestyle choices are in accordance with the recovery of moral and existential problems. These problems are increasingly present both in everyday life and in public debates in a way which becomes understandable by pointing out the principal difference between life politics and emancipatory politics. According to Giddens (ibidem: 211-214), the difference concerns whether the subject is oriented to the self or towards the others. *Emancipatory politics of the others* was aimed at releasing underprivileged social groups from their unhappy living conditions and from subjugation to unfair domination. Eliminating social differences between citizens, or rather reducing the processes of exploitation (cf. justice), inequality (cf. equality) and oppression (cf. participation), was the political ideal for liberating the subjugated from constraints. The demand to construct *ways of life* by classifying socially and culturally privileged or subjugated identity groups was based on this logic, which follows the principle of negative freedom, whereas lifestyles are positively propagated as individual choices (e.g. Chaney, 1996; Barker 2004: 219-220; Bennett 2005: 63). *Life politics* is oriented to individual self-actualisation and deals with emerging life changes. In accordance with this orientation, narrative construction of the self is consciously reflected in autobiographies. In this way emancipation is internalised in the sphere of life politics, the main concern being the success of the enabling self rather than the caring politics for marginalised others.

Individuals are expected to be capable of making proper choices in their lives. Social reflexivity means that individual life choices are made, as stated by Beck (1994: 14-15), inside networks where skilfully negotiated commitments are the result of options that are embedded in opportunities available for those who can utilise them best. Success of the self is bound to option-like rewards in life games. Life-political experts are specialised in helping people make choices in optional situations. But there are problems concerning moral questions, which are necessarily met in the intimate life sphere. Professionals cannot commit themselves to substantial values because then they make normative decisions. But without personal involvement, these experts act in an instrumental way by arranging the multitude of more and more situational ethical codes according to the principles of technical rationality. Who can take responsibility in moral questions? Ambivalent relativism, egoistic attitudes or social conformism – these are the alternatives given to the late-modern builders of communities who prefer discursive subjectivity for comparing how successful biographies are “produced, staged and cobbled together” (ibidem: 12-13) by using narrative strategies. By these means the individual subject returns to the domain of institutions. Everyday compilation of the self, especially when identity is constructed in the sphere of intimacy, is reflexively related to an institutionalised concern for the life adjustments (Giddens 1994: 59-60).

Social reformation of the self is introduced in the discussion on how the everyday life of ordinary people is ordered, negotiated and decided in reflexive ways in matters of choices concerning the precariousness of life-structures, personal life being increasingly embedded in risks, uncertainties and ambivalent alternatives. By emphasising the need for personal life strategies, it is asserted that both demand for and supply of professional expert counselling, advice, norms and rules which legalise, reform and regulate the life-sphere are necessary, even compulsory for enhancing reflexive sustainability.

This situation also makes the demand for everyday heroism understandable. Individuals fulfilling the life-political requirements of late-modern society are heroes of competitive liberal democracy. To manage the risks of reflexivity and uncertainties met during the course of life, they need capacities for self-respect. Their discursive competence makes them good if not superior agents for the deliberative democracy of the politics of presence (cf. Phillips, 1995). Those who are clever and skilful enough succeed well in complementing their competencies by using the services of the best supervisors to become *primus inter pares*. Performing and representing magnificent properties in illustrative, narrative and discursive ways will guarantee the attractive popularity of the hero of one's own life, although it demands continuous efforts to keep this position of cultural capitalist as safe as possible.

But the problem dealt with also concerns another side. Heroes of one's own life, as interpreted in reflexive terms of life politics, are not everyday heroes *if* this term refers to a process that results in self-respect because of altruistic deeds. Altruism means that a person is respected because she/he does something exceptionally unselfish. In this sense everyday heroism does not mean the same as winning in a competition or otherwise gaining public recognition. Overcoming of personal difficulties can be a necessary precondition of everyday heroism, but the most important aspect is that the needs of the other are taken into consideration during happenings of everyday life, which results in heroic deeds without conscious striving for fame or honour. Martyrs, however, are not everyday heroes because their self-sacrifice lacks any other hope of salvation than that in heaven. Their exceptional behaviour cannot be placed in the normal order of quotidian life. Everyday heroes are not produced by providing nourishment for sensations.

When analysing the autobiographical data, the focus was placed on both how the identity of an everyday hero is produced by overcoming difficulties during the life-process and also on how awareness of social responsibility among individuals is increased by this. The strategy for analysis was quite simple. The life course contains turns, openings and closures as well as specific ways of reasoning about the choices for continuing the path by crossing difficult situations. These aspects were underlined when the data was read thoroughly, paying attention to how the orientation towards the self and meaningful others was justified.

### **Once discriminated everyday heroes**

The autobiographical narratives are structured, in general, by starting from how the author was born and what were the life conditions of the parents. *Urho* is the key narrator in the interpretation of the data applied here because he illustrates well the unselfish character of an everyday hero, but also because his life-career reflects well the structural turns of the society during his lifetime. His early childhood was during the pre-war years but he pays no attention to the living conditions of that period. As is known, most inhabitants of Finland were then living in the countryside. In this sense *Urho* was not typical because he was born in Helsinki. During the wartime his father was a soldier like most men in the same age group. The winter-war (1939-40), in particular, is seen as a heroic episodes in the history of Finland as a nation.

*Urho* says nothing about siblings. Possibly he was the only child in his family, contrary to most families which at that time were quite large. Only after the post-war "baby-boom" did the population transition take place in Finland and nuclear families become planned more consciously. We may define the family life in this case as safe because *Urho* comments: "The wartime (1939-1944) did not cause me big traumas".

A couple of sentences later he continues, however, saying that his home was destroyed in the bombings. This may have happened in the summer of 1944 because Helsinki was heavily bombed before the fighting at the Karelian front stopped. The family had to move to a very modest summer cottage without electricity or water and sewage pipes. *Urho* felt that the war was like an adventure for boys - quite awful as an adventure, however, because he lost some of his friends in the bombings. A female author who was born just before the winter war also describes the effects of this period. The safety of children depended on how well the parents could give their children immediate care and only afterwards did the children realise the larger context of this difficult period.

The life of my parents was certainly filled with anxiety and fear because of the fate of the homeland and the family, but I was so small that these things did not touch me in any way. Home was safe, we had enough food and I did not know anything about the material welfare before the war. (Rauha, an author)

In post-war conditions people “lacked everything”. Those who started to build a house of their own had a serious shortage of money and building materials. *Urho* tells: “... our clothes were ‘modified’ from uniforms left over from the surplus stocks of the army, we had big fat leather boots and our faces were thin because of the lack of food”. *Urho* was lucky enough to continue his schooling in the senior high school by learning, for instance, the German language although when he came to know what had happened in Germany, he was disappointed and felt reluctant to learn German well.

In the post-war conditions scarcity prevailed, but characteristic of the general atmosphere was that everybody had to struggle by participating in rebuilding the country. The social structure in Finland was renewed quickly in the reconstruction period. According to the autobiographies, the principal reason for experiences of deviance and social discrimination in childhood or youth was sickness or some physical disability. One of the authors describes how she got polio during her second year of life. This serious illness was not unexceptional before the war or during wartime. *Urho*, on his part, had rheumatic fever and was bedridden during his student examination.

Not all homes were safe and warm places. From their early years children had heavy responsibilities. They had to be humble and obedient. Many children suffered because they were left without the necessary care in hard conditions. During this time an authoritarian way of raising children without expressing warm emotions, especially on the part of the father, was the normal practice in Finnish families, organised according to a patriarchal model of everyday life (e.g. Ahponen and Järvelä, 1987: 68-86). “Invisibility” was a strategy for overcoming a difficult family situation. A female author from an academic Swedish-speaking family tells how she suggested that she was ill and to get attention from her parents she pretended that she could not move her knee. In this special family, when the daughters were “old enough”, the father expected patronising services from them. He even had incestuous interest in the author, who finally attempted suicide with medicines but recovered and started to contemplate her inner life intensively. Like so many authors of these autobiographies, she felt that she was intelligent. She succeeded well in her studies until she fell in love and then did not continue her studies because of a difficult marriage.

Love, intimate relationships and marriage are turning points in the life course. This aspect is exceptionally interesting in *Urho*'s miniature story.

I married a very intelligent young woman and we had two children. During the following years her psyche began to change, in the course of time so much that she had to be admitted to a mental hospital. In addition to my work, I took care of the children and the household. After my wife got out of the hospital, she did not want to continue the marriage with me. Our children were officially left in her charge in the divorce. It was the normal practice for the court to give this responsibility to the mother. Because of the unstable health of my former wife, I lived with her and the children, and took care of the household whenever she tolerated it. The situation continued this way for about five years. My wife did not express any gratitude but blamed me for things like using the vacuum cleaner too often or for being otherwise too conscientiously occupied with 'mundane' affairs.

*Urho* does not say a word about how well he succeeded in his student examination and in his occupational studies. He mentions that he taught school pupils as encouragingly as possible and started to take on the home responsibilities after his working day. We can draw the conclusion that he worked as a teacher, in other words, as an expert in education. Socially he was better off than most of the representatives of his generation. The service society based on the middle class was not realised in Finland until the great social transformation in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, as *Urho* says, "it was normal practice" in the case of divorce to give the responsibility for children to the mother. In this story something seems to be turned upside down. Was it "normal practice" to assign care-giving to the mother even when she was mentally ill? What the father tells in his laconic style indicates that he was able both to practice his occupation and to take practical care of the children as well as of the household duties. The story continues:

My wife began to turn her negative attitudes towards our fourteen-year-old son, who became solitary and withdrew from his mother. Little by little the lives of my children as well as mine began to be continuously painful. We left home because of the wishes of the children (daughter 12, son 15); we sold our summer cottage and moved to our new home. Naturally, my former wife tried to make our life difficult but did not, in the end, succeed. My manly pride did not, from my side, allow me to start legal proceedings to ask for maintenance payments.

Social allowances were possible, even then, and could be applied on the basis of the Social Assistance Act. Social welfare was systemically organised in Finland during those years when the welfare-state model was implemented and developed. But as Kröger, Anttonen and Sipilä (2003: 43, 45) mention, modernisation in childcare was late in coming to Finland, gendered assumptions about male and female parental responsibilities were strong and informal childcare was not expected to be a generally accepted part of the male role. In addition, until the change towards the new Social Service Act took place in 1984, social care had an old-fashioned label of relief for the poor. We can only guess the main reason for *Urho's* "manly pride". But year by year he managed better and better economically, maintaining all the time a close relationship with his children. He ends his life story by remarking that he now enjoys his days "as a happy pensioner."

My mental state was hard-pressed but step by step my strength returned. We supported each others, my children and I. In the wintertime we went in

for slalom. After passing the student examination, both children went to the Technical University, and got their degrees rapidly, without any loans because they lived at home and worked in the summertime. Now they are working as managers in the field of economics, and I enjoy happy pensioner's days. I take fitness exercise, jog, and go skiing. Music, literature and 'Sunday painting' are also part of my life.

*Urho* concludes the heroic aspects of his life coherently way. Remarkably, he sees himself as a hero of his own life, but aspects of everyday heroism can also be found in his story.

I see that there are three phases of 'everyday heroism' in my life course: childhood during the wartime, becoming a student (while having a serious physical illness) and coping with a single-parent situation as well as with the crisis preceding this time.

*Urho* definitely managed his everyday crises well without becoming bitter and without blaming fate for landing him with an unbearable burden. He succeeded well in the arenas of work, home-building and bringing up children. He does not tell whether he had meaningful contacts with women after his divorce. He points out certain aspects in the family life, but other social relations play no part in his story.

*Urho's* laconic writing style concentrates only on key episodes while in many other stories a multiple spectrum of intimate relationships is brought to light to show coping with or getting out from under problems caused by difficult partners. Thus, the partner was often left because otherwise the author would not have been able to continue the process of constructing him- or herself as a life hero. A clear clue in *Urho's* story is that empowerment is framed by increasing social well-being and an ideology of the struggle for success. From the individual point of view of everyday heroism, the most significant aspect in this story is the unselfishness of the author and his self-respect as a result of his successful career as a father in difficult life conditions. Structurally, the development of the welfare state was a guarantee of the basic conditions for living without scarcity, but *Urho* apparently wanted independently to clear up with the situation – like a lonely hero. His intention of giving his children a good education was included in his life project. A structural precondition is that the children managed to have a good start to their careers before the time of hardened competition and the precarious elements of liquidity in present-day working life.

The authors of the autobiographies describe their significant experiences, personal turning points and moments of resignation as *epiphanies* when they see that overcoming difficulties and managing challenges in education, working life and family relations are important aspects of their self-respect. Serious illnesses and disappointments in intimate relations feed feelings of resignation. These experiences are reflected in expectations which are charged by hope and dreams. One of the authors describes how she became convinced that she could not manage life independently and continues: "My only way to cope with myself was marriage". Later she went through a difficult divorce. The autobiographies of *once discriminated incipient heroes* are mainly descriptions of sometimes almost unbelievable difficulties met during different phases of life. Sacrifice is rarely met without martyr-like sentiments. Everyday heroism is present in the narratives only in fragments like this sentence full of empathy: "when an old man is aware of the pain of his wife, he feels this pain in himself".

Most autobiographies of the once discriminated are descriptions of how the heroes of their own lives have gotten through personal difficulties and almost

overwhelming troublesome relationships with their parents and their partners. "At last I am independent", cries a middle-aged woman, who already is a grandmother. On the other hand, it is deeply reflected, by both male and female authors, how important it is to have close emotional relationships, and how difficult to reach and keep them up. At best, life is seen as "surrounded by life angels who have supported my way". Most urgent, however, seems to be mastering one's very own life reflexively. "I felt that I have never existed", complains one of the authors. Another middle-aged woman writes: "In the nearest future I will cure my weak self-confidence, which is related to my dependence on family and friends". Proceeding through this process means that the life-political reflexivity is deepened in accordance with the will to become conscious, independent self. The process of divorce is analysed in this way: "My husband needed my support to be able to break away from me. This break-away hurt me so deeply that I became able to meet the challenge to create my own life". The precariousness of everyday heroism is culminated in these fragile sentences.

### **Everyday heroism in altruistic deeds**

To characterise further the essence of altruism included in everyday heroism, some illustrative examples are chosen from the media publicity. When interpreting the contents of the following episodes, I emphasise that altruistic deeds result in self-respect because of exceptional unselfishness, both towards the family and friends but also towards people who are not known. The first fragment was already in focus in the beginning of this article. A comparative event was told in public some years ago, before a car accident took the life of the heroine of this story. This fragment portrays how an ordinary Finn, with the help of the royal *Princess Diana* saved a bum who had fallen into the River Thames in London. Later a medal was awarded to this decent young man for his bravery. The hero of this story discovered, by accident, a poor drunken man drifting along in the river. The heroine, Princess Diana, was taking her daily jog on the riverside and went to help in this rescue operation. Everyday heroism is included in this happening because both of the brave figures spontaneously helped a "down-and-out" person without asking whether he was valuable or useful for them, or familiar due to earlier face-to-face contact. The young Finn and the princess acted as everyday heroes just because they put themselves in danger for another person in this suddenly encountered risky situation, which they managed bravely, decisively and successfully.

This episode was exceptional. It may be thought that the publicity given to what happened on the bank of the Thames was due to the presence of Princess Diana as a *public person*. After her fatal accident in August 1997, the story was immediately repeated in the media. Princess Diana lived and died in the public eye, used by sensation hunters, but also herself utilising the media as an image-product. Signs of charity played an essential part, if not in her life, at least in her public role, which was based on specific role-expectations. Everyday heroism reinforces moral responsibility as an aspect included in the myth of Diana, thus counterbalancing the luxury of her royal life.

Charity serves image work well. To earn a good reputation among the public, care is given to poor people. Charity means that well-to-do people orientate down towards the poor from their heights. That is why charity does not really, in the moral sense, fit in well with everyday heroism better than martyr-like self-sacrifice does. Bauman (1993: 24) thoughtfully points out how, in the process of civilisation, the representatives of the "self-liberating elite" become emancipated from their own

animal side. Therefore, as Bauman (ibidem: 23) notes by referring to another analyst, “they rejected everything that appeared to them ‘savage, dirty, lecherous’ - in order to better conquer similar temptations in themselves”.

Levinas has defined morality as unconditional responsibility towards the Other, giving to Bauman (1998a: 15) a significant point for continuing that the Other commands us through her weakness. In morality, according to Bauman (ibidem: 19), “the weakness of the Other makes me powerful”, because “everything depends then on my taking up the responsibility and giving voice to the unspoken demand”. Bauman (ibidem: 21) argues that we are thrown into the moral situation without justice, ethical codes or negotiated agreements. Products of the work of reason are free from the virtues of moral attitudes, not demanding one-sided responsibility.

The spontaneous reaction towards an unknown and weak caretaker brings the jogging princess near to ordinary people and therefore, into the spheres of charity and morality. This way the episode described above is linked to altruism in everyday heroism. The third fragment does not include figures known from publicity:

A young woman, 17 years old, was walking with her father on the Central Market Square in Helsinki when she saw a drunken bum who had fallen into the dirty sea water in a pool in front of the square. The man had been playing a card game with his friends, who because of their drunkenness did not even notice the poor fellow tumbling down. The rescue experts said later that the man would certainly have drowned, because of his unconsciousness and the dirtiness of the water, without the help given by this brave young woman. For her part, the young woman emphasised, when interviewed, that she did what she did because she was brought up to believe that all human beings are equal. She also said that she was very certain that her father would save her if needed. (HS, June 1998)

This accident was noted in the media publicity mentioning that the prize of the year, “The Flame of Life”, was awarded to the rescuer for her bravery and inventiveness. According to the report, after resting two weeks in the hospital, the rescued man phoned to the girl and thanked her for saving his life. During the phone conversation he wondered “how a young girl can jump into dirty water after this kind of a human being“. It is not very usual to jump spontaneously to rescue an unknown person in a dangerous situation. Narrative elements are dramatic enough to be told and celebrated in public.

Every time it occurs, everyday heroism is caused by a specific situation. The role of the rescuer is taken by an unexpected hero in a moment when he/she reacts to a person who needs help and *care*. This aspect was discussed extensively in the public after *Veera*, 12 years old, wrote about her experience. At a tram stop on the street at the centre of Helsinki she started to cry when she felt weak because of a diabetic attack. Everyone walked past her indifferently except for two “outcasts of fortune” who came to ask how she felt, went to buy jam and sugar, and helped her to phone her mother. *Veera* says:

Those people were the only ones who recognised my situation. It does not matter who the person is who knows how to act. The only thing which means something is that somebody can act and care. (HS, November 2003.)



## Concluding remarks: To meet myself and the Other in everyday heroism

Indicators of a reflexive understanding of one's own life are increasingly demanded for life-political purposes. This kind of understanding seems to increase the capacity of an individual to live a better life. A person who masters an emotional life course consciously also learns to narrate the life story in interpretative ways to present him-/herself as a heroic figure. It is sensible in the autobiographical genre to see the author as the principal actor on the stage. But the autobiographical process also allows the narrator to find his or her *other* as estranged from the present subject. When the author sends the narrator to the past in the process of story-telling the aim is to find the person who had meaningful experiences and to remember them as internalised. Heroism is produced in an emancipating way by processing experiences into meaningful memories in the form of episodes and narratives. The process of telling one's own story is significant to the author, who needs self-confidence to become protected from outside attacks which might hurt the fragile self. Deepening self-understanding gives an individual the capacity to interpret her/his experiences and find meaningfulness in life in order to orient towards the future with the help of consciously remembered epiphanies which are selected and differentiated from the stream of everyday happenings.

The tendency toward life-political individualisation is discussed here with the intention of understanding why autobiographical narratives fit well into the spirit of late-modern self-actualisation. Society demands reflexivity by authors in order to develop consciously programmed consultation concerning both choices of identities and reflexive solutions to serious psycho-pathological problems. As far as these problems are both caused and attempted to be solved by extra-individual steering mechanisms, tendencies toward self-estrangement may increase rather than being dealt with. Psycho-cultural models of individualisation are, in addition, necessary instruments of socialisation when a society aims at integration through seduction (Bauman 1998b: 23-24). Reflexively manipulative mechanisms tend to produce a phenomenon called by Bauman (see Cantell and Pedersen, 1992) *velvet-dependency*, which includes soft means of emotion management (Hochschild, 1983). The subjective lived-through sensations and conscious processing of symbolic aspects of everyday experiences are relevant aspects of life-political regulation, both for the individuals themselves and for the authorities, consultants and mentors who are responsible for the cultural design of life-stylistic choices.

Aspects of everyday heroism are discussed as precarious, sometimes almost invisible and unnoticed processes. In deeds that result in everyday heroism one cannot consciously operate in egocentric ways to produce a self-reflective hero. An attempt is made here to reach the precariousness of everyday heroism by contemplating difficulties in narrating such heroism. How to tell about turning unselfishly towards an Other? The moral processes of *being for* are ambivalent and embarrassing experiences for the Self as the author of an autobiography.

Self-respect in everyday heroism is resulted by altruism because in exceptionally unselfish deeds the Other is met as a person. This means, using the expression of Bauman (1997: 69-70), that "the moral party of two" is the "breeding ground of all (asymmetrical) responsibility for the Other". Phenomena like *pure relationship* or *confluent love* are interpreted by Giddens (1991; 1992) as significant aspects of life politics, related to the floating responsibility of postmodern intimacy. From this groundless basis the risk-conscious life-political expertise is reasoned in the late-modern sociality. The less this kind of politics of life is based on personally taken moral responsibility, the more it rests on egoism, narcissism, "love as passion" and pure relations. In that kind of love, following the argumentation of Luhmann

(1986: 164-165), the “ego’s Self is the result of self-selective processes“ and love is “the validation of self-portrayal“. According to this logic, the self is reinforced in intimate relations in so far as these relationships give the individual “a chance to identify with himself and to be the Self of his ego“ (ibidem: 167). This way, even intimate relationships tend to become self-referential and aimed at egoist self-fulfilling in a reciprocal sociality (see also Seidman, 1992). As Beck (e.g. 1997) has stated, reciprocal relations are seen as guaranteeing confident commitments in social options with which we are playing increasingly in our risk society. It seems that the less people are responsive to the precarious challenges of everyday heroism, the more they aim at being egocentric life-heroes.

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