

The Shaping of Subjectivity and Biographies of Individuals in the Face of the Transformations of a Neo-Modern Society: An Introduction¹

Kamila Biały 
University of Lodz, Poland

Piotr F. Piasek 
Central China Normal University

Paweł Pieniążek 
University of Lodz, Poland

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Abstract: The presented text is an introduction to other articles included in this issue, which were prepared for the purpose of publishing the methodological and the historical-theoretical parts of the results of the research grant. Our study aimed to examine contemporary changes in subjectivity as well as explore how the subjectivity of our interlocutors emerges during narrative interviews. The first part of the article outlines the premises for the conducted research. The subsequent section presents a short argument discussing the category of “projectivity” in the context of changes in a (post-)modern society. Finally, we briefly refer to methodological issues, which are described in much greater detail in other texts presented in the issue.

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Kamila Biały

Sociologist (Department of Sociology of Art, University of Lodz), Gestalt therapist. Her area of interest is the epistemological, the methodological, and the ethical as pertaining to sociological problems inspired by contemporary phenomenology.

e-mail: kamila.bialy@uni.lodz.pl

Piotr F. Piasek

Sociologist and philosopher (Central China Normal University). His scientific interests include ontological and epistemological problems of social sciences (phenomenology, systems theories).

e-mail: piotr.franciszek.piasek@outlook.com

Paweł Pieniżek

Philosopher, associate professor at the University of Lodz (Department of Contemporary Philosophy). His research focuses on broadly-defined contemporary and late modern philosophy (French and German) from the existential perspective as well as on the philosophical and cultural aspects of modernity.

e-mail: pawel.pieniazek@filhist.uni.lodz.pl

Introduction

The question of subjectivity and its transformations is one of the key issues in the humanities (see: Pippin, 2005) and, as we think, it still leaves a lot of scope for conducting research, especially within the framework of empirical sociology. Subjectivity was initially defined by us at the beginning of the research project as the capacity of individuals for decision-making and reflective self-recognition and self-forming, regardless of the limitations of that capacity imposed by various forms of situation of an individual. However, what we were looking for was not a general definition of subjectivity, nor any concept of subjectivity that has been assumed *a priori*, but, instead, we were asking specifically about how the subjectivity and biography of individuals are formed in the conditions of the contemporary neo- or postmodern society. As can be seen from the selection of key categories, the project we report is an attempt to combine two scientific disciplines, namely philosophy and sociology. Therefore, our undertaking is an attempt to develop the connection between philosophical thinking and sociological empirical research.

There are two further assumptions behind this. First, we assumed that subjectivity can be more fully understood in the context of an individual's biography, and that biography can be understood more deeply when read from the perspective of subjectivity. Therefore, we decided to make biographical narratives the primary source of empirical data. At the same time – and this is the second assumption – we believe that, given the complexity of the issue of subjectivity, contemporary philosophy provides tools appropriate for the interpretation of such empirical material. Due to the multitude of schools and philosophical currents that undertake the theorization of contemporary times, what we did not assume was the adequacy of any particular philosophical definition of subjectivity. This can be seen in the texts presented in this volume, which draw inspiration from such trends as phenomenology, existentialism, and postmodernism. The multitude of philosophical approaches reflects the diversity of

contemporary life, which defies a single view. Such reliance on one tradition would, from the very beginning, narrow the field of analytical attention.

As we said above, the work we undertook was not intended to describe the “average” types of subjectivity, but, rather, at capturing that which is changing – we ask about the formation of subjectivity and biography in the face of contemporary (broadly-understood) transformations. Such an approach poses a question as to the nature of these transformations. Among the various processes, we have assumed, based on the socio-philosophical references cited below, that the particularly important changes are those that directly relate to the phenomena described as late capitalism, neo-modernism, second/late/liquid modernity. We believe that what we call projectivity is an expression and a good indicator of these changes.

The initial premise of the research project is the assumption that one of the keys to capturing contemporary transformations is to analyze the formation and biographical experience of project-based attitudes, action strategies, and life orientations; a complex syndrome that we have designated *projectivity*. Basically, we understand project-based orientation as the orientation of one's activity toward carrying out tasks which are definable, time-bound, and ‘finishable’ (see: Strauss, 1988). Thus defined, this project-based orientation can be found at different levels and within different institutional settings of the society as well as in different social spheres and dimensions of the individual psychological and biographical structure: from the temporary task-based style of working or voluntary engagement to – at a deeper intrapersonal level – a project-based character of action strategies, life orientations, or the development of the so-called identity projects.

We assume that a major role in forming projectivity is played by the project-based attitude and practice in the sphere of professional work and that it constitutes key elements of project-based attitude in other spheres of life/biographical experience of individuals. Thus, the hypothesis of our research was as follows: the contemporary universality of the project-based character of professional work is related to the formation and perpetuation of the type of biographical experience we refer to as projectivity, and it is related to the formation of the type of subjectivity influenced by the phenomenon of projectivity. This means, in effect, that projectivity is a very broad phenomenon and refers to many levels of social life, one of which is the sphere of professional work.

The idea of projectivity from the perspective of social sciences

Since the end of the 1990s, project-based work is no longer confined to specific types of economic and social institutions, socioeconomic positions, fields of work, and forms of employment (e.g. freelancers, artists, research employees, or the so-called peripheral workers). There is a process of “diffusion” in the last twenty years that is connected with the structural and institutional transformations of contemporary capitalism, i.e. neo-modernization. Rather, projectivity has become an overarching feature of professional work.

Moreover, projectivity as an emerging new type of life orientation and biographical experience is not only caused by the transformations of professional work. There are multiple causes and drivers also located in the political, administrative, educational, artistic, and other spheres. As our interviews showed, experiences with project-based work do not begin with entering the sphere of gainful employment. Already in family contexts during primary socialization or in learning environments at school, this phenomenon is visible and part of the biographical experience in contemporary societies. Further, projectivity on the sociocultural and biographical level is not only an expression or the simple result of structural and institutional transformations in several spheres (above all: in the socioeconomic sphere). Let us illustrate this with the following excerpts from our interview with Aniela (a student and musician in her twenties). She uses the word “project” to refer to several different areas of social reality, revealing how potentially wide the scope of this term’s referents is for her:

Well, I just probably would like to do project work the most, but I haven’t quite found a way to do it yet.

[...]

You just need to know how to make money from music. This is a normal company and you have to make a name for yourself, see where the niche is, just shoot yourself into that niche. This is a project for two years before you start making any money on it, so you have to invest money in it. This is a company like any other.

[...]

I personally encountered this while writing projects. Um, because I wrote three and none passed and I just saw who won and it was such top things, some cultural centres, such major cities and so on.

[...]

No, no, I see myself more as a project. And the child? [thinks] No, I don’t like it. I mean, I would prefer to experience it all than project it [laughs] onto a child.

[...]

Well, as far as I’m concerned, it’s just that I have a certain vision and I implement it, which is how projects work, in the sense that I assume various things and implement them. Uh, and I think it’s very cool on the one hand, because I’m progressing quite quickly through it, and I have a goal all the time, and I’m moving forward all the time, and I know in which direction. Uhm, that’s right, it’s development all the time, all the time, non-stop.

[...]

It actually guides me through life, some kinds of constant projects. Or maybe I call them projects, and this is, I don’t know, just making dreams come true.

In the examples selected above, the word “project” is used in several different senses: project as a form of externally funded employment; project as work within one institution; project as one’s own life; project as a projection of one’s own ideas onto the world. In the case of the last fragment, the narrator loses confidence in her own understanding of the word “project”, which illustrates the

obviousness of this category. It is all-encompassing; it has both specific meanings and can be universal and define, depending on preferences, almost any activity. Therefore, projectivity turns out to be a category defining (the understanding of) action as such.

As other authors also stated, project-based professional work, voluntary engagement and leisure activities, but also project-oriented action strategies and life orientations as well as the idea of “life as a project” have all become a wide-spread phenomenon in contemporary modern societies (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999; Bröckling, 2005; Boltanski, 2007; Ladwig, Kunze, Hartmann, 2011; Peters, 2016). Some theorists even argue that this phenomenon is one of the most impressive distinct features for a new phase, period, or formation of the modern society (Bröckling, 2005; Boltanski, 2007). Our research was focused on capturing the changes described by the above authors at the biographical level, i.e. where various project activities are linked in a concrete way into one human life.

Work, organization, management

As we have already noted, projectivity is not limited to the sphere of work, but, rather, this sphere is a convenient starting point for observing the social processes of the development and diffusion of projectivity. This refers us to Packendorff's remark about the discursive field of organization and management theory, which pointed out in the mid-1990s that industrialism is linked with “standardizing work and specializing the workers to fit the industrialist agenda. [...] Although this reasoning came to pervade society as a whole, projects were important as unique and creative work environments on two counts: (1) investments providing the basis for mass production (such as railways, factories, steel mills, etc.) required project management skills for their implementation; and (2) the life-cycles of products, organizational structures and technologies all became shorter and shorter, thus highlighting the need for projects as instruments for achieving continuous improvement and innovation” (Packendorff, 1995: 319).

Today, however, project work seems to have become common within all kinds of organizations and across them. Liberation through project work first became an issue in Western societies in the mid-1970s, when alternative social milieus wanted to emancipate themselves from the bureaucratized and machine-like work in capitalist enterprises that follow the life course logic ‘from cradle to grave’ by establishing own economic, social, and cultural projects (Bröckling, 2005). Further, the critique of machine-like work were elaborated in the centers of capitalist labor by trade unions and progressive adherents of work organization, e.g. in Germany within the context of the program of “the humanizing of work” (see: Peter, Zwingmann, 1982). Career theorists interested in the notion of boundaryless, project-bases, and portfolio careers (Arthur, Rousseau, 1996) drew inspiration from Hollywood (Jones, 1996), soft-ware development (Kanter, 1995), and other project-oriented industries when they argued that workers in the new economy can attain greater security as well as greater autonomy by configuring their careers around skills that allow them to move freely between organizations. Shortly after, however, the first studies on so-called contractors demonstrated that moving from organizations to markets created new time binds (Evans, Kunda, Barley, 2004). Contractors believed they had more

control over their time than they had had as full-time employees, but this belief seldom led them to limit their hours or schedule their time more flexibly. They rarely took advantage of the contracting's greater opportunity for breaks and vacations, and they mostly worked long hours (see: Birken, 2012; Cicmil, Lindgren, Packendorff, 2016).

These processes have given rise to the modern theory of project management. A project is usually defined as a unique, one-time, often complex task; with a predetermined date of delivery; being subject to one or several performance goals (such as resource usage and quality); consisting of a number of complex and/or interdependent activities (see: Packendorff, 1995; Bröckling, 2005; Birken, 2012; Cicmil, Lindgren, Packendorff, 2016; Peters et al., 2016). The project management discourse has been changing over the last three decades. Its traditional concepts such as "planning", "structure", or "control" have become less important (Packendorff, 1995), whereas temporary organized processes (i.e. the deliberate social interaction occurring between people) took the central stage. In the field of the sociology of work and professions, this focus is well-established. "Interactional processes" are crucial in articulating people's work and getting the work done despite the inevitable disruption and contingencies in the workflow (Strauss, 1988).

Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) as well as earlier, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) studied the above-mentioned processes since the 1980s with reference to the Weberian concept of the spirit of capitalism. Their new management ideology is considered as a part of the broader ideological system. The authors show that the first protoproject-based systems of self-organizing, self-fulfillment, and deliberate collectivities had been designed and attempted at by independent artistic movements in the name of protest against capitalism (see: Bröckling, 2005; Szreder, 2016). The new spirit of capitalism is the ideology that legitimizes and inspires people's commitment to capitalism. The approach was developed on the basis of the assumption that one of the main characteristics of capitalism as a social order is that it constantly transforms itself and yet does not cease to be capitalist through the continuity of a number of central features (wage-labor, competition, private property, orientation to capital accumulation, technical progress, the rampant commodification of all social activities) (see: Rosa, 2005; Bauman, 2006; Kollmorgen, 2011; Dörre, Lessenich, Rosa, 2015).

In their study of the third spirit of capitalism that has been emerging since the 1980s, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) suggest that the justificatory regimes of the social order (including the so-called Market, Industrial Cité), identified by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), cannot fully describe all of the types of justification that can be found in the 1990s texts they were analyzing. A new and increasingly influential justificatory logic has emerged: Projects-oriented or Connectionist Cité. Such project orientation emphasizing mobility, availability, and the variety of one's personal contacts goes beyond the professional sphere, or – as Nikolas Rose already wrote in the end of the 1980s – "The Citizen, in work as much as outside it, is engaged in a project to shape his or her life as an autonomous individual driven by motives of self-fulfillment" (Rose, 1989: 115).

Work, projectivity, biography

As projectivity goes beyond the scope of professional work, it organizes, as a specific logic, increasingly broader planes of life. Therefore, it serves as a matrix of self-understanding and, further, self-organization. It is in this context that the biographical dimension can be emphasised, which means **the formation and biographical experience of project-based attitudes, action strategies, and life orientations** (up to the mentioned idea of life as a project) (Boltanski, 2007) – a complex syndrome we have preliminarily designated “projectivity”. Already in the period between the 1970s and 1990s, the sphere of work and political-economic regulation played an important role in elaborating key notions and theoretical approaches in biographical research. The debate revealed that biography, as a medium of social regulation (Kohli, 2007) and as a template for self-representation and self-authentication, is bound up with the evolution of modern society, has been transformed in this process, and is continuously being transformed (see: Brose, Wahlrab-Sahr, Corsten, 1993; Alheit, 1994).

One of the key questions of biography-theoretical research is how people “construct” or “produce” a biography in different social contexts, and which (varying) conditions, rules, and patterns of construction can be observed in this process. The concept of “biographical work” – in the meaning of developing an identity by building and maintaining continuity and coherence through changing situations – and the concept of “biographicity” (see: Alheit, 2000) strive for explaining the synthesis of structure and individuality. “Biographicity” can be understood as the “intuitively available genetic structure of a biography” placing oneself in relation to society. “Biographicity means that we can continually reinterpret our life in the contexts in which we (must) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as »formable« and »shapeable«” (Alheit, 2021). Therefore, research based on biographical narratives, due to its form, explores issues of individual subjectivity. Moreover, as the term “biographicity” reveals, this form of theorizing biography is itself related to the changes described above, aimed at the individual actively managing his or her own life.

The modernity discourse in the last 30 years can be grasped as a kind of comprehending and condensing the conceptualization of many aspects of “projectivity” and its structural as well as institutional and cultural contexts discussed hitherto. This can be demonstrated, e.g., by referring to Giddens (1991), when he discusses that the condition of “high modernity” is associated with new modes of self-identity in which the self is constructed as a project. The author did not mention the relationship to work and did not elaborate on the specific techniques through which the project of the self is conducted. Other relevant conceptualizations have been brought forward by, e.g., Zygmunt Bauman (2006) with his idea of a “liquid modernity”; Hartmut Rosa (2005), who focuses on the problem of social acceleration (also by project work); or Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss, and Christoph Lau (2001), who introduced a new stage or formation of modernity: the “second” one that clearly distinguishes from the “first modernity” that dominated the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. With reference to Peter Wagner (1995) and others, Raj Kollmorgen (2004) has developed the conception of “neo-modernity” and “neo-modernization”. Its main thesis suggests that this new formation of modernity (since the early 1980s) displays substantial references to the old liberal modernity of the

19th century, but combines such elements with technological, institutional, and cultural inventions and innovations of the late 20th century. Project-based work as well as “projectivity” can be considered as phenomena demonstrating this ambivalent character impressively.

Therefore, in our perspective, projectivity is not just a simple transplantation of this mode of action from the sphere of work to other spheres of social activity. Rather, the sphere of work is one of the spheres a part of a larger structural whole. These changes are, therefore, not institutional transformations, but, instead they seem to indicate transformations in the social construction of the 21st-century modernity. Referring to subjectivity, defined by us as “the capacity of individuals for decision-making and reflective self-recognition and self-forming”, it can be stated that the meta-narrative nature of projectivity should potentially regulate these three indicated spheres. Therefore, in our study, we decided to focus on finding interlocutors who demonstrate the projective attitude in various spheres of life, so not only in terms of professional work, but also in relation to the perspective on one’s own health, family, interests, conducting social activities, or in the form of a general life attitude (i.e. reflective self-recognition and self-forming).

Methodology

As we stated above, our methodological starting point was the assumption that subjectivity can be more fully understood in the context of an individual’s biography, and that biography can be understood more deeply when read from the perspective of subjectivity. Biographical narratives were, therefore, the basic research tool we used when collecting empirical material. The research results presented here constitute a methodological extension of the project titled “Poles in the World of Late Capitalism: Changes in Biographical Processes in Terms of Professional Careers, Social Ties and Identity During the Transformation in Poland” (Opus 6, UMO-2013/11/B/HS6/01473). The biography research tools developed in the Opus 6 project were first used for philosophical diagnosis and the development of philosophical and sociological conceptualization of basic research problems. This interdisciplinary perspective and research – to a large extent supplemented with the theory and practice of Gestalt psychotherapy – enabled the creation of an alternative technique of narrative research, namely an interview about the present. The greatest *novum* we have introduced to the classical method of the biographical interview method was allowing the researcher to ask questions during the main part of the interview.

As soon as our methodological preparation and pandemic conditions allowed it, we proceeded to the phase of conducting proper narrative interviews. We were looking for people in three age groups – up to 30 years old, 31–40 years old, and over 40 years old. Each person was supposed to be characterised by some project component. To find suitable narrators, we searched for them through various social channels available to the members of the research team. In the course of the search, we harmonized the research group on an ongoing basis, with the aim of creating as much diversity as possible in terms of the type of projectivity present in the lives of the narrators and their professions. In this way, we managed to reach the stories of not only people doing project work for corporations or as

freelancers, but also people employed at universities, in NGOs, and in hospitals. In the end, we conducted 40 double biographical interviews, and the research material in each of them consisted of two to nine hours.

We collected and analysed the data presented here, making every effort to comply with all ethical principles of sociological research. From the very beginning, our respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, its form, and the method of data analysis. Before we proceeded to the actual interview phase, each respondent had been informed about the identity of the individuals employed in the grant to eliminate the possibility of conducting an interview with someone previously known to any member of our team. From the moment the material was collected, each respondent received a pseudonym, and the material we collected was defined only by referring to the pseudonym. The respondents were asked not to mention their real names during the interview to prevent them from appearing in the interview recording. Subsequently, when transcribing the recordings, the interviews were anonymized, so any data that would enable the identification of our interlocutors by potential readers of the texts presented was changed. Our interviewees voluntarily provided all gathered information and were informed that any difficult or sensitive issues could be omitted with prior indication that, in a given phase of the interview, there is a matter they would like to withhold.

The data collected in this way was used to prepare the articles included in this volume. Methodological issues are discussed in the first two texts by Kamila Biały and Piotr Piasek. They introduce the reader to the logic of conducting interviews and analyzing them. The first article, *On Social Emergence: A Non-Dichotomous Approach to Qualitative Data Analysis*, presents our method of insight into the interview, which is aimed at probing the “emerging” subjectivity in the interview situation. The second article, *On Social Emergence: A Non-Dichotomous Approach to Qualitative Tool Design*, discusses a narrative interview tool about the present created as an alternative to the “classic” narrative biographical interview.

Next, there are theoretical and historical analyses prepared by Paweł Pieniążek based on interviews. Therefore, the third article, *Late Modern Projectivity and Existentialism*, discusses the relationship between the existentialist understanding of the category of project and the projectivity of late modernity in the context of the phenomena of project work and biographical projects. The fourth article, *Late Modern Individualization in Light of Critical Theory (Frankfurt School): An Essay*, looks at the contemporary transformations of individualization processes while using the tools of the Frankfurt critical theory.

Biographical interviews were the basic, but not the only, type of empirical material we collected. As part of our research, we also conducted two focus group interviews thematizing the issue of intersectionality, as well as two consultation seminars with experts on the topics of neuroatypicality and non-heteronormativity. Moreover, we analyzed subjectivity in the Polish social context and looked at the biographies of our interlocutors from the perspective of intergenerational differences. Readers interested in this part of our research project are referred to the soon-to-be published monograph titled *Czy te pojęcia coś dziś opisują? Słownik samo-świato-wyrażeń* [En. *Do These Concepts Describe Anything*

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Cytowanie

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Kształtowanie się podmiotowości i biografii jednostek w obliczu przemian neonowoczesnego społeczeństwa. Wprowadzenie

Abstrakt: Niniejszy tekst stanowi wstęp do innych artykułów zamieszczonych w tym numerze, przygotowanych w celu prezentacji części metodologicznej i historyczno-teoretycznej wyników grantu badawczego. Nasze badania miały na celu eksplorację współczesnych przemian podmiotowości, a także tego, jak podmiotowość naszych rozmówców wyłania się podczas wywiadów narracyjnych. W pierwszej części artykułu zarysowano przesłanki przeprowadzonego badania. W dalszej części zaprezentowano krótki wywód omawiający kategorię „projektowości” w kontekście przemian zachodzących w społeczeństwie (po)nowoczesnym. Na koniec krótko odniesiono się do zagadnień metodologicznych, które są opisane znacznie szerzej w pozostałych tekstach prezentowanego numeru.

Słowa kluczowe: projektowość, biografia, podmiotowość, społeczeństwo neonowoczesne, wywiad narracyjny