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“Biographical Certainty” in Reflexive Modernity

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Abstract

As a result of continuous social change it seems more and more difficult today to produce biographical certainty in the sense of clear expectations and the shaping of one's own life-course. What was previously taken for granted is being transformed into (real or apparent) decisions by means of social individualization processes and individual processes of building up one's own biography (Beck 1992). Life courses are no longer simply given, but (allegedly) dependent on decisions, and if this premise is accepted, the pressure on individuals rises to make the right decisions.

Against this background, the essay aims to determine the different action and interpretation patterns with which biographical certainty is created under the conditions of a systematically uncertain world. A typology of *biographical certainty* developed on the basis of qualitative interviews will be presented. At the end of the essay, results will be integrated in the discourse on a fundamental change or structural rupture within modernity.

What can be considered as the central result is the fact that apparently obsolete certainty strategies, no less than apparently new ones, are effective means of creating biographical certainty and action potential today. Therefore, at a methodological level, the error must be avoided to equate what is attributed to epochs with specific individual action patterns. Rather, when interpreting and classifying results, it must be made explicit where one stands as a scientific observer and what normative implications are involved for the interpretation and classification of results.

Key Words

Biographical Certainty, Modernization, Reflexive Modernity, Life-Course, Biography, Risk

1. Introduction

The issue of *biographical certainty*¹ presupposes that life courses are open to both individual and social shaping forces. This assumption, so self-evident to us today (but also challenged yet again) is the result of a long historical process of change, the transition to modernity.

Liberating the individual from all-embracing conceptions of the world in the Middle Ages was a basic condition of this process. In these conceptions of the world, one's destiny was always pre-determined - and in this sense *certain*. At the same time, it was inaccessible to individual action and unpredictable in its development. One could attempt to reconcile the gods through gifts and prayers, but ultimately one's actual life course was always determined by the unfathomable will of God and by strokes of fate (epidemics, cot death, war). There seemed to be no escape from one's destiny, regardless of how ingenious and extravagant one's security measures may have been (Delumeau 1978).

When modernity was accomplished, the idea gained ground that inner and outer nature could be controlled, people believed in the unstoppable progress of technology and in social participation through gainful employment, and all these notions had an effect on individual life courses. Where life had still been determined, first and foremost, by social class and local bonds, a new social structure evolved, the *institutionalized life course* (Kohli 1986: 274ff.). Life courses became predictable and could be shaped individually and institutionally, as life expectancy rose clearly and death was deferred to very old age (Imhof 1981). A normative program succeeded for leading the right life and for protecting it institutionally, as social security was introduced and established effectively on a large scale (Kohli 1986: 277ff.). Thus, the fiction was born that life courses could be organized safely and according to one's own will.

As the individual was liberated from the fetters of the corporate state during the transition period to industrialized modernity, it was reintegrated into large social groups (classes) and division-of-labor patterns legitimized by those found in nature, e.g. gender roles. Once the subject had been separated from the society of the corporate state and all-embracing conceptions of the world, it found itself in new stable conditions in which life courses could be planned. In modern theories such as Gehlen's theory of institutions (1980, 1988), Parson's theory of structural and functional socialization (1964) or Erikson's concept of identity formation (1950), stable and predictable action contexts guarantee the process of becoming a subject, and they are the prerequisites for successfully organizing one's life.

The inconsistencies between early modern notions that life courses could be shaped individually and institutional demands limiting the possibilities of doing so increasingly put the institutionalized life course (Kohli 1986) and status biography (Levy 1991/1996) under pressure. Basic certainties of male and female life course planning become more and more doubtful, and need to be more and more substantiated, in both a normative and practical sense, as for instance women's emancipation or the structural changes in working society show. With regard to individual life course planning, it is above all the basic certainties of *normal employee-employer relationships* and *professional development* as well as the *normal family* that become eroded and make the unquestioned reference to standard models of life course planning doubtful (Berger 1996, for instance, or Berger, Sopp 1994, or

Brose, Hildenbrand 1988). A development which, from the perspective of modern theory, clearly fosters *uncertainty*.

As the thesis goes, such changed conditions for one's own life-course planning also have an effect on patterns of biographical certainty. What these patterns are like will be shown in the following.²

We will start with some basic conceptional considerations concerning the term of *biographical certainty* (2.) and then move on to the empirical part in which a typology of biographical certainty will be presented (3.). Finally, results with regard to the discourse on changing modernity and its consequences for subjects will be discussed (4.).

2. A general theoretical conception of certainty

Certainty, both in its everyday and academic usage, means very different things like protection, absence of danger, absence of fear, security, trust, order, stability or control. At the same time, certainty is discussed in every conceivable field: inner and outer security; political, social, economic, technical security; legal certainty, public safety, national and international security; self-confidence, personal safety, certainty of knowledge, certainty of orientation and much more. What is always involved are expectations with regard to the future. If the future is *certain*, it is specified, determined and *remote from a time context* (Kaufmann, 1970: 357).

In modernity, where the world is not simply given, but can apparently be organized and controlled, the future is open for change. Thus, in a future which is always uncertain in principle (Luhmann 1985: 24f.), certainty becomes a problem and a positive social value (Kaufmann 1970: 45). On the one hand, it is a general prerequisite for any kind of action, because, without a minimum of certainty about oneself and one's environment, actions become impossible. On the other hand, actions cause uncertainty, because they might always have been different and things can turn out other than we expected (Luhmann 1985: 24f.).

Certainty of expectations always emerges when an unlimited and complex sphere of possibilities where everything seems possible is transformed into a level of expectations with a limited number of options among which a choice can be made and the consequences of which can be assessed; in other words: when "(unmanageable) contingencies" are redefined as "(manageable) complexities" (Bonß 1997: 24). With regard to a manageable sphere of possibilities, expectations can then be more or less certain/uncertain (Luhmann 1995: 307f.). The certainty of expectations always moves between the extremes of *absolute certainty* where, by definition, actions are no longer possible, as there is no choice between alternatives, and *contingency* which does not allow the slightest expectation to emerge that would be necessary to act at all.

2.1 Biographical certainty through interpretation and action?

Strategies of biographical certainty, on the one hand, can refer to expectations, i.e. the level of interpretations (*certainty constructions*) and, on the other hand, to action strategies with the aim of achieving certainty in the sense of protection against events assessed to be negative (*protective actions*). Certainty constructions indicate what has to be reckoned with and how undesirable events can be dealt with. Various protective

actions result from there which can be used to try and protect oneself against those undesirable events by means of rational calculation, for instance, or hope or prayer. The distinction between certainty constructions and protective actions is important, because biographical certainty is achieved not only through protective actions and the belief in their effectiveness, but also by reinterpreting a situation or changing a reality construction. That is the case, for instance, when a mundane view of life and definitions of gender roles requiring explanation are exchanged for a religious philosophy with comparably unambiguous or certainty-based predetermined roles.

The difference can be explained using divorce as an example. Only where a reality construction exists that includes divorce as a possibility (even if, at the moment of marriage, it is not considered to be very likely), will measures be taken (e.g. therapy for couples) to prevent it from happening. If it remains uncertain whether a divorce can be avoided through efforts of one's own, the possibility still exists to protect oneself against negative consequences, as, for instance, by means of a marriage contract.³ In these two examples, uncertainty is perceived as *a risk*,⁴ i.e. individuals think they *can influence or handle* an event and its consequences when they occur.

Certainty in marriage can also be achieved by considering divorce to be impossible. Even if other people get divorced, one can have the firm conviction that, in one's own case, a divorce will not occur, or it is so unlikely that precautions do not have to be taken. In this case, divorce is part of a logic of *danger*: it is *not included* in the sphere one can influence and occurs *unexpectedly*. Accordingly, no precautions are taken to prevent it from happening. Finally, another case is conceivable. If divorce is considered to be an uncontrollable and *unmanageable* danger, one can avoid marriage altogether, so that the divorce situation simply cannot come up. A change of context, e.g. by entering a monastery, makes divorce a biographical event not to be expected in the least, since divorce does not have to be taken into account where the possibility to get married does not exist (see Bonß, et al. 2003, Bonß, Zinn 2003).

The following remarks and the typology refer to *certainty constructions*, i.e. to the level of meaningful references and reality constructions from which certain protective actions can be inferred logically.

2.2 Biographical certainty from the perspective of a theory of identity and action?

Frequently, in academic discourse, feelings of uncertainty and the knowledge about complex decision-making possibilities are not clearly enough distinguished (see Zinn, Eßer 2002, for a clear point of view). Ambiguity is often equated with feelings of uncertainty, and, in this context, the question remains unanswered to what extent a variety of options inevitably create uncertainty.⁵ Only a few studies examine *new* social uncertainties or life-course risks (e.g. Wohlrab-Sahr 1993; Behringer 1998; Mutz, et al. 1995), and they give a predominantly negative evaluation of the disintegration and shifting of formerly effective pre-determined structures, claiming this fact was responsible for an increase in *personal uncertainty* regarding lifestyle and biographical planning (e.g. Behringer 1998).

One of the reasons for the inevitability of this conclusion is the underlying identity-logical conception of the uncertainty problem in an order-sociological research tradition (Bonß 1995: 13ff.). Conceptions of this kind focus on the task of establishing and stabilizing a clear, continuous and coherent (biographical) identity. In this sense,

identity becomes a conception for establishing *personal certainty* (Bauman 1995).⁶ If it is endangered or infringed upon by ambiguities, what results is, per se, uncertainty. Consequently, uncertainty is evaluated as being negative, and one wants it to be reduced and overcome as far as possible. Hence, the research perspective is committed to different ways of coping with identity-threatening influences.

Two central conceptional conclusions can be drawn: To avoid the dangers of identity-logical concepts - e.g. evaluating, from the start, certain life-course references that do not correspond to the underlying identity concept (Geissler, Oechsle 1996) or excluding them from the analysis altogether (Baethge, et al. 1988) - we do not focus on *identity*, but rather on *biographical actions* (Zinn 2003). Thus, we no longer examine the continuity and coherence of biographical identities, but biographical ways of life-course planning. Different *ways of relating certainty and uncertainty to each other* can then be observed.

3. The Survey

The aim of the empirical survey was to determine *biographical certainty strategies* that people refer to as they shape their lives in current social conditions. For this purpose, 60 individuals aged 30 to 40 (+ / - 5 years) were interviewed (see in detail: Zinn/Eßer 2001: 8f.).

The assumption was that, in highly differentiated modern societies, biographical certainty can vary according to particular social environments. Therefore, when analyzing how biographical certainty in the shaping of individual lives comes about, it seemed reasonable to focus the investigation on the main factors that can be proved to give structure to people's lives. These are, above all, material reproduction through gainful employment (material security) and the organization of partner-relationships in marriage (certainty of relationships). As late as the mid-sixties, Schelsky (1979: 254) claimed they were the basic elements of certainty in modern life. They were complemented by a third one targeting the basic providers of meaning in life. Religious and ethical beliefs, but also mental concepts such as the family being a "combat group" or maxims such as "Life is what you make it", put life in a comprehensive context of meaning and, in this manner, can help to structure biographical expectations (interpretational certainty).

3.1 Action types - types of persons

As for the *development of a typology*, it was explicitly not the objective to work out specific certainty constructions related to specific individuals, e.g. in the sense of unambiguous biographical narratives or identities. Rather, the attempt was made to determine the entire range of biographical certainty types that are possible, regardless of whether individuals, depending on their environment, circumstances or phase of life, choose the same or different biographical certainty strategies. That is why the following presentation of types is a *typology of meaningful kinds of action logic* (see Zinn 2001a, b), and individuals or types of identity are not being examined.

Even if the following presentation of types occasionally suggests that ideal types can be generalized to signify individuals in their entirety, one should not give in to this false conclusion. It is possible, and it can be observed, that in the field of gainful employment, for instance, other certainty strategies are pursued than in the field of partnerships.

3.2 The context of biographical certainty problems

In the *typology of biographical certainty*, individual types can be distinguished according to the different problem references that have to be considered. If one achieves certainty in regard to one's own life, this always happens with reference to *norms*; if *uncertainty* is perceived in a specific way, a specific *time* perspective is opened up and an *action* basis constructed. All certainty constructions relate to culturally available models of the *right way of life* or notions of normality (norms) concerning, for instance, gainful employment or partnerships. Unexpected events in the course of one's life (uncertainty) are always ascribed, somehow, either to oneself (risk) or to factors outside of one's own sphere of influence (danger).⁷ All expectations are directed towards the future. They differ, however, in the length of time they envisage or the concrete amount of time they bind. Finally, in order to be able to act at all, it seems to be necessary that a secure basis (action basis) is constructed, in whatever way, for each action. For reasons of space, only the first two problem references, norms and uncertainty, can be dealt with in detail here to illustrate the types. This will be sufficient, however, to make the construction logic of all types quite clear. The underlying time models and action basis, on the other hand, will only be explained in summary (see also the table and Bonß, Zinn 2003).

3.3 The typology of biographical certainty modes

The empirical material, having examined problem references, allowed for the development of five ideal types of biographical certainty modes: *traditionalization*, *approximation*, *optimization*, *autonomization* and *contextualization*. These are meaningful kinds of action logic and not a case structure. To make this clear, the individual certainty modes will not be presented using a single, detailed case description as an example. Rather, in the following, the problem references characteristic for each type will be explained, one after the other, and illustrated with interview material around the topics of partnership, marriage and divorce. A typology overview will be given in the table at the end of the empirical part of this paper.

3.3.1 The traditionalization and approximation modes

In the *traditionalization* mode, certainty is based on the *traditionalization* of norms that seem to be given. Deviations and unexpected events are not envisaged. Accordingly, precautions are not taken (nor certainty systems developed) to protect oneself in case they occur. Divorce, for instance, appears to be a fateful catastrophe. The approximation mode, just like the *traditionalization* mode, follows a *logic of danger*. The occurrence of unwelcome events is expected in a general sort of way, as a consequence of the world's inevitable imperfection which resists the immediate realization of an idealized ethic of the right way of life. Precautions not being possible, the *approximation* mode is used to approach the requirements of a system of values, understood to be binding, by means of improvisation and rectification.

Where the *traditionalization* mode is concerned, *dealing with norms* is characterized by the reproduction of given action patterns which appear to be natural or self-evident. Decisions concerning working life or partnerships are not primarily an issue of whether one should go ahead with them (get married, have a family, find a job), but

rather of fine-tuning: when and under what circumstances the individual events of a traditionalized *sequential pattern* should be realized. The example of *Sonja* (511f.) shows how notions of normality about marriage and having a family effectively interlock even where unexpected events occur, such as an unplanned pregnancy: "If you live together and have children - well, *I guess you're married*, and that's how it was with us when we met: we wanted to get married, we wanted to have children too, and then *the kids just came before the wedding* or were in the making, and that was no issue any more, we just said, *now's the time to get married*, and *that was the right thing to do*."

In this mode, biographical uncertainties are seen as dangers. Unwelcome events are biographical *catastrophes* that descend upon a life guided by notions of normality. They are one's *destiny* and, as such, inaccessible to actions of one's own. Even if an unwanted event, such as a divorce, is seen elsewhere, it is out of the question in one's own life. Nonetheless, *Rosina*, for instance, sees - and deplores - that many of her friends are divorced:

"Maybe I'd like to have a circle of friends who sort of share our values, *who live like we do*, meaning *they're married with one or more kids*, I have very many friends who are *divorced*, who are *singles.... divorced several times....* What I'd like sometimes is an *utterly normal married couple* where you simply don't have *any problems*." (*Rosina* 345f.).

In spite of these experiences, *Rosina* does not take into consideration the possibility of a divorce in her own case. Accordingly, she takes no protective measures. An exception would be traditionalized protective measures to be realized according to a logic of traditionalization: "That's the way it's done!" *Rosina*, however, has accepted to be financially dependent on her husband to a high degree.

I: "You have the strong support of your husband, don't you?" - R: "Yes." - I: "Have you ever thought *what would happen* if you got *divorced*?" - R: "Yes, I'd be a *welfare case*." - I: "And that *doesn't worry you*?" - R: "No." (*Rosina*137f.).

This "no" proves that *Rosina* does not really expect to be a "welfare case". Therefore, measures need not be taken.

In the *approximation* mode, the connection to norms is not so clear and *modified* by practical experience. Instead of a valid tradition, we have a general ethic of what is right and wrong. This ethic, however, has to be *individually implemented* in a complex reality. A logic of this kind is expressed, for instance, in the following statement:

"That's *what the Bible says*, that's the way we should do things, and *we don't really have to talk about it a lot*." (*Anton* 1022ff.).

The *modification of ethics in practical life* is apparent in another statement made by *Anton* (1090f.): "At the moment, *life is not just a straight path*, actually, my goal being out there, straight ahead of me, and all I have to do is go for it. Probably, *a few detours have to be made*, which, at that very moment, one *doesn't recognize, or their meaning*."

Normative notions are just as unquestionably valid as for the *traditionalization* mode. However, *common sense* comes into play as a kind of mediating force that deals with unexpected problems. This mediating force is implied in the limited expectation certainty provided by given norms and is used to realize practical action solutions that

might sometimes even violate ethical standards. Thus, *Anton* justifies committing adultery by saying that he wanted to avoid divorce (528ff.):

"Well, *marriage* is normally, let's say, a long-term relationship which, on the one hand, *God created, because it's a meaningful thing*. If I'm unfaithful, does that mean I'm violating the Ten Commandments? No way! *Logical thinking* tells me that, just because it says 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' in the Bible, being unfaithful can't be all wrong. I feel like it might be the better solution than saying straight away I'll get myself divorced. That would settle things once and for all, and our kid would grow up without a father..."

In contrast to the *traditionalization* mode, it is reckoned that unexpected events will occur - in one's own life, as well, but only in a very unspecific way that hardly allows precautions to be taken. It is only too likely that something will happen that undermines the realization of the ideal, making it imperative to search for individual solutions. It remains open what they might actually be. Hence, prevention and counter-measures are impossible.

The various certainty modes bind time in very different ways. Depending on how far expectations are projected into the future, different requirements arise for the certainty strategies. These requirements are less compelling where expectations have to be met in the not so distant future, present and future, as a rule, being less strongly determined, in this case, than in the case of long-term planning up to retirement which needs comprehensive provision (e.g. securing one's old age or a home of one's own).

From the perspective of *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes, the *future* is certain. Either it is thought of as a reproduction of past and present (*traditionalization*), or it is determined in a specific way, so that only the detours that have to be coped with as one attempts to realize an ideal appear to be insecure (*approximation*). In this sense, long-term commitments such as marriage or home-building are possible without too many problems, since dangers such as divorce are not reckoned with. Correspondingly, in the *approximation* mode, one assumes that something can always happen, but since one doesn't know what that might be, it is not possible to be prepared. Instead, the ideal, considered to be normatively right, is pursued unwaveringly.

The *ultimate grounds for actions* or the *action basis* are references that biographical decisions are based on "even if everything goes wrong". *Basic certainty* shields current biographical action situations against unexpected biographical events. Basic certainty can be a cognitive construct, but also a feeling expressing itself both in a belief in divine power and confidence in one's own action competence.

In the *traditionalization* mode, the action basis is established by assuming that given traditionalized references are right; and in the *approximation* mode, because the validity of a value system (possibly ideological, possibly religious) is not questioned. These two ultimate grounds for actions seems to be unalterably given and cannot be analyzed.

3.3.2 The optimization and autonomization modes

In contrast to the *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes, the *optimization* and *autonomization* modes follow a logic of risk-taking. In the competitive market model

of the *optimization* mode, events judged as negative are the consequence of imprudent or inadequate calculations; in the emancipation model of the *autonomization* mode, they are disturbances of one's own development or flexibilization strategies.

The *optimization* mode does not refer so much to a clearly defined norm (as it does in the *traditionalization* or *approximation* modes), but rather to a mechanism. In the labour market model, one's biography is the competitive struggle for success or failure. This notion is expressed, for instance, in one's concern "*to always be among the top 10%*" of one's colleagues (*Finn* 460ff.) or, even more clearly, in the metaphor of the mammoth hunt: "The risk of an accident, oh well, I think *it's got to be dangerous* sometimes, I sort of think in the direction of "we are natural born killers", us men - we've simply got to go hunting and the strongest will shoot the mammoth, which can be *a real victory* only if *some people in one's own ranks suffer injuries*." (*Sven* 219ff.).

The labour market or competition model, however, is not limited to the employment system. It also applies to the field of partner choices, as the following example shows:

I: "And what does it mean for you: *to be a single?*" - Sven: "Oh shit, *a loser....to come off worst in the fight for women*, something like that. If you take a good look at this male competitive thinking.... But I also bumped into it, because I really thought, hey, I'm actually somebody who's a good talker, sort of, I'm not obese or anything like that, I go out a lot, get to know a lot of people, so I think: well, actually, it should be possible, one way or another...." (*Sven* 169ff).

Uncertainty, in this sense, is perceived as an *accident*. In a world of competition, failure, loss or defeat are always possible. One might have been careless, even if one seems to have done everything right, thus finding oneself on the loser side. From the perspective of the *optimization* mode, insecurities are perceived as risks which, in their entirety, are not calculable or manageable because of *accidents*. Ultimately, certainty remains unattainable, as failure is implicit in the competitive struggle within the market model.

The market model includes a rational calculation of all perceived advantages and disadvantages of a situation in order to minimize risks and find the best individual solution at any one time. Actions are characterized by systematically planned procedures. This can be seen in the example of *Finn*. In order to secure his relationship, *Finn* deliberately prevents his girlfriend from having contact with "competing friends", since "my circle of friends.... there are many *singles* among them, around the age of 30, there's always some men hanging around and maybe trying to *meddle a bit*" (*Finn* 1080). His coping strategy "that was to *keep my distance* a bit (*Finn* 1090) or to "cultivate *relationships more strongly with people who are in relationships themselves*" (*Finn* 1093).

The *optimization* mode can be characterized by competition with others in the context of a market model, whereas the *autonomization* mode gets into conflict and confrontation with given structures. It is characteristic for the *autonomization* mode to dissociate and emancipate oneself from given norms, an attitude dating back to the Age of Enlightenment. The ability to dissociate oneself is achieved through one's individual personality development and action competence. The goal is to open up individual action possibilities and spaces.

How this mode is related to norms can be illustrated with the example of gender

roles in partnerships:

"For me it is absolutely normal to *organize my life (independently)*. Sure it's necessary to show consideration for each other, but it's not like me, as a woman, that I have to be considerate in a thousand different ways and turn my life upside down.... that's why, ultimately, the partnership failed. [...] I work, I support myself, I get by, I can manage my life by myself, and if I say yes to a relationship, I do it on the basis of *equal rights*.... sharing the work at home, helping each other out, all that is obvious for me, and, well.... I'm not willing to make great compromises or, sort of, play the role of an *obedient little housewife*. (Maria 700ff.).

Maria distanced herself from gender role requirements as she perceived them and is only willing to enter into a self-determined partnership based on equal rights.

Biographical uncertainty in one's job or in a partnership is perceived as a developmental risk resulting from attempts to assert and develop oneself in opposition to given norms. The potentially lifelong development of one's personality and competencies is risky, but even in the case of negative experiences it leads to a competency increase in coping with life:

"It was *all a learning process*, and I'd say that *in the middle of life* one has somehow *overcome those first obstacles*, and then it just goes on like that. I wouldn't say that now I'm *a complete person*, it's not like that at all, but let me put it like this: in regard to certain *things* one can *assess oneself* and decide what to take on and *what not to take on*, one has learned that meanwhile. And that's why I say I've never been happier, it's only around the age of 25 or 26 that life really takes off, even if all kinds of things can still go wrong, but *everything that went before was somehow necessary, too*, although I can really do without *strokes of fate* now, like a child or whatever, but even then it wouldn't be *so tragic anymore*, it wouldn't exactly bowl you over" (Maria 69).

In comparison to closed *time* constructions in the *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes, the future is open to new events in the *optimization* and *autonomization* modes. Individual events, however, appear on a line of development that follows a logic resulting from the course of life itself. In the *optimization* mode, this logic is an additive-linear piling up of resources that optimize success in the market with moments of failure possibly interrupting the process. In the *autonomization* mode, biographical experiences follow one another in a lifelong process of learning and development. *Disturbances* may occur, but they do not change the time construction and future perspective.

In contrast to the *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes that obtain their *basic certainty* from mainly external sources, the *optimization* and *autonomization* modes relate to a person's competencies and skills. These are the firm basis that, even in a crisis situation of failure, maintains the ability to act. In the view of the *optimization* mode, it is more the acquired competencies that matter. In the logic of the *autonomization* mode, on the other hand, it is one's own personality and one's ability to develop it that give the certainty for managing one's life.

3.3.3 The contextualization mode

In the *contextualization* mode, the danger and risk types of logic are mixed. On the one hand, the biographical future appears to be manageable and predictable. On the other hand, neither a pure danger logic nor a pure risk logic is realized. Rather, the

unpredictable (or uncertainty) is no longer assessed in a fundamentally negative manner, but considered to be an opportunity for new events and experiences. Certainty is seen as fictitious, and rational calculation becomes a helpful instrument among others. Its limited validity is taken into account and supplemented by *emotional* decision criteria.

A biographically open way of dealing with norms is a distinguishing feature of the *contextualization* mode. Depending on context, specific norms can be complied with, but also rejected. Both attitudes are possible, without a long-term commitment to a specific biographical model resulting from one or the other. Rather, both a normal family and a normal employment situation are conceivable as a temporary biographical orientation pattern. Which model is referred to remains embedded in a situational decision-making framework: "I can think: how do I benefit from this or that for my future, but I can also try out: *how do I feel about it, and that's what usually works out best for me*" (Ludwig 241ff.).

What follows from that is not just anything at all. Rather, the *outer* description of a process (e.g. one's employment history) might well reflect a normal model (e.g. school, academic studies, doctorate). At the same time, the *inner* action logic can be a situational one which only becomes *visible* when, after doing a doctorate, you do not pursue an academic career, but fulfill your dream of being a gardener.

In the *contextualization* mode, biographical uncertainty with regard to an overall biographical project is an opportunity linked to dangers. No matter how accurately risks are calculated, the awareness prevails in the *contextualization* mode that things can always turn out differently:

"... It's a risk I take, and then try and get on, jump into the cold water like, on the edge and pow! down I go. That's the only way to do it, I think. Oh, you can *absolutely keep an eye on things* while taking this risk, but *ultimately it's always a plunge into cold water*. Not everything can be predetermined. If I'm *protective about everything* - then *either nothing happens*, or I *failed to see something*. That would be a *nice risk, too*, that would be okay" (Ludwig 1479ff.).

In the *contextualization* mode, there is an awareness of the limits of rational risk calculation, where the logic of *danger of the second order* (Bonß 1995: 80) applies. However, the awareness that things can always turn out differently is not decisive (see the *approximation* mode, for instance). What matters is the fact that this awareness leads to a specific reinterpretation of the situation on hand. Limited rationality is not always seen negatively as a lack of control, as it is in the *optimization* mode. Rather, unforeseen consequences get a positive evaluation. They make access to new and unexpected experiences possible. This way of looking at uncertainty also affects the construction of biographical time.

In the *contextualization* mode, biographical certainty and uncertainty are interconnected. The certainty of expectations exists for biographical episodes. Hence, precautions and protective measures are directed only towards each ongoing biographical project. Beyond that, the future remains contingent. Its *unmanageability*, however, is an opportunity for entirely new experiences which are not limited by current stipulations.

In the *contextualization* mode, as in the *optimization* and *autonomization* modes, the reference to one's own personality is the unalterable action basis. In the

contextualization mode, however, neither one's competencies nor one's ability to develop are emphasized. Instead, one's self-confidence is the point of reference, self-confidence to be able to weigh up rational calculations and emotions correctly. The assumption is made, here, that a crisis situation, that can never be entirely ruled out, may occur, (temporarily) suspending one's ability to act.

In the following table, the different types are shown in summary

Table: Types of biographical certainty construction

Types of biographical certainty: Problem reference:	TRADITIONALIZATION	APPROXIMATION	OPTIMIZATION	AUTONOMIZATION	CONTEXTUALIZATION
Dealing with norms	Tradition <i>Reproduction</i>	»Ethics« <i>Readjust, Improve</i>	Market <i>Calculate, Compete</i>	Emancipation <i>Development, Flexibilization</i>	Situation <i>Situational reference, Contextualization</i>
Perception of uncertainty	Catastrophe <i>Fate</i>	Danger <i>Imperfection</i>	Market risk <i>Carelessness</i>	Developmental risk <i>Disturbance</i>	Second order dangers <i>Opportunities in dangerous situations</i>
Conception of time	Closed time horizon	Closed future <i>Approximation of an ideal, that is attainable in principle</i>	Open future <i>Additive-linear</i>	Open future <i>Development and lifelong learning</i>	Open future, project time <i>Episodes and lifelong learning</i>
Ultimate grounds for actions	Given traditions	Value system	Competencies and skills of one's own	Personality and developmental competencies	Self-confidence, emotional rationality

4. Conclusion: Biographical certainty in reflexive (or second) modernity

How should the empirical results concerning the thesis of a fundamental change within modernity (Beck, Bonß, Lau 2003) be evaluated? From the perspective of an order and identity logic, it seems reasonable to assign the various biographical certainty constructions to certain historical epochs and to evaluate them either positively or negatively with regard to social processes of change.

The *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes would then be pre-modern modes that cannot really fulfill the demands of a society changing comparatively fast. They would be deficient and regressive. The *optimization* and *autonomization* modes would be the ideal models for a modern world where one's own chances must be realized in competition with others or where one's personal development occasionally has to be achieved by dealing with given norms (innovation). The assumed action autonomy provided by these modes would correspond to the dichotomous subject model of simple (or first) modernity.

Action types in the *contextualization* mode would again be deficient if definite biographical planning were regarded as a prerequisite for successfully organizing one's life (e.g. Geissler, Oechsle 1996; Baethge, et al. 1988). Such a perspective would be the point of view of a modernity that, in the tradition of order theory (Bonß 1995: 13ff.), *mourns* the ideals of unambiguity, coherence and certainty. On the other hand, the *contextualization* mode would be *celebrated* as a *reflexive, modern* mode, most likely to correspond to changed social conditions, from a perspective in which coherence, identity and certainty have been exposed as an inadequately simple, modern fiction of our time. In comparison, *optimization* and *autonomization* would be fictitious in a time in which "the place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets, contrary to the image of individual control which establishes itself in consciousness." (Beck 1992: 131).

What seems more appropriate is a perspective acknowledging that all modes establish biographical certainty successfully and are suitable for organizing individual biographies. They differ, however, with regard to the consequences for individual life courses. Obviously, the advantage of the *traditionalization* and *approximation* modes is to be seen in the radical reduction of complexity. Far-reaching precautionary measures do not take root in the present. What has to be dealt with are only the catastrophes and dangers that really occur. To that extent, such certainty strategies can be highly effective in giving orientation, even where an increase in *catastrophic experiences* might encourage the notion of *a world getting worse and worse*. When society as a whole no longer provides explicit interpretation models (or *great narratives*), the context of references might change. For instance, people might look for *protection* in religious, ideological or local communities where expectation structures are unambiguous. Even if it is not social class and stratum, but rather milieu and lifestyles that perform this security task, they are not likely to be less effective.

The *optimization* and *autonomization* modes leave it to each individual to create his/her biography successfully or unsuccessfully. That seems to be in line with Beck's thesis that all individuals must see themselves as planning departments of their own biographies if they do not want to be at a permanent disadvantage (see Beck 1992:

135f.). Where success prevails or sufficient resources are available to cushion the impact of temporary setbacks, these are the modes in which the individual organization of one's life can be asserted against competition and given structures. Where high unemployment and high divorce rates do not drop off, individuals, male and female, who apply these modes might be exposed to considerable pressures if they are frequently forced to acknowledge their own responsibility for failure and to deal with that fact.

In the *contextualization* mode, the overall biographical development perspective has been abandoned in favour of individual biographical projects. The result is greater flexibility in dealing with unexpected biographical developments. The danger of fictitious notions about manageability (risks) is understood, leaving life planning open for decisions that go beyond the rational weighing up of risks. In this mode, however, the difficulty could arise that in many social groups life course and career patterns are still valid which cannot be disposed of in just any way one chooses. Thus, academic studies are only available to those who have obtained the relevant qualifications, and certain occupational positions can only be reached if certain age limits are not exceeded. It follows that biographical possibilities in the *contextualization* mode are also structured by commitments and non-commitments.

If biographical uncertainty is seen as the normal action situation in the simple (or first) and reflexive (or second) modernity, then it becomes clear that certainty can be achieved not only through unambiguity, but also by means of *incorporating contingencies* (Wohlrab-Sahr 1993), making expectations *more ambiguous* (Luhmann, 1995: 308f.), or referring to one's own *emotions* (Wahl 2000: 17). The reason why this possibility was not seen clearly for a long time might be connected with the fact that life course perspectives were dominated mainly by the autonomous male subject model and a linear time model (see Kohli 1986), whereas the *female* kinds of life course planning, with their remarkably contingent time structure (e.g. Maines, Hardesty 1987), went unnoticed or were interpreted as deficient.

Other interesting research perspectives are still open. The issue has not been resolved when and under what conditions one or the other certainty mode is referred to. The important question follows what influence changing institutional conditions have on the fact that people refer to different biographical certainty strategies. Beyond that, the possibilities and forms of reciprocal referencing and the interlocking of different certainty modes in individual biographies remain to be investigated. Repeatedly, there have been indications of specific *mixed forms* of rational and religious interpretation patterns (e.g. Mansfield, Mitchell, King, 2002).

Footnotes

¹ Three translations of the German word "Sicherheit" into English are possible: safety, security and certainty. "Safety" is a rather more technical term and mainly refers to protection against unexpected events. "Security" can be interpreted as a feeling or as protection or is used in economic affairs. This essay, however, focuses on problems that can be understood best using the term "certainty" in the sense of clear, unambiguous expectations.

² The following remarks refer to a study carried out in the context of the Collaborative Research Center 536 *Reflexive Modernization* from 1999 to 2002 (see Bonß, et al. 2003; Zinn, Eßer, 2001; Eßer, Zinn, 2002). Wolfgang Bonß was in charge of the

project, and contributors, along with the author, were Felicitas Eßer, Joachim Hohl; Alexander Jakob and Helga Pelizäus-Hoffmeister. The project team deserves special thanks. Without their contributions, this essay would not have been possible.

³ However, a divorce can also be seen as hardly negative at all or as having no serious consequences, so that no measures seem to be necessary. In that case, a problem with certainty does not arise.

⁴ Luhmann (1993: 21f.) introduced the distinction between risk and danger to mark the difference between events that must be individually ascribed to one's own actions (risk) and events that must be ascribed to the actions of others or not to persons at all (danger).

⁵ Thus, there are clear indications in psychological studies that feelings of uncertainty are not located in the same dimension as cognitive ambiguities.

⁶ The boom of concepts such as *biography* or *biographical certainty* can be seen as an indication that it is not sufficient to *identify* individuals by pinning them down to a factual and social dimension.

⁷ E.g. Luhmann (1993: 21f.) on the distinction between risk and danger.

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