

## Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Turning Points

*Daniela Reimer, Research Associate at the University of Siegen*

### 1 Introduction

In education and social science research, the term “turning point” is hard to pin down. It fascinates researchers, as in trajectories and life histories the term describes unexpected changes which require interpretation and may present a particular challenge when it comes to analysis. Among social pedagogy practitioners and social policy-makers, talk of turning points awakens the hope that changes in direction can be brought about in difficult biographical courses, with targeted interventions putting an end to problematic social situations passed down from one generation to the next.

At the same time, the literature so far on turning points tends to add to the confusion rather than clearing it up. This is mainly due to the fact that there are all kinds of different views as to what turning points are. Sometimes they are understood only as changes in the direction of a person's life course (cf. Elder 1974); sometimes they are instead seen as transitions or events which can normally be expected to occur and which alter people's self-interpretations (cf. Rosenthal 1997; Clausen 1995). Sackmann and Wiggins sum up these different understandings of what a turning point is when they state that the “methodological and theoretical status of turning points has not yet been unambiguously defined” (Sackmann & Wiggins 2001:26).

This article aims to roughly sort some of the literature on turning points into life course research and biographical research. The suggestion is then made only to describe something as a turning point if there are subjective and objective markers of relevant change. Finally, a case example is used with the intention of shedding light on how turning point analysis can be used in social-pedagogical research.

### 2 Life course research and biographical research – a constructed German difference

While in English the terms “life course research”, “biographical research”, “research on oral history” and “life stories” are frequently used synonymously, in German-speaking research on the social sciences and educational science a stark differentiation has developed between two different approaches known respectively as “life course research” (*Lebenslaufforschung*) and “biographical research” (*Biografieforschung*).

#### Life course research

Life course research focuses on groups of people, often cohorts. Data is usually collected based on a quantitative logic; as a rule, trajectories are measured at several points of observation: this is a longitudinal study. Thus, life course research paves the way for comparison between, for example, different generations' life courses, and provides an insight into social change as reflected in the changes between those life courses (e.g. Elder, 1974). Moreover, it allows us to examine and compare certain groups of people, such as delinquents (Laub, Sampson 2003; Schumann 2003 a,b), social benefit claimants (e.g. Buhr, Leibfried,

Ludwig, Voges 1990) , sufferers of chronic illnesses (Alonzo, Reynolds 1992), victims of violence (Spano, Rivera, Bolland 2011) and others. The large, internationally well-known studies on trajectories fall within this tradition. Glen Elder was one of the first to tackle life courses and carried out a particularly ground-breaking study on the subject, which is probably also the most well known, published under the title “Children of the Great Depression” (1974). This assessed the data of 162 people who were all born in the 1920s in Oakland, California, grew up during the 1930s economic crisis and experienced the Second World War as young adults. The data was collected at numerous intervals between the ages of 10 and 40.

Elder analyses the effects of poverty on children in the middle and working classes and the consequences that growing up in poverty has on their further life course. He determines that, measured by objective criteria, most of the people in the sample examined grow up to be successful (at least from an economic point of view) despite their difficult start in life. One particularly interesting set of results is that boys both from the working and middle classes who were affected by extreme poverty in their families of origin and forced to bear all or some of the responsibility for their families at an early age (e.g. by contributing to the family income) grew up into particularly strong, successful personalities. The girls from the working class who had to start work early, on the other hand, were far more likely than others to take on a traditional role as a housewife.

This investigation provided Elder with an analysis of social change in the USA which is still held in high esteem today and added a recognised set of terms to life course research, including “turning points”, “trajectories” and “transitions”. Just a few years after Elder first published “Children of the Great Depression” (1974), the first major publication of another longitudinal study appeared which, though it is discussed less frequently in the context of life course research, fits into the same tradition: the Kauai study by the First Lady of resilience research, Emmy Werner (1977).

Emmy Werner investigated 698 children on the island of Kauai and discovered that many (two thirds of) children who suffered from difficult beginnings (risk factors arising from their social status, such as poverty, or biological risk factors, such as birth complications) developed more negatively than those of their peers who were not subjected to such risks. However – and this particularly drew her attention – one third of the children suffering from difficult beginnings developed especially positively. Just like Glen Elder, Emmy Werner identified an outcome as being particularly positive if the subjects led a successful life according to measurable quantitative criteria. Over the years, Emmy Werner used her detailed analysis of these astonishingly positive trajectories to develop her resilience theory, which is today an important element of theory and research in the social sciences.

A more recent life course study which stands out in particular and thus deserves mention here is “Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives. Delinquent Boys to Age 70” by Laub and Sampson (2003). Laub and Sampson went out to find 500 men who had been delinquent during their childhood and adolescence and had been the subject of a study by the researchers Glueck & Glueck in 1950 (Unravelling Juvenile Delinquency; Glueck, Glueck 1950). Glueck & Glueck started a longitudinal study of 500 delinquent boys, 455 of whom they followed in a scientific project up to the age of 31. In 2001, Laub and Sampson checked the death registers and discovered that 225 of the former subjects were already dead. In their search for those who were still alive, they did manage to interview 52 of the subjects from the Glueck & Glueck study. They discovered that some of the men had succeeded in leaving the criminal world.

The turning points the men described in their lives were marriage / wives, military service (especially overseas) and reform schools, moving out of a deprived neighbourhood and getting stable employment. Sampson and Laub found that the subjects who had managed to leave the criminal milieu described themselves as playing an active role in their exit and grasping opportunities.

The life course research approach was not taken up by German-speaking researchers until Karl Ulrich Mayer began his large-scale life course study on West Germany in 1970. This was particularly aimed at a long-term cross-cohort comparison and was later complemented by a life course study on East Germany (e.g. Mayer 1990).

This approach was adopted on an even greater scale by a research unit entitled “Status passages and risk situations in the life course” (1988–2001). Various subprojects investigated topics such as career development (e.g. Sackmann 1998), trajectories of poverty and social benefits (Ludwig 1996), transitions from schools to the vocational training system, and deviance among children at Hauptschule (Schumann 2003a, 2003b), as well as status passages between reproduction and gainful employment (Born, Krüger 1993). There are also several German-language studies dealing with criminal trajectories, of which Schumann provides an overview (2003, p. 24ff).

### **Biographical research**

The investigation of biographical life courses, meanwhile, involves qualitative research. Most investigations are cross-sectional. Stories or other data material (e.g. diary entries) are used to reconstruct people's life course or life history as they experience it. Analysing biographical trajectories provides access to subjective information and individuals' own interpretations of their careers; to potential suffering; to their own specific efforts (e.g. efforts to cope), and to the input individuals perceive as coming from their environment (Schütze 1983; Corbin, Strauss 2010; Wolf, Reimer 2008).

Research into biographies can be traced back to the Chicago School, in particular<sup>1</sup>. Very early on, Thomas and Znaniecki used autobiographical interviews to study the stories of Polish immigrants in the USA (Thomas, Znaniecki, Zaretsky 1996, originally five volumes, 1918–1920). This study is considered a classic in the field of biographical research. In the 1930s, several studies then came out on social deviance and deviant substructures (cf. Ludwig 1996, p. 20). This was followed by Oswald Hall's early study on the stages of a medical career (1948) and later Howard Becker's study on the careers of teachers (1952) and drug addicts (1953), then Everett Hughes with his study on occupational biographies (1970). Erving Goffman (1959) as well as Everett Hughes and his pupils initially used the term “career” to describe a life course (cf. Ludwig 1996: 20ff). Although there are various definitions of the term “career” even within the Chicago School, the term has since mainly been used to describe the longitudinal analysis of individually experienced social processes (Gerhard 1986: 23).

Glaser and Strauss (1968) and later Corbin and Strauss (1988) also examined illness careers, analysing in detail the work done by those suffering from chronic illnesses and their partners. Biographical research in Germany is subject to various trends and influences (cf. Fuchs-Heinritz 2005: 85ff). With close links to the Chicago School, and above all Anselm Strauss,

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs-Heinritz 2005, p. 85ff, provides a comprehensive overview of the history of biographical research.

Fritz Schütze and his pupils investigated biographies using the biographical-narrative interview method. Ever since, this has been considered the method of choice for biographical research in German-speaking countries. The biographical interview is set up so that the interviewer merely gives the interviewee narrative-inducing cues: thanks to the interviewer's active listening and the inevitable nature of storytelling, the interviewee then starts to tell a life story which may take several hours.

In his analysis of the biographical interview, Schütze distanced himself from his colleagues from the Chicago School by speaking out against the term "career", which he believed was too strongly aimed at social action, and did not sufficiently take into account processes of suffering (Ludwig 1996: 43). Schütze did also investigate positive trajectories in biographies, which from his viewpoint are characterised by deliberate action and thus being able to influence one's own life course: to describe this he introduced the concept of the "intentional action scheme". However, in Germany his trajectory concept was particularly well known for its "trajectories of suffering", characterised by the fact that instead of deliberate action, people increasingly fall into self-aggravating passive suffering, which is hard to escape. He describes the social and biographical process of the trajectory as being characterised by "increasingly painful, inexorable suffering [...]: sufferers can no longer take action but are driven on by events and related conditions they experience as overpowering; forced into reactive behaviour patterns. As the disastrous chain of events unfolds, the actors become unrecognisable to one another and to themselves: they react with irritation, a short temper and a lack of understanding, and are surprised and sad about their own inexplicable behaviour [...]. The disaster now plays out more or less automatically: those affected cannot believe for one moment that they might have any influence or control over the course of events, so their attitudes to life are increasingly ones of discouragement, while they become progressively passive in their activities of daily living." (Schütze 2006: 212f).

Schütze's pupils, such as Riemann, linked in with this by investigating trajectories of suffering among the mentally ill (1987), while Scheer and Peters (1996) studied the careers of drug users and Sutterlüty (2004) examined violent careers.

In the 1970s, biographical research underwent a renaissance in the field of educational science. Since then, it has become a popular approach to the research field with numerous investigations in the field's subdisciplines, including – especially – that of social pedagogy. This is partly due to the related field of work, "as educational science is by its very nature already linked to biographies" (Krüger, Marotzki 2006:7).

Thus it can be seen that life course research and biographical research have different focuses and investigative goals. However, both approaches use the term "turning point". The next section will study in detail the form this takes.

### **3 Turning points in life course research**

For Glen Elder, a turning point is an objective change to an expected course of events. In his study, one of the central turning points was when disadvantaged young men entered military service at an early age. According to Elder, the military is a total institution (as defined by Goffmann), while military service also provides new beginnings, a break, new experiences and opportunities to take responsibility.

At later stages of the survey, those of the once disadvantaged young men who entered military service at an early age began to achieve higher results than others on the life success scale.

They were more ambitious, assertive and self-directed, and made greater use of state-provided educational and housing benefits.

However, Elder underlines the fact that timing is essential. Turning points only appear among early entrants to the military. Later or very late entrants (> 30 years of age) experienced the opposite effect, as it caused a disruption of their life course. Elder interprets military service as a turning point as it involves what Elder calls a “knifing off”: when a disadvantaged youth becomes a successful or at least ambitious young man.

Interestingly, other large-scale life course studies have achieved similar results. Both Glueck & Glueck and Emmy Werner see entry into military service as the central cause for a turning point. Laub and Sampson name three other events apart from entry into military service<sup>2</sup> as frequently leading to turning points: marriage and wives; moving out of a problem neighbourhood and gaining stable employment.

According to Laub and Sampson, these situations took young men who had until then been criminals out of their previous environment and social network. Their wives and employers increased their informal social control, while at the same time providing social support and growth. This allowed the young men to alter their everyday routines fundamentally, creating their own stable structures and giving them the chance to change their social identity: from good-for-nothings to fathers or important workers.

The life course studies reveal the events which help people (most studies examine young men) to change their status from disadvantaged to successful, from being criminals to no longer being delinquent. One point is often left unmentioned: it is not the event of entering military service, marrying, moving home or gaining stable employment which triggers this change. Instead, when these events occur a process of change can be triggered which is then retrospectively described as a turning point.

What we do not discover from these studies, however, is the individuals' own personal experience of the turning point: is it positive or negative? Do they feel as if they are having to pay a price for it, or do they only see the advantages? Do they see themselves as active agents in bringing about the turning point or did the turning point simply happen? Neither do we know how they see the change in their life: Are they, for example in the case of Laub & Sampson's study, happy to leave their criminal career behind? Do they miss their “old life”? Did they perhaps find their life better before the turning point? Are they happier and more satisfied today than before the turning point? And do they themselves see the change as a turning point?

These questions have a major influence on the individuals' identity concepts, how they interpret the change they have experienced and their entire life course, and on the question of whether the turning point has opened up new prospects for an individual. Answering these questions calls for qualitative research methods, preferably in the form of biographical research.

#### **4 Turning points in biographical research**

The investigation of turning points in biographical research is somewhat more complex and in some ways also possibly more confusing due to the purely subjective approach and the

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<sup>2</sup>Laub & Sampson see experience in reform schools as of equal significance to military service.

similarities they share with transitions. Just some of the different ways in which the term is used are described here as examples.

In the context of biographical research, Strauss (1959:95) understands turning points as a transformation of identity: "I am not the same as I was, as I used to be". Rosenthal (1995) distances herself from this definition, extending the term considerably by distinguishing between three kinds of turning points in the analysis of life stories (cf. *ibid.* 134ff)

1. Turning points which are relevant to developmental psychology

According to Rosenthal, these affect "how memories and the textural structure of the life stories told are organised" (*ibid.* 134). Turning points which are relevant from the point of view of developmental psychology are not necessarily experienced or recalled consciously. In detail, three main kinds of turning point can be identified in this category. The first is that from early to mid-stage childhood (age 4–6). Here, the biographical subject can remember images and separate events before the turning point, while the narrative flow sets in after it. The second relevant turning point is the transition to late adolescence / early adulthood, and involves identity-building and making plans for the future. The third turning-point is identified as a period during later adulthood when the biographical subject becomes aware that life comes to an end and that certain biographical decisions are irreversible. One characteristic of turning points relevant to development is that they are always accompanied by changes on both the inside and the outside.

2. Status passages, i.e. social turning points

By this Rosenthal means culturally established transitions such as starting school, entering vocational training or university, starting work, getting married, becoming a parent, getting divorced, adult children moving out, etc. This kind of turning point is generally only seen as a crisis if it does not occur "on time": if it comes too early and is thus unexpected.

3. Interpretation points

To Rosenthal, interpretation points are the most interesting turning points, a point on which she again links in with Strauss (1959). She describes interpretation points as biographical turning points creating a "reinterpretation of the past, present and future" (*ibid.* 143). They shape people's life history into a *before* and an *after*.

Clausen (1995) comes to a similar definition of the turning point. In his survey, most of the turning points which appear are predictable transitions, though they do involve changes in people's self-images. He explicitly dissociates his understanding of the turning point from that used in life course research: "However, subjective perceptions of discontinuity do not necessarily entail a change in direction. As I illustrate, discontinuities often do prove to be turning points in the life course, but sometimes continuity accentuated is seen as a turning point" (Clausen 1996: 369).

Abbot (1997), meanwhile, stresses that turning points change the course of events. He understands turning points as narrative concepts and thus as processes which take trajectories in a whole new direction and thus relate to two different points in time simultaneously (before and after): "A true turning point, as distinguished from a mere random episode, has the further character that the trajectories it separates either differ in direction (slope, transition

probabilities, regression character) or in nature (one is 'trajectory-like,' the other is random)" (Abbott 1997: 94). Abbot's particular interest lies in the question of when and how turning points begin and what leads to them becoming turning points in the long term. He explicitly investigates these questions not with an attitude of searching for variables, but with one based on social patterns, "For through turning points constraints and contingency play roles that mock the presuppositions of variable-based analysis. If the world actually has turning points and trajectories, the only way to find them is to pursue the project of narrative positivism." (Abbott 1997: 103).

Schütze and some of his pupils, on the other hand, refrain entirely from using the term "turning point" and describe the phenomenon more generally as transformation processes. According to Schütze, these are characterised by a sudden or gradual transformation of central attitudes to life (Schütze 1994). In this context, the term "process" indicates that from the subjective point of view of the biographical subject, changes marking turning points cannot usually be pinned down to a certain point in time, but are part of a (more long-term) process with multiple influences. Marotzki also talks about transformation processes. To him, the category of transformation, as in a process of education, involves "a change that takes the form of a qualitative leap in how people make reference to themselves and the world" (Marotzki 1990, 131). From the biographical subject's perspective, according to Marotzki, transformation processes involve a change in the "interpretative structures used in self-description" and those "used to describe social reality and ... outline biographical events" (ibid., 129).

One aspect which stands out is the fact that the term "turning point" tends to cover several meanings in the various methods of biographical research, and constantly threatens to lose its meaning.

For this reason, Sackmann and Wingens are critical of a purely subjective approach to turning points. They are afraid that the concept of the turning point tends to blur "as it in many ways parallels the key concept of the transition: in this subjective approach, little difference is evident between turning points and 'normal' transitions which do not trigger a change in the direction of a person's life." (Sackmann, Wingens 2001:27). This blurring of the concept of the turning point in biographical research is also suggested by the recently published book "Biography and Turning Points in Europe and America" (Hackstaff, Kupferberg, Négroni 2012). In the ten articles by a total of eleven different authors, widely differing concepts are presented and discussed. Among the different authors, for example, turning points appear as subjectively relevant transitions (Négroni 2012: 44, 68), as role-swapping (Négroni 2012: 44, 68), as retrospective constructs (Négroni 2012:46), as narrative concepts (Négroni 2012:46), as altered self-interpretations (Kupferberg 2012:1), then on the other hand as events or processes which "substantially change the direction of the life path" (Ghergel, Saint-Jacques 2012: 70), as milestones (Boldt 2012: 93) and as identity changes (Ward 2012:201ff). Despite all this, the authors see potential in the term "turning point". "Actually, society has invented institutions to investigate these particular issues such as drama, the novel, poetry, etc. There is not yet any science, however, which deals with these issues in a rigorous, systematic and empirically open manner. Biography research, informed by narratology, might well become such a science and for this purpose the theoretical concept of 'turning point' might turn out to be both an heuristic and theoretical tool, helping us to unpack and decode biographical narratives." (Kupferberg 2012:254).

## **5 A proposal for viewing the term on multiple levels: interplay between subjective and objective dimensions**

The following is intended as a proposal for viewing the subject from multiple dimensions, in order to make the term “turning point” sufficiently specific while at the same time narrowing the gaps which appear due to the relatively specific use of the term in life course research, the idea being to take account of both subjective and objective dimensions. The approach proposed here takes objective criteria which come from life course research and applies them to data from biographical research.

The objective criteria, reflecting an outside view of the biographical trajectory, are subsumed under the heading “Successful life and social integration”. These include successful vocational training and occupational integration, following the law, avoiding recidivism, maintaining a stable living situation and being relatively independent of (long-term) social benefits, having a relatively stable relationship with a partner and, if relevant, taking on parental responsibility.

The subjective criteria, on the other hand, fall under the heading "Happy life and coping". This includes not only regaining a positive self-image and having that image confirmed, plus gaining or regaining agency, but also achieving extreme satisfaction in certain central areas of life (important personal relationships, involvement in social networks, success at work, recognition within the community), perceived self-efficacy, achieving life plans, having positive expectations of the future and being in good physical and mental condition. From this point of view, something can be identified as a turning point when (and only when) there is a change of direction within both the objective and the subjective dimension. The questions to be asked about an event or process are thus:

- What objective changes have occurred in the contexts of the subject's job, delinquency, living situation, dependency on state support and family situation?
- What subjective changes can be found: is the biographical subject happier and more satisfied or less happy and less satisfied? Is his or her self-image more positive or more negative? Are there more or fewer possible courses of action? How is his or her health and what expectations does he or she have of the future?

The following example will now show how this can be applied to analyse a biographical interview. This is the story of Sascha Stoff, who was 27 years old at the time of the interview<sup>3</sup>. First, the subject's life history is described using the phases provided by the subject during the interview<sup>4</sup>. Afterwards, turning points are analysed. The interviewee himself was not asked specifically how he himself would describe turning points in his life. He was just asked to tell his life story. Turning points are one analytic category on the interview<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This biographical interview was held as part of the project “Pflegekinderstimme” (“Voice of children in care”, Reimer 2011) and analysed in further projects. The interviewee chose the anonymous name.

<sup>4</sup> In this case example, phases are linked to physical moves because of the importance the interviewee gives to this moves: Each phase is described by the interviewer as a coherent sense.

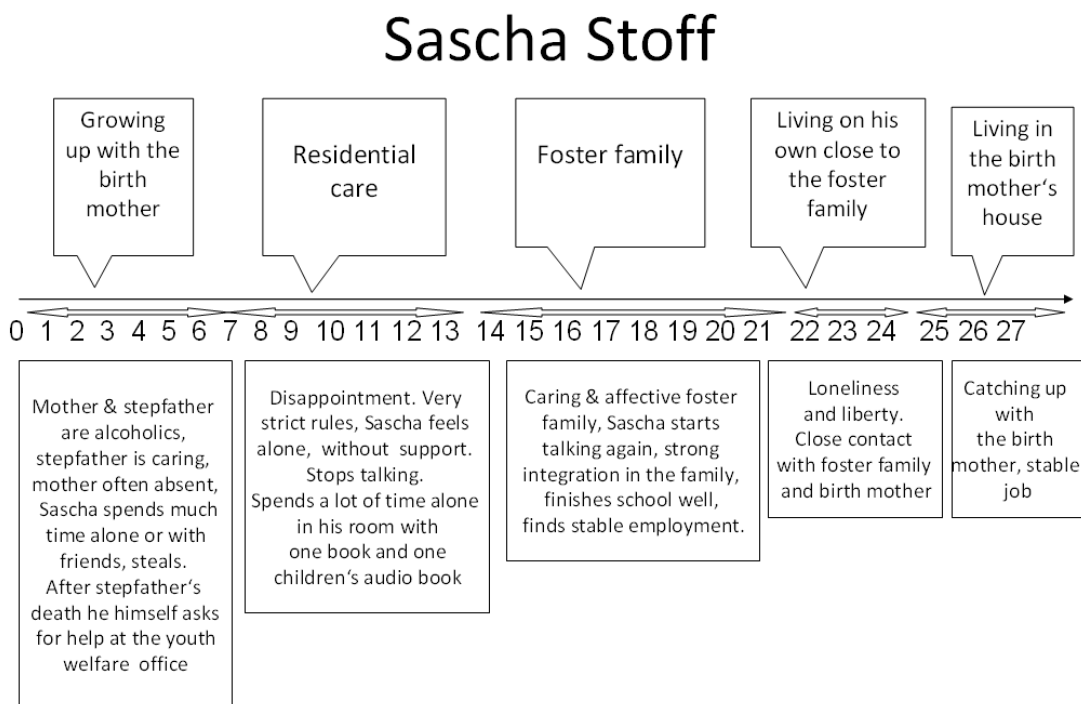
<sup>5</sup> Turning points are actually just one analytic category used in the projects mentioned above beside other categories and theories such as the interviewees experience of and with parenthood, resilience, liabilities and resource in the life story, normality constructions and balances.



The interview was conducted in German. Direct quotes were translated to English. The original interview text is respectively offered in footnotes.

## 6 Sascha Stoff

### 6.1 Life story



#### With the birth mother: "I never knew what a family was"<sup>6</sup>

Sascha spends the first six years of his life with his birth mother, living in her home. In the first six years of his life, his story is embedded in his family history and his birth mother's biography. For this reason, some aspects of that which are relevant to Sascha are also outlined here.

Sascha's mother can hardly read or write and works as a cleaner. Before Sascha's birth she was married; Sascha has two sisters from that marriage which he has not, however, ever seen. In the year of her separation, Sascha's mother begins a relationship with another man, which led to Sascha's birth. Sascha's birth parents split up when Sascha was a baby, at his mother's wish.

There has been no contact between Sascha and his natural father since then. His mother begins a new relationship, with Sascha's stepfather, who becomes a key person to Sascha, and whom Sascha sees as being his actual parent. Sascha believes throughout this time that his stepfather is his natural father. He describes him thus:

<sup>6</sup> „Familie hab ich da nicht kennen gelernt“.

“He was always there when I got home, when I went out, when I went to bed; he was always there [...] he was the one I laughed with, that I did stuff with, and that was always there for me. I could talk to him whenever I wanted; I just thought it was my father”.<sup>7</sup>

This is in harsh contrast with his birth mother, of whom Sascha repeatedly says “She was never there”.<sup>8</sup> Both Sascha's mother and stepfather are alcoholics. Sascha sometimes looks after the two of them, for example once putting out a fire at night in their home when both parents are drunk, or regularly buying alcohol for them both.

Sascha goes to kindergarten and finds a circle of friends at a very early age: a clique which meets regularly at the playground near his home. Sascha's first contact with the children's services come when he is caught stealing Matchbox cars from his mother's department store. His stepfather dies of lung cancer when Sascha is five years old, after which the situation escalates. Sascha is left alone increasingly often. One morning he telephones the children's services and tells them his mother is “missing”.<sup>9</sup> From then on, staff checks every morning whether his mother is present or if Sascha is alone. When he has repeatedly been found alone, Sascha is taken to the children's services and allowed to play in a children's corner before being brought to a home a few hours later.

Sascha repeatedly sums up the time between his birth and age six as follows: “at my mother's I never knew what a family was”.<sup>10</sup>

### **In the home: “basically hell”<sup>11</sup>**

Sascha describes his seven years in a home as the worst time in his life: “The home really wasn't my kind of place; it was basically hell for me”.<sup>12</sup> In his eyes the home is characterised by strict rules, harsh sanctions when rules are broken, violence, a high staff turnover and a lack of any support with everyday matters.

He describes daily life in the home as monotonous and characterised by rules and regulations. He starts the day by getting up on time, as those who get up late do not get any breakfast; then all the children go to school. After school everyone stays in their room until they have done their homework (without any help); in the worst-case scenario that can drag on for a long time: “However long it takes. We don't give a shit whether it takes until the middle of the night, let's say, or not: you're going to do it now and that's that”.<sup>13</sup> After homework they have an evening meal, and then the day is already over.

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<sup>7</sup> „er war immer da wenn ich kam, wenn ich ging wenn ich schlief, er war immer da [...] er war der, mit dem ich gelacht habe, mit dem ich Sachen erlebt habe, und der immer für mich da war. Immer wenn ich wollte konnte ich mit dem reden. ich hab einfach geglaubt das ist mein Vater“.

<sup>8</sup> „die war nie da“.

<sup>9</sup> „vermisst“.

<sup>10</sup> „bei meiner Mutter hab ich nicht Familie kennen gelernt“.

<sup>11</sup> „Im Prinzip die Hölle“.

<sup>12</sup> „Also Heim ist für mich gar nichts gewesen, das war für mich im Prinzip die Hölle“.

<sup>13</sup> „Solange wie Du brauchst. Das ist scheiß egal ob Du bis mitten in der Nacht brauchst, sag ich jetzt mal, oder auch nicht, Du machst das jetzt fertig und tschüss“.

In reaction, Sascha stops speaking after just a few weeks; for him, the home becomes a symbol of silence. “It didn’t feel like a life to me those seven years. It was more like silence than living”.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas Sascha was an active agent when living with his mother and even during the move into the home, once in the home he increasingly describes himself as passively suffering. He “ends up<sup>15</sup>” in the home, where things happen to him; he no longer has any influence on matters but increasingly retreats into himself: “I switched off totally in the home”.<sup>16</sup> He spends his spare time in his room with a TKKG<sup>17</sup> audio cassette, and later, when he learns to read, a book (Krabat<sup>18</sup>). He listens to and reads them both so often that he knows them off by heart.

His school career is characterised by repeatedly being put back a year, enduring harsh sanctions and failure.

During this time, Sascha suffers from losing his relationship with his birth mother. In the first year, the children's services order that he is to have no contact with his birth mother. Afterwards they come into contact again at planned fortnightly meetings, which is a great relief to Sascha. He reports that during later visits he was always pleased to see his mother, and always asked her to take him away with her, but that it was not possible, which led him to react with increasing anger towards his mother.

Sometimes the meetings do not take place as the mother does not turn up. These are particularly painful moments to Sascha: he regularly retreats into his room and “passes the time” there. This problem of dates being missed worsens until eventually there is a two-year period (it is not certain when) during which his mother does not come at all and there is no more contact. All attempts by the children's services to contact her fail. One particularly striking event in the home for Sascha is his First Communion. He says nothing about the ceremony itself. What happens afterwards leaves him in deep shock. His dismay can be felt from his description:

“Well, I can remember my first Communion very well, for example. I got loads of presents for my Communion; a bike, and this, that and the other. And in the end all I got to keep of all those presents was the bike. The other presents were gone. I don’t know where they got to, but the next day the presents were gone [...] I cried my eyes out and said 'Where are my presents' [...] No idea, and then I was so annoyed I took the bike apart and put it back together a million times until at some point it was done in. Until I basically couldn’t get it back together again 'cause I was so pissed off, but the presents had just gone”.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> „Das war für mich kein Leben wie sieben Jahre. Das war eher Schweigen als wie Leben“.

<sup>15</sup> „gerät“.

<sup>16</sup> „ich habe ja im Heim komplett abgestellt“.

<sup>17</sup> TKKG is a series of German books for young people which has been made into a series of audiobooks. The four young protagonists are a close-knit team and solve a criminal case together in each episode.

<sup>18</sup> Krabat is a German book for young people with several hundred pages. The central protagonist is the young orphan Krabat, an apprentice at a windmill who has to stand up to his master, who is involved in black magic.

<sup>19</sup> „Da kann ich mich zum Beispiel an das Kommunionfest sehr gut erinnern. Zur Kommunion hab ich jede Menge Geschenke gekriegt, Fahrrad und dieses und jenes und das und das. Und im Endeffekt blieb mir von diesen ganzen Geschenken nur das Fahrrad. Die anderen Geschenke warn weg. Ja ich weiß nicht wohin sie gekommen sind. Am nächsten Tag waren de Geschenke weg [...] Ich habe geweint, geheult und habe gesacht "wo sind meine Geschenke" [...] Keine Ahnung und dann hab ich aus Frackischkeit das Fahrrad tausendmal

When Sascha turns 14 he is told that the home is being closed for financial reasons and that he is to be put in a foster family.

**In the foster family: age 14–21: “I was definitely really happy in that family”<sup>20</sup>**

Sascha describes being taken in by the foster family as the “biggest stroke of luck”<sup>21</sup> that could ever have happened to him in his life. He sums up his time in the foster family by saying: “I was definitely really happy in that family”.<sup>22</sup>

He describes his foster mother as someone who is always there, always listens, helps calm him down when he becomes aggressive: she is “the one who always managed to cool me down again”.<sup>23</sup> He describes his foster father, by contrast, as the person he can clash horns with, whose limits he can put to the test, which he enjoys. At several points, Sascha describes one of the central characteristics of the foster family as that being the place where he learned “what family is”.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Sascha learns from his foster family to do homework, to study and generally “keep up in school”.<sup>25</sup>

The situation of getting to know and moving in with the family “went pretty quickly”.<sup>26</sup> Sascha spends a weekend with his future foster parents without knowing exactly why he is there. He starts to speak again there, goes to a local festival with his foster parents, laughs, had “more fun than I’d ever had”<sup>27</sup> and feels in his element. He sees it in contrast to the home: “there [in the foster family] there was fun and laughter [...], which I didn’t really know at all from the home”.<sup>28</sup> Afterwards he is simply asked how he liked it. His answer is that he “liked it; I didn’t say any more” and “so it was decided that I’d stay with them”.<sup>29</sup> He moves in with the foster parents two weeks later.

When first in the foster family, Sascha only says what was absolutely necessary, but that is already more than in the home. It takes some time for him to open up. In this context he tells of one central event when the dam burst. He is sitting at the kitchen table one evening with his foster mother and starts to tell her about his negative experiences in the home:

“When I said it, it was basically like a bit of a release [...] I was sitting at the table one night with my foster mother in the kitchen and I just said that the home was really terrible [...] she talked to me to calm me down, because I was really worked up, and well, she was the one who talked to me calmly again, and then I got it off my chest pretty quickly, I have to say”.<sup>30</sup>

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wieder zusammen und auseinander gebaut bis es irgendwann kaputt war. Bis ich es im Prinzip gar nicht mehr zusammengekriegt hab, weil ich so sickig war, aber die Geschenke waren einfach weg“.

<sup>20</sup> „Auf jeden Fall war ich in der Familie sehr glücklich“.

<sup>21</sup> „größtes Glück“.

<sup>22</sup> „auf jeden Fall war ich in der Familie sehr glücklich“.

<sup>23</sup> „diejenige, die es geschafft hat mich immer wieder runter zu kriegen“.

<sup>24</sup> „was Familie ist“.

<sup>25</sup> „in der Schule mitzukommen“.

<sup>26</sup> „ging recht schnell über die Bühne“.

<sup>27</sup> „Spaß wie nie“.

<sup>28</sup> „dort [bei der Pflegefamilie] war Freude und Lachen [...] was ich eigentlich im Heim so gar nicht kannte“

<sup>29</sup> „gut, mehr hab ich nicht gesagt gut“ und „so hieß es, dass ich bei denen bleibe“.

<sup>30</sup> „Es war im Prinzip als ich’s gesagt hab wie so ne kleine Befreiung [...] ich hab abends mit meiner Pflegemutter am Tisch gegessen, in der Küche und da hab ich das einfach gesagt dass das Heim total schlimm gewesen ist [...] sie hat beruhigend auf mich eingesprochen, weil ich total aufgeregt war und sie war halt sie

From that moment on, Sascha starts talking again and becomes integrated into the family and his school; his performance also improves.

During this time in the foster family, he only has sporadic contact with his birth mother: “it got less and less in the foster family”<sup>31</sup>, as Sascha puts it. His birth mother attends the annual care planning meetings, phones up on his birthday, and occasionally Sascha visits her at her home, which is only a few kilometres away. Sascha has no explanation for the fact that contact was so rare.

Sascha’s transition from school to work features several challenges and difficulties. He is refused several apprenticeship places because he has spent time in a home: “obviously lots of them even said they wouldn’t take me because I’d grown up in the children’s home and they’d had bad experiences with children from homes. And then I said that in that case he should do what he had to to get workers, and that was that; sure, I had that happen too.”<sup>32</sup> After a long time spent searching, Sascha does then find an apprenticeship place and starts training as an electrician. However, he has to give up this apprenticeship after a year and a half as the company organising it has “gone bust”<sup>33</sup>. Sascha subsequently trains as a bricklayer for three years, giving up shortly before gaining a qualification. He describes this event briefly: “there were misunderstandings”<sup>34</sup>.

This is followed by jobbing: working in a drinks market. Then Sascha finds a job as a “dispatch driver for a furniture store”<sup>35</sup>, which he keeps in the long term (for six years at the time of the interview). He is happy with this job and the pay, and happy to have a job which gives him a physical workout and leaves him “ready to drop into bed in the evening, out like a light”<sup>36</sup>.

Around Sascha’s 21st birthday, the children’s services want to end the foster relationship, which in this case means Sascha moving out of the foster family. Sascha refuses: “I told them ‘I’m not moving out, I won’t move out’ (.) I told the services”<sup>37</sup>.

Sascha talks to his foster mother and sets a condition: “I’ll only move out if we stay in contact”<sup>38</sup>. This condition is accepted. Sascha moves into his own small home near his foster parents.

### **Living independently: caught between freedom and loneliness**

To Sascha, there are two poles to independent living: freedom and loneliness. However, the fact that he lives near his foster family and has very close contact with them helps Sascha relativise the loneliness. He regularly visits his foster family, eats there and even works in the

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diejenige, die wieder ruhig gesprochen hat und wo ich mich dann auch ziemlich schnell wieder abregiert hab, muss ich ganz ehrlich sagen“.

<sup>31</sup> „in der Pflegefamilie wurd’s auch immer weniger“.

<sup>32</sup> klar viele haben auch gesagt sie nehmen mich nicht, weil ich im Kinderhaus groß geworden bin und weil die schlechte Erfahrungen hatten mit Kinderheimkindern. Und dann hab ich gesagt, ja dann soll er machen dass er so seine Leute kriegt und fertig sowas hab ich natürlich auch erlebt“.

<sup>33</sup> „pleite“.

<sup>34</sup> „da kamen Missverständnisse auf“.

<sup>35</sup> „Möbelgeschäft als Kurierfahrer“.

<sup>36</sup> „abends so ins Bett falle und fertig“.

<sup>37</sup> „ich hab zu denen gesagt "ne zieh ich nicht, ich zieh nicht aus" (.) zum Jugendamt hab ich’s gesagt“.

<sup>38</sup> „ich zieh aber nur unter der Voraussetzung aus, dass wir weiter in Kontakt bleiben“.

same company as the foster father. Another stabilising factor is that Sascha still has his stable job and is happy that he can exert himself physically.

The foster mother remains Sascha's central point of contact. At the same time, in this phase he begins to have more intense contact with his birth mother. Sascha regularly visits his birth mother and sometimes stays there overnight.

### **Living in the birth mother's home**

Sascha describes his move into his birth mother's home as something that was not planned; Sascha does not know why he moves there:

“But to be really honest, I have to say that it was never a big dream of mine to move back to D-village, I just ended up here somehow by coincidence, that was kind of, I didn't want to go to D-village after all. And then it somehow happened that I spent longer and longer living with my mother [...] then I cancelled the contract for my other place [...] and she [the mother] basically slept here [in the living room] and I slept in the bedroom”.<sup>39</sup>

Sascha himself describes the relationship of which there had been earlier signs and which develops as they live together as a phase of catching up with the relationship they did not have during Sascha's childhood. The birth mother treats the adult Sascha like a seven-year-old:

“Yes, basically she's trying to have that time again that she basically lost when I was a child, so to say, that's simply how I saw it at least. She talked to me like a little child, ‘oh sweetie’, and sometimes out in the open I found it quite embarrassing”.<sup>40</sup>

During this time the foster mother continues to act as someone Sascha can turn to. There is still close contact to her; she is always there when Sascha needs someone; there are regular telephone calls and visits. She also offers a way to interpret the birth mother's behaviour, which Sascha adopts:

“And I talked about it to my foster mother and then we agreed that she was basically trying to catch up on lost time, on the fourteen years, basically, when I wasn't there. And then I just came to terms with it, that that was just the way it was. And it was somehow not as embarrassing any more as it was at the start. After a couple of weeks I didn't care about it, it didn't bother me and that time was actually nice”.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> „Aber ich muss ganz ehrlich sagen, das war nie mein großer Wunsch wieder nach D-Dorf zu kommen ich bin irgendwie per Zufall einfach hierhin gerate, das war irgendwie, ich wollt ja nicht nach D-Dorf. Und dann kam es irgendwie, dass ich dann immer weit länger auch bei meiner Mutter gewohnt habe [...] dann hab ich die [andere Wohnung] gekündigt [...] und sie [die Mutter] hat im Prinzip hier [im Wohnzimmer] geschlafen und ich hab im Schlafzimmer geschlafen.“

<sup>40</sup> „Ja im Prinzip versucht die Zeit versucht zu wiederholen die sie im Prinzip in meiner Kindheit verpasst hat, sag ich jetzt mal, ganz einfach so kam ich mir zumindest irgendwie vor. Sie hat halt geredet mit mir wie so n kleines Kind "oh Liebchen" schon teilweise also draußen war es mir schon peinlich“.

<sup>41</sup> „Ich hab auch mit meine Pflegemutter darüber gesprochen und dann haben wir und halt drauf geeinigt, dass sie im Prinzip die Zeit versucht nachzuholen, die sie im Prinzip verloren hat, diese vierzehn Jahre im Prinzip, die ich ja nicht da war. Und dann hab ich mich damit abgefunden, dass es einfach so ist. War auch irgendwann gar nicht mehr so peinlich wie es am Anfang war. Ein paar Wochen später war es mir egal hab ich mich nicht drum gekümmert und war eigentlich aber auch schön die Zeit“.

Sascha sums up the time they spent together thus:

“She's my mother and she'll always be my mother. Nothing is going to change there. She's just not like other mothers and that's the tiny difference. But I'll always call her my mother and I'll never say 'No, you're not my mother' (.) I won't say that. My mother has always said I'm her flesh and blood. Exactly right. Nothing's going to change about that and nothing has changed: that's how it is”.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the intense relationship between Sascha and his birth mother, they do not talk about the past. Their history together and apart remains a taboo which neither party touches upon. Sascha stops living with his birth mother just one and a half years after he moves in, when she has to move into a nursing home.

Although at age 27 Sascha has long left his days in the children's home behind him, he is still regularly asked about his story by friends and acquaintances. Speaking openly about these questions with others is very important to him.

Sascha's plans for the future are on several levels. In terms of employment he plans to stay in his previous job. At the time of the interview he has been there for six years and does not want anything to change in that respect. At the same time he would like to help children living in homes.

Sascha does not yet have any plans to start his own family, partly as due to his own history he is afraid that his child might have to grow up not with him but in a home.

## 6.2 Analysis of turning points

In the following, the concept of the turning point suggested above, involving an interplay of subjective and objective dimensions, will be applied to the case presented. Using the phases in the interviewee's life history which he himself chose subjectively makes it easier to analyse turning points in that it provides an initial means of access to examining the transitions between those phases. Subjective transitions are not the only point in a person's life history at which turning points might appear, but as transitions involve major changes in living conditions, especially in this particular biography, turning points are more likely to appear at those times, or processes set off which might become a turning point. Sascha grows up in desolate family conditions. He comes to attention because of delinquent behaviour before starting school. The children's services are aware of the family. In view of his living conditions and the escalation after the death of his stepfather, it is a logical consequence for Sascha to be taken out of the family. It is thus neither a surprise nor at that moment a turning point. Sascha's life history starts out hard and continues to be hard in the home. From a subjective point of view there are some changes which lead to him seeing the home as more negative than being with his family of origin. Whereas he experienced relationships while living in his family of origin – mainly through the stepfather and his clique – and paints a picture of himself as an active and capable person, the home is

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<sup>42</sup> „Sie ist meine Mutter und wird auch meine Mutter bleiben. Da wird sich nix dran ändern. Nur sie ist halt nicht so wie andere Mütter sind und das das ist natürlich der kleine Unterschied. Aber ich werd sie immer als Mutter bezeichnen ich werd nicht sagen "Nein Du bist nicht meine Mutter" (.) das werd ich nicht sagen. Meine Mutter hat immer gesagt ich bin ihr Leib und Blut. Völlig richtig. Da wird sich auch nix dran ändern und da ändert sich auch nix dran, so ist das“.

characterised by loneliness. Sascha thus describes himself as increasingly passive, as dramatically documented in his persistent silence. Objectively all that is reduced is the number of relationships and friendships, leading him to suffer subjectively. Apart from this there is little objective change. He was neglected in his family of origin and is neglected in the home. Thus, while things subjectively become more difficult than before, this is not a change of direction in the stricter sense.

His entire time in the home continues in the same direction: Sascha is lonely, withdrawn and passive, has problems in school. In narratives it becomes obvious that he still copes this difficult situation in an active and creative manner e.g. when tinkering with his bike or reading his only book over and over. But actually at the age of 14 a negative career is more or less preordained. The next transition comes unexpectedly, as the closure of the home was probably not planned long in advance and the biographical subject, at least, was only informed about it at short notice. What is even more unexpected is the fact that Sascha enters a family setting rather than another group in a home; after all, in Germany it is commonly thought that foster families are especially appropriate for younger children and to a lesser extent for youth. Moving into the foster family, he enters a field with plenty of resources. His basic needs are more than covered there and he receives additional resources, which he accepts and makes use of to his own benefit. In this setting, a process begins which does indeed trigger a change of direction, i.e. a turning point in Sascha's life. For Sascha, one symbol of this change of direction is the conversation with his foster mother at the kitchen table, when he tells her about the home and experiences a "release". During this process, subjectively, his entire emotional state changes: he feels good, is satisfied, talks, laughs, describes himself as happy. He changes from passivity to activity and earns positive feedback for his activities.

Objectively, the number of relationships changes, he is integrated into a family in line with social norms (which is of particular significance to Sascha), makes new friends, and has success at school and while entering into the labour market, despite experiences of stigmatization.

Looking at the transitions which follow, which could well be risky, what is interesting is that this positive turning point is not revised.

The subjectively negative impact of moving into his own home (feelings of loneliness) are soon relativised by the fact that he lives near his foster family and is coming into increasing contact with his birth mother. It might even be conjectured that Sascha already has enough stable relationships, sufficient courses of action open to him and capacity to act, meaning that he is able to deal with that loneliness.

From an external point of view, the subsequent move in with his birth mother could be seen as risky, as a return to the problematic setting of his family of origin, with the risk of the young adult positioning himself in that setting once more and adopting the same lifestyle as his birth mother. But that does not happen. Sascha has a realistic view of his birth mother ("not like other mothers"), a foster mother with whom he can reflect on his birth mother's behaviour, and stable employment. This gives him the freedom to enter what from his point of view is at first sight an odd relationship with his birth mother, but which actually benefits him, as he comes to terms with his birth mother and their shared history. In other words, the time he shares with his birth mother subjectively even leads to further improvement. Objectively there is no change to the direction already set in the foster family.



## 7 Conclusion

The means proposed here of viewing turning points in both their subjective and objective dimensions links life course research and biographical research. This paves the way for possible new insights. The aim must be to understand the dramatic composition of life histories which are initially characterised by difficulty, then both subjectively and objectively take a positive turn. Through this means, the turning point can be established as a descriptive concept (cf. Kupferberg 2012: 235) which is not just useful in analysis and theory but is also of practical relevance for social pedagogy. Thus, turning points can be understood as an analytic concept as well as a social and individual phenomenon which can be detected in a retrospective perspective.

Social pedagogy can no more create turning points than can social policy, but it can create possibilities and situations in which turning points are more likely to occur. Analysing life histories seems to be an interesting access to find out more about patterns of processes which are likely to create turning points.

Exploring these patterns in detail has the capacity to create more knowledge for professional social pedagogical practice about supportive settings, significant resources and other conditions. If we succeed to put them well in place we could increase the chance of individuals managing to put them to use for a positive turn.

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**Author's Address:**

Daniela Reimer  
Research Associate at the University of Siegen  
Adolf-Reichweinstr.2  
57068 Siegen  
Germany  
E-Mail: [daniela.reimer@uni-siegen.de](mailto:daniela.reimer@uni-siegen.de)