SHORT DESCRIPTION

This module deals with the different perspectives and experiences of those who seek institutional and professional assistance and those who provide such assistance.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To sensitise readers to the different perspectives and experiences of those who seek institutional and professional assistance and those who cope with the problems and questions which clients pose.
2. To develop a realization that professional work routines can sometimes create unnecessary trouble for both clients and professionals
3. To encourage the use of narrative analyses in professional practice in the field of vocational rehabilitation.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. Meeting the Client
3. The beginning of the Retraining
4. Two Crises
5. Down and Out
6. Starting Anew
7. Aspects of an Analytical Abstraction
8. Exercises
1 Introduction

Life histories of persons who have run into different kinds of difficulties deriving from their (loss of) work, their material situation, their failing bodies and their relationships with others can be shaped by powerful institutions of people processing and the work of professionals. If adult members of German society experience a failure of their bodies, have grave accidents or develop chronic illnesses which make it difficult for them to continue their work it sometimes happens that they apply for and enter a process of vocational rehabilitation. Many persons get into the picture, among them doctors, counsellors, teachers, social workers, psychologists, fellow participants of a program, and colleagues and superiors of the re-trainee. All of them have their story to tell about what is going on during this process.

The idea of this module is to sensitise readers to the different perspectives and experiences of those who seek institutional and professional assistance on the one hand and those professionals on the other hand who have to cope with the problems and questions which clients present to them as part of their professional work. Once in a while such problems can be rather complicated to deal with. Everett Hughes (1984, p. 316) once remarked that “one man’s routine of work is made up of the emergencies of other people.” But professional work does not just consist of routines and sticking to routines sometimes creates unnecessary trouble for clients and professionals alike.

One can learn about the specificities, requirements, practice wisdom, down-to-earth case analyses, problems and possible “blind spots” of social work in the field of vocational rehabilitation by listening to stories which social workers tell about the history which they share with clients. Such off-the-cuff-narratives are valuable data for getting familiar with the realities of social work as experienced by the workers themselves - quite different from programmatic statements (“our approach”) or official, polished websites, annual reports and other presentations of what “we” have to offer to “our” clients, patients, customers and what makes “us” special etc.. Even experienced professionals can profit from carefully looking at transcriptions of spontaneous narratives on practice experiences that seem quite familiar to them, especially if they participate in a discourse which is about “making their own or their colleagues’ practice strange” (Riemann 2005). One can also learn about a client’s biography, her or his work experience and experience of vocational rehabilitation by listening to her or his story. That’s what professionals do or should do and that’s what social scientists sometimes do (cf. module B.2). One can learn a lot about what’s going on by putting all of this together. Social scientists talk about “triangulating” (Flick 2003) the perspectives of different people involved in such events.

1 I wish to thank Mrs. Brühl, a social worker and the protagonist of the following case study, for providing me with some helpful background information on institutional arrangements of vocational rehabilitation when a few questions arose during the textual analysis. This information, which I did not receive from her personally but via Peter Straus, the coordinator of the Leonardo project INVITE, will be included in footnotes 7, 18 and 26. The names of Mrs. Brühl and her client, Mr. Scholz, are not their real names. They have been chosen for reasons of confidentiality.

2 The development workshop which is presented in module 0 can be described as a setting in which participants are encouraged and encourage each other “to make their own practice strange”. An important device in this regard is the joint analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews with clients who are in programs of vocational rehabilitation.
One of the professionals who are in the picture is Mrs. Brühl, a social worker in a vocational retraining centre\(^3\) in a city in East Germany. This institution provides assistance for adults who undergo a process of vocational rehabilitation after having qualified for such a procedure; i.e., they have successfully applied for this measure at the respective agency of statutory pension insurance: A decision is reached that it is not possible for them to work anymore in their present occupations because of specific health problems and they are entitled to retraining in another occupation.

Mrs. Brühl, the protagonist of the following events, told about the history which she shared with a client in a narrative interview which a member of our project, Fritz Schütze, conducted with her in the beginning of 2005. He asked her to narrate how the relationship between her and this client developed and to focus on the case work which she had done. Mrs. Brühl knew that the interviewer was interested in a certain client, Mr. Scholz, who had been interviewed by another member of the project, Peter Straus, somewhat over a year before the interview with her (in the middle of December of 2003). The focus of Peter Straus’ narrative interview with Mr. Scholz (who was in his early thirties at the time of the interview) was the history of the interviewee’s work experience\(^4\) and especially his experiences during vocational rehabilitation. Mrs. Brühl, a member of Peter Straus’s “development workshop” with professionals in vocational rehabilitation, was familiar with this interview since this material had been discussed with the members of the workshop.\(^5\)

In working with this data I used the procedures of a narrative analysis which has been developed by Fritz Schütze (1983, 1987) and applied in a number of research projects in the last decades – projects in the fields of biographical research (e.g., Riemann 1987, Nittel 1992, Schütze 1995, Treichel 2004) and the analysis of professional work (e.g., Reim 1995, Riemann 2000). The experiences of the social worker as revealed in her interview will be at the centre of the following reconstruction, but once in a while I will introduce what I have learned from the client’s narrative (without aiming for a presentation “without a gap”).\(^6\) I will try to present my reconstruction in a way that at least partially reveals the way in which I attempt to make sense of the data. By making my own work of wondering aloud and “stumbling over” particulars of the spoken language visible I invite readers to join me in the attempt to understand the narrative(s). And I hope to encourage readers who are professional practitioners in the field of vocational rehabilitation to do such narrative analyses themselves.

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\(^3\) In German: “Berufsförderungswerk” (Bfw)

\(^4\) I.e., he is not asked to tell his whole life which would elicit more background information on his biography, but the interviewer’s query for his vocational history is probably more in line with the kind of questions which professionals usually ask in the context of vocational rehabilitation.

\(^5\) There are a few references to this interview with Mr. Scholz in the last part of her interview. She does not refer to it in her introductory narrative, but during the subsequent phase of answers and questions based on the introductory narrative.

\(^6\) These excursions into the client’s biography will be clearly marked, so it will be easy for readers to distinguish between the professional’s and her client’s perspectives. Quotes from the interviews will be italicised. The term “narrator” refers to Mrs. Brühl at the time of the interview. Thereby it becomes easier to distinguish between the perspectives of the same person at different times and when taking on different roles: the role of the narrator and the role of the actor in the events which are depicted in the narrative. I also use the present tense in dealing with the interview and the past tense in referring to the events and the experiences of the actors in the unfolding story.
2 Meeting the Client

The story begins when Mrs. Brühl was contacted by a rehabilitation counsellor of the regional pension fund for workers, LVA (“Landesversicherungsanstalt”), who told her that she would send a new participant of the program of vocational rehabilitation to her. She already informed her that he would like to become a car salesman. As the narrator explains, sometimes people who have qualified for the program have not decided yet in which direction to go, sometimes they have. In looking back Mrs. Brühl remembers that “it was already clear in his case”. This quote leaves open what the work of the rehabilitation counsellor at the pension fund consisted of, how she felt about the client’s decision and whether or not Mrs. Brühl would sometimes take the license to try to divert a new participant from her or his chosen path and to move her or him into another direction. This issue will remain important in the unfolding of the story.7

At this point we do not learn about the pattern of institutional procedures which people like the new participant experience (e.g., undergoing certain tests etc.), but at least we can start asking questions about it. The narrator does not give background information about the processes which led to the declaration that “it was already clear in his case” and about the division of labour between the pension fund and the vocational retraining centre. Who was involved in confirming this choice besides the new participant himself? The quote “it was already clear in his case” conveys that the social worker regarded this as given fact: something which had been arranged before she entered the stage. - Peter Strauß told me that complaints about such “givens” were an important topic among the counsellors in vocational rehabilitation who took part in his development workshop: They felt that the quality of their own work of counselling suffered because quite often they were just informed by the pension fund about a new participant’s vocational choice without being able to engage in an inquiry (together with the client) if this decision was a wise choice and was sufficiently grounded in her or his biography.

Mrs. Brühl invited Mr. Scholz, the new participant, for a first “information talk”: This term shows that there is a language for routine activities and a regular sequence of steps in working with clients. “Information talk” probably refers to the fact that she informed the client about the program, but also received information from him about himself. As she remembers, “And of course I also asked him how it came about that he had chosen this occupation of a car salesman. After he had told me his story / life course, what he had done before. Before that I believe he had been a machine and plant mechanic (“Maschinen- und Anlagenmonteur”). Yeah and he wanted to become a car salesman because he is busy with cars in his private sphere, because he enjoys cars, likes to buy cars, is interested in them. And because he had the opinion that he could earn quite good money when selling cars.”

As this quote reveals the social worker asked the participant to freely narrate his story – at least as far as his work experience is concerned (“what he had done before”). Other parts of her narrative show that she is well acquainted with the development of his medical problems. This must have already been a topic in their first meeting, too, since the history

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7 That’s what I learned from Mrs. Brühl at this point: If a decision with regard to the specific direction of a vocational reorientation has been made before the respective client is sent to the vocational rehabilitation centre for starting her or his retraining it is of great weight that it can be assumed that such a decision has been reached in an orderly procedure (in consideration of medical opinion etc.). Therefore such a decision has a strong binding force. Revoking it before the start of the retraining is only possible on the basis of “hard facts” (e.g., no place for retraining is available, the grades are not sufficient for a re-qualification etc.).
of his work experience is partly a trajectory of suffering (Schütze 1995) which had finally led to the decision to actively cope with it via rehabilitative measures. It would be interesting to know more about her specific questions: When the professional took the freedom to ask the client for “his story”, was this strictly a story about his work experience and his way into rehabilitation? How much can be asked for in such a situation without appearing intrusive and indiscreet? This problem is highly relevant for working with a client since the quality of the process of counselling depends on a sound empirical basis, in this case a narrative basis in which a client reveals a lot about himself in his own words. How much does one need to know? How much is plausible for the interaction partners without violating unwritten rules pertaining to the protection of the private sphere? And what about the time pressure of the work and shared standards of efficiency? There is probably a shared understanding among colleagues of how much time to invest in such an encounter, so that other parts of a social worker’s daily business don’t get neglected. Otherwise the worker could lose her reputation as an efficient practitioner.

It is interesting that the social worker learned enough from the client’s initial presentation of self to become a little sceptical as becomes obvious in a commentary at this point in her interview: “Well, that’s always something. A lot of people have this idea. Many of them always look for something which they think will make them rich afterwards.” That means that during her work with clients she has developed the notion that there is some kind of self-deception involved when new participants emphasise the motive of “earning quite good money”. At the same time she did not pursue this line of questioning and arguing during her first encounter with the client: “Well, it really seemed very, very consolidated at first glance. He also explained this to me in a quite plausible way.” It seems that she put her own doubts to rest – for a while. “At first glance” and “it really seemed” already allude to a downhill course while “very, very consolidated” sounds positive, like a “strong foundation” (unlike “stubborn”).

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8 This issue was probably important in the development workshop of Peter Straus which he conducted with social workers, psychologists, teachers and trainers in vocational rehabilitation. Learning about the insights which can be generated via the analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews leads to the question of how to incorporate such an analytical mentality and sensible practice of narrative inquiry without confusing the worlds of professional work and social research.

9 After reading a first version of my case study Peter Straus informed me “that generally speaking such an inquiry stays focused at aspects which appear immediately relevant at this point in time (vocational biography, course of illness). At this point practitioners attempt to get specific (factual) information instead of trying to learn how the new participants have experienced certain processes. And they proceed within a rather strict scheme of questions and answers instead of making open narrative requests. Of course there is also a potential for biographical and process oriented inquiries within the overall proceedings (that’s what I tried to make accessible in the work of the development workshop).” This comment is informed by his general knowledge which he acquired in his work with professionals in vocational rehabilitation.

10 „Na gut, das ist immer so ne Sache.“ The German sentence reveals a doubt which I find difficult to adequately express in English.

11 In German: „Und es schien ähm auf den ersten Blick auch wirklich sehr sehr gefestigt.“
Changing perspectives: The client’s work experience before vocational rehabilitation

At this point it makes sense to present a summary of what I have learned from the narrative interview with the client as far as the history of his work experience prior to entering vocational rehabilitation is concerned:

The starting point of his narrative is the time when he was first exposed to industrial labour during a practice placement during his eighth or ninth grade in school in the GDR. It was not possible for him to get his “dream job” as a “fitter for controlling facilities” since these positions were extremely rare, so he finally decided to go on an apprenticeship as a machine and plant mechanic in the firm which he had already got to know during his practice placement. (As he recounts, finding a place to work was not difficult at all in the GDR.) He already had some problems with his back at that time which were taken into regard (“I wasn’t allowed to work in the pipes and stuff where I couldn’t move and so on.”). In retrospect one can say that this is (in terms of the long-term unfolding of a trajectory of suffering) an important part of his trajectory potential (Schütze 1995).

During the time of his apprenticeship unforeseen collective events had a decisive impact on his biography: the GDR dissolved and its industry collapsed. He was still able to finish his apprenticeship, but was then put on short-time work in his firm right away. At that time he was eighteen years old and did not find his situation too hard to bear because he still got a large part of his former wage, but his parents put pressure on him to work (“go to work, go to work”). This led to his leaving for a big city in West Germany all by himself where he worked as a mechanic for just six months. He felt very lonely (“because I was too young and my family and friends weren’t there”) and returned home to Magdeburg where he was unemployed again. He took a class in further education for a quarter of a year to become a welder. At this time he also got to know his girl-friend (with whom he is still living together at the time of the interview, they have two children).

For about two and a half years he worked as a driver for pharmacies until he got dismissed; the firm had run out of commissions. He found another manual job in a firm outside of Magdeburg and worked there for four or five years. Due to difficulties in the tape recording it is not totally clear what his work consisted of – in any case he had not been trained in this specific occupation - , but in retrospect he evaluates this period quite positively referring to the fact that he became a foreman after some years: “well, things having to do with handcraft that’s something for me”: a proud biographical commentary on what he believes he is good at and which skills he can acquire easily.

He left this job and returned to Magdeburg because his girl friend who worked in Magdeburg gave birth to their first child. At that time he was ill for half a year because of inguinal hernia and medical complications following an operation. These experiences are already a part of a trajectory of suffering from chronic pain and a failing body. As mentioned above, the conditions of the later onset of his trajectory of suffering had already been partially created at the beginning of his apprenticeship when he began training in an occupation which required hard manual work – despite the fact that he had already developed problems with his back; but the structural conditions of the collapse of the industrial infrastructure in East Germany which had a decisive impact on his work experience and life history have also to be taken into account. It is somewhat difficult to pin down (on the basis of this topically focussed and rather laconic narrative) when his trajectory – a trajectory of chronic or recurring...
Gerhard Riemann: Working with a client in vocational rehabilitation

In order “to earn a lot of money” he began to work in the field of connecting iron railings on building sites. He did this as a foreman for about three years (partly in Bavaria). One important goal of his was to save enough money so he could have a basis for starting retraining at the age of thirty (while also supporting his family at the same time). He was acutely aware of the medical problems which were associated with his hard manual labour and knew that he could not continue with this kind of work in the long run: “I always had slight problems with my back, with my disk, you know, because connecting iron railings was a really hard job, but I always went back to work, let’s put it this way.” The project of preparing for retraining at the age of 30 can be regarded as a long-term biographical action scheme of control: an attempt to get away from hard manual labour and to prevent a further deterioration of his body.

What is remarkable or even ironic about his action scheme of control is the fact that it meant getting into especially risky and hard work: He wanted to get away from a type of work which he found too strenuous for his body. But in order to start retraining in a field which was less strenuous for him he tried to earn as much money as possible in order to have material resources as a basis for retraining – and this meant an even intensified exploitation of his body. This action scheme had a ruinous character as far as the damage for his body was concerned. The topic of a possible retraining stayed more or less diffuse – except for the motives of (a) getting away from a kind of work which he could not endure in the long run and (b) earning a lot of money.

There are also hints in his interview which convey something like a strategic attitude with regard to the resources made available by the system of vocational rehabilitation. When asked by the interviewer about the origins of his plans of retraining he said, “Yeah, it had always been my idea that I wanted to reorient myself when I was thirty. And that’s exactly what I did. I am thirty-one now and I did it that way. It’s something else how I arranged it, you know. I really have problems with my back / I did / that has been medically con(firmed) / (I) was put into a pipe and you can see it, but I can cope with it well by doing sports.” (He elaborates a little more on how he has managed to keep his problems with his back under control.) What I find interesting is his remark “It’s something else how I arranged it, you know” and the way he refers to the legitimacy of his medical problems as a ticket to vocational rehabilitation – medical problems which have been officially confirmed and legitimised, but are de-dramatized by him nevertheless. His remark “It’s something else …” is a hint that he prefers to keep all this under some information control and that he senses that there might be a lack of legitimacy as far as his own presentation and usage of medical problems is concerned. This might also have consequences for his relationship with professionals in vocational rehabilitation. (But I am stepping too much ahead in my story, he had not mentioned vocational rehabilitation yet at this point in his introductory narrative, it is not totally clear when he had become aware of such an option and whether or not this was really a long-term orientation. He mentions that his girl-friend had also undergone a retraining and had become an occupational therapist, so it might be possible that he had already learned about such options some time ago. – The analysis of his narrative reveals in any case that Mr. Scholz had developed a lot of serious health problems during his long experience of hard manual labour – regardless of the issue (“how I arranged it”) which I just mentioned.)

When his firm went bankrupt he stayed at home for three months. It is somewhat unclear in the interview if he got dismissed before the bankruptcy of the since he already suffered from a slipped disk (“he threw me out immediately”) which could not
be operated because the disk was damaged already. He suffered a lot of pain and was on very strong medication.

Later he worked in an assembly plant in West Germany together with a friend until the firm stopped paying the regular wage. He stopped going to work and “is calling in sick”. The narrative conveys that he thereby tried to secure at least his sickness benefit (which is paid by the statutory health insurance after six weeks in case of a “disability to work”) since he could not count on receiving his regular wage from his firm any more. This is a common strategy to secure one’s claims in case of an insolvency. But the narrator also emphasises that “I really had problems with my back all the time, I suffered the whole time and stayed sick.” The doctor sounded alarmed (“we have to do something now”). Mr. Scholz stayed at home for a long time (also securing money from his firm during insolvency proceedings).

On the basis of the narrative it does not become clear if he already had in mind at this point in time to strive for the status of “occupational disability” as the basis for being granted a retraining. It is quite possible that he could not clearly anticipate the procedures which finally led to his vocational rehabilitation. Reading the first lines of the following narrative sequence makes you wonder if he experienced some kind of automatism - unintended consequences of “calling in sick” for a protracted period of time (cf. “the health insurance had already put pressure on me” in the following sequence which conveys a sense of experiencing something which is beyond his control):

“And then the health insurance had already put pressure on me what’s gonna happen with me. I said, ‘I can’t stay sick any more.’ They also didn’t pay any more and said, ‘We have to do something now.’ That meant that I was supposed to go to a health resort. Then I went to the health resort. And the doctor had already told me in the beginning, ‘Well, you may only do light work from now on. And nothing of the kind which you are doing now.’ And then someone came from the LVA in ((big city)), because I was in the health resort in ((Bad ….)), someone came from ((big city)) and asked me and so on what I was planning and whether I’d like to do retraining and so on. And that there are certain opportunities – (from ....) and the vocational rehabilitation centre, they have their big thing in ((A-town)). A big object. And they said that I should leave the health resort for two days and go there to do a kind of ‘search for a vocation’12 and so on. But actually everything was clear to me what I wanted to do. That was already / because I had already (talked) to friends and so on, because they had already done that and (still) do that. I said right away, ‘I want to become a car salesman.’ And that settled it. I did that for two days, then the time in the health resort was up.

And then I went to the LVA here in Magdeburg right away and said, ‘I would like to do retraining.’ I was really taking care of that, let’s put it that way, for at the health resort there were people who waited for their retraining for three years. And it went rather quick in my case. Ähm and I was supposed to start in June, I had come (home) from the health resort in April. Then I told them, ‘No, that doesn’t work. I’d like to on a vacation for four weeks before (it starts).’ And then I was told I could start in December.”

The narrator does not go into any details. He also stresses the unproblematic character of the whole proceedings in other parts of the interview: He stresses that he was so sure of his choice to become a car salesman and that this contributed to the speeding up of the whole process. At the same time he was not in a hurry to start the retraining

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12 In German: „Berufsfindung“. 
at the earliest possible time (as the above quote reveals). This delay is at least interesting since it raises the question of the biographical foundation – or the possible lack of a biographical foundation – of his vocational choice.

Going into vocational rehabilitation can be regarded as a biographical action scheme of control which entails entering a program of people processing.

3 The beginning of the retraining

The first step in the program of retraining consists of an eight week “vocation specific preparation” which takes place at the vocational retraining centre. Since the whole process of retraining only lasts for two years whereas regular apprenticeships last for three years, there is the need for an intensive training in the beginning in order to support the participants in the program to catch up with other apprentices.

During this seminar Mr. Scholz and three other re-trainees who wanted to become car salesmen were taught by a coach who was employed by the centre on an honorary basis. Apparently Mrs. Brühl was informed by him that her client did not quite fulfil his expectations: “It turned out that he was the absolute loner somehow. He did not ask questions, did not actively present himself as the coach (…..) had expected. And during breaks he was always by himself. But it did not seem to be the case that he had problems with the occupation, but that was what he was like. Well. And the preparation as such went okay.”

At the end of such an eight week phase the social worker has a “final talk” with the individual participants in order to prepare them for the next step: their entry into a firm. (These “final talks” belong to a regular pattern.) She also had such a conversation with Mr. Scholz.

Before describing the substance of her conversation with him (as she remembers it in her interview) I would like to turn to a formal feature of Mrs. Brühl’s narrative for a moment since the way in which she introduces this conversation sheds light on something which she apparently had experienced as troubling during this eight week seminar. When she mentions the fact that the “final talk” serves as a preparation for the next phase – the entry into a firm – she remembers that first of all a local car dealer had to be found during this eight week time span, i.e., she interrupts her main story line and introduces something which had happened before the “final talk”. This phenomenon is referred to as a background construction in the type of narrative analysis which I use (Schütze 1987, pp. 207-235). The comparative analysis of spontaneous narratives about personal experiences leads to the insight that such background constructions (self-corrective devices which are often introduced by utterances like “Oh, I forgot something” or “I have to add” (see below) and which are always closed in an orderly way before the narrator returns to her or his main story line) reveal something about the troubling character of former experiences, but also about the fact that the narrator has still some difficulties in coming to terms with these experiences in the present. Otherwise she or he would not have left them out in the main narrative in the first place. Of course it is important to avoid quick assumptions about the nature of such trouble when stumbling over these formal features of story telling. It is enough to get sensitised and to start looking for the heart of the matter.

The background construction deals with the difficult search for a firm: “Yeah, I have to add: During these eight weeks it was necessary to make a contract for retraining, yeah a training contract. And we had approached several car dealers where he had applied, too. I

13 In German: „Verkaufstrainer“ („sales coach“).
always think it’s great when people make suggestions themselves: Where could I apply? Where would I like to apply? What kind of notions do I have about the car dealer? Which brand am I especially interested in? That’s also important in the process. But he did not do anything. He went like, ‘Oh, Mrs. Brühl, just go ahead. Yeah. I have never really applied for something, see, and I have trust in you. You must certainly have your contacts.’ Okay. And then finally it happened that he had applied at a Skoda dealer in (local city) which had left quite a good impression on me at first glance. I also visit the firms. And he got invited to an interview. And he returned and said, ‘Yeah, I could imagine quite well to work in this Skoda firm.’ And people there would (take) him for these two years. And the whole thing was sound.”

What Mrs. Brühl found difficult to cope with seems to be her client’s lack of initiative and the problematic division of work which developed between her and him: Because of the client’s passivity the social worker apparently slipped into the role of having to organise things for him. On the one hand she sensed that she should not give in, especially since she has a clear notion (cf. her commentary: “I always think it’s great…”) that a re-trainee’s taking initiative and developing identifications is a necessary part of his successful vocational socialisation; if he does not do this kind of work it is doubtful whether or not he is sufficiently committed to the vocation which he has chosen. And beyond that he could learn the problematic lesson that he can always lean on his social worker, i.e., she would foster the development of dependency. On the other hand there are temporal constraints within this program: A firm has to be found within this period of eight weeks in order to avoid chaos and difficult negotiations with the pension fund. In discussing paradoxes of professional work Fritz Schütze (1992) refers to a “pedagogical basic dilemma” which consists of the need to demonstrate to a client in an exemplary way how certain activities should be carried out while running the risk that such exemplary demonstrations could foster dependencies. Mrs. Brühl apparently senses that the way she coped with this dilemma is not satisfactory according to her own standards. The formal features of her narrative rendering at this point which I referred to as a “background construction” can be used to get sensitised to (a) the difficulties which she experienced and still experiences in this particular case and (b) a type of professional paradox in general.

I will now return to the “final talk” as the narrator remembers it in the interview: During this conversation the social worker gave feedback to her client14 and raised some doubts: She told him that she had noticed that he had been “a very, very quiet participant”. If he wanted to become a car salesman “he would have to be quite the opposite”. She asked him “if he could still imagine” to work as a car salesman to which he responded that this would not be problematic. “He would look at people from above. That’s exactly what he told me. And he / he chooses the persons with whom he talks. And the instructors of our house and also his three comrades-in-arms in his group, let’s put it this way, they were absolutely not on his level. He has totally different standards and I could be lucky that he talks to me. (…..) In that situation I could only think, “Oh God, this is going so disastrously wrong.15 He is

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14 At a later point in the interview she goes into more details with regard to the organisation of this “final talk” which appears to have a regular pattern: She mentions that she has developed a list of questions which she uses in this situation - questions on vocational issues in a more narrow sense (how well they feel prepared etc.), but also questions referring to self-perceptions (personal strengths, weaknesses, notions on the employer’s expectations etc.). Afterwards she gives feedbacks on how she experienced the participant during the eight weeks.

15 In German she uses a colourful metaphorical expression: „Oh God, this is hopelessly going against the tree.“
supposed to sell cars, he is supposed to approach people, is supposed to convince them. Well, let’s wait and see.”

Of course we do not have exact knowledge of the details of this conversation (cf. module B.3 for the analysis of a conversation between a professional and a client), we have to rely on what the social worker remembers. Her detailed memory of this scene shows that it has left a lasting impression. She was shocked by his answer which she regarded as a revelation of his essential arrogance without feeling insulted herself (as she remarks in the second part of the interview when the interviewer asks her about this). When things went wrong later on, she remembered her client’s remarks as a key to understanding what was wrong with him in the first place. During the “final talk” she apparently tried to convince Mr. Scholz that he had to overcome his tendency to keep his distance from other people if he wanted to be successful in his apprenticeship as a salesman, but she felt that her criticism and exhortations didn’t have any impact on him. He seemed to be immune to her attempts at coaching him. In a later part of the interview she mentions that she went so far as to give him strong advice at the end of their conversation: “that it would become very difficult for him to work in this field which he had chosen if he didn’t change his attitude. Because the whole opposite will be expected from him: He has to sell a car to a customer, too, whom he does not like. That’s the way it is. I asked him if he had gotten familiar with the image of this occupation, with the things which he will encounter. And he always said, ‘Yes, yes’, that he had done so. And that he will see what’s coming up. And it’s important for him to earn a lot of money (in this field).”

An interesting question which cannot be resolved on the basis of this data has to do with how open and straightforward she was in her criticism in this situation: A reader gets the impression that she sent a strong warning and appealed to her client to change his general outlook, she also showed her doubts (“I asked him if …”). But maybe she was also careful in not fully explicating her negative prognosis (“I could only think”) because this could have made it more difficult to establish a trust relationship, it might have also destabilised the client. Professionals have to cope with the problem that sometimes they have much more knowledge about the most likely (downhill) development of a “case” than the client or patient her- or himself. Establishing an “open awareness context” (Glaser and Strauss 1965) could entail the risk of demoralising the client, keeping it closed could further endanger the reciprocity of the relationship and could introduce a spurious, inauthentic quality into the communication (Schütze 1992).

It is also important to ask how difficult it would be to stop the “machinery” at this point after the social worker had been informed by the pension fund about the participant’s decision and had arranged for his participation in an eight week preparatory course. A lot of time and money has already been invested in this process of retraining.

4 Two crises

Six weeks after Mr. Scholz had started working Mrs. Brühl got a phone call from the Skoda firm. As she remembers she was told: “It is impossible for us to cooperate with Mr. Scholz any longer, that’s impossible. Scholz is not willing at all to establish contact with the employees of our firm, to return to the role of an apprentice, to approach customers in an appropriate way, to adjust his appearance to what is expected in this trade. We would like to have a talk in order to discuss these things.” Shortly after this talk she got a call again and received the information that Mr. Scholz would be dismissed without notice within his probation time. Even though she explicitly asked them to provide her with reasons for his

16 Cf. footnote 7.
dismissal (so that she could write a justification for the pension fund), they declined to do so: “No, we don’t want to have anything to do with Mr. Scholz anymore. There have been enormous problems with the gentleman and we would like to get some distance from the whole business. And you have to accept this.” As can be seen the social worker had been called in to act as a “fire brigade” or a coach, someone who could be expected to talk turkey to the client. It is not clear though what she did and experienced during the crisis meeting at the firm. Afterwards she had to engage in some kind of legitimation work when she had to develop an account for the pension fund as to why things had gone wrong.

When Mrs. Brühl talked to the client about this disaster he presented a totally different version of events which she apparently did not give much credit to: “Of course Mr. Scholz told a quite different story. The others were to blame, they did not accept him as he was. Then he told me in retrospect that the Skoda brand was also not possible for him to sell Skoda cars, since this is totally below his level. And then I said, ‘Why didn’t you tell me before? Didn’t I give you the chance, ‘Look for something for yourself, something which fits your ideas.’ Yeah, there was no response from his side. Okay, ‘well’, I say, ‘I have to provide a justification for the pension fund. I would like to give you a second chance, but there has to be a reason and we have to find it out.’ ‘No, it’s not my fault at all.’”

This sequence of the interview conveys that the social worker tried to get the client to review together with her what had gone wrong, but found this frustrating because of his downright refusal to consider that he had somehow contributed to the mess. She felt that he was self-righteous and that his theory of why he had suffered defeat was far too simple and even self-deceptive. This joint review also had the function for Mrs. Brühl to get a more comprehensive view of the events in order to have a basis for a convincing account which she could present to the pension fund (so that the financing of the measure could be continued), but she was unable to win her client over in this regard.

During her conversation with Mr. Scholz she initiated the scheme of argumentation and used the strategy of revealing a discrepancy in her client’s account: Why had he not revealed his distaste for Skoda automobiles right from the beginning if this seemed so important for him? The way in which the narrator is quoted with his statement that this brand was “below his level” creates a link with his earlier statement (as quoted by the narrator) that his fellow classmates and his instructor “were absolutely not on his level”, i.e., she confirms the theme of his self-deceptive arrogance. It is interesting that the client’s statement about himself became consequential for the unfolding of the story (as will be seen in the following) and was used by the professional for what turned out to be an interesting field experiment.

Mrs. Brühl was informed by the pension fund that the participant “should have a second chance”. She was asked to look for another car dealer together with her client which she found a little difficult in this situation: “That’s basically all right. But it’s just difficult if a firm dismisses (a person) at a moment’s notice, it’s not possible for me to get hold of another training firm right away.” Such a search would get even more difficult if one knows about the problematic character of an applicant. The narrator reveals something of (a) the time pressure under which she is working, (b) the networking quality of her work, i.e. the need to reach out and get cooperation partners, and (c) her difficulties in trying to represent and “sell” someone who is hard to “sell”. It also becomes obvious during the interview that in the process of contacting firms and negotiating with them she has learned a lot about work milieus, conventions and expectations in different occupations. This experiential knowledge serves as a resource for her counselling and coaching of clients.

17 The work of counsellors and social workers in vocational rehabilitation could probably further profit from a familiarity with ethnographic studies on different work milieus. Cf. Terkel (1975) as a rich (journalistic) collection of personal accounts on the experience of
What seems interesting, too, is the general directive from the pension fund to look for another car dealer together with her client. The social worker does not mention in her narrative if she had the freedom to argue with the representative of the pension fund about the wisdom of this directive or if she thought about trying to get her client to consider other vocational options. For an outsider who is not familiar with the regular institutional procedures it is somewhat surprising that there did not seem to be some reflective pause for discussing the general question if selling cars is really the right thing to do for Mr. Scholz.\(^{18}\) This question seems quite appropriate since the social worker had already entertained serious doubts about the success of his retraining for quite some while (cf. her earlier evaluation of their “final talk” at the end of the preparatory seminar: “In that situation I could only think, ‘Oh God, this is going so disastrously wrong. He is supposed to sell cars, he is supposed to approach people, is supposed to convince them. Well, let’s wait and see.’”). But the client was not willing to raise any general doubts himself about whether or not he was on the right track as far as his vocational choice was concerned.

When Mr. Scholz went on sick-call she asked him, “‘Okay, then you are sick now, but you can pick up a phone nevertheless. Just choose some firm. If Skoda doesn’t suit you – VW, Audi, whatever’ – but there was no response whatsoever.” I.e., the social worker tried in vain to “activate” her client by showing him that she took him seriously, also as an opponent in the scheme of argumentation: If he is so particular about cars, it should be his turn to look for a car dealer of his own choice. She apparently failed to draw him into an argumentation which would have some morally binding force, i.e. the mutual willingness to respect argumentative constraints and to act accordingly. The social worker felt (and still feels) that Mr. Scholz could be expected to respond in this situation, “but there was no response whatsoever.”\(^{19}\) Maybe there was a response (similar to the accounts he provided for his initial reluctance to look for a car dealer during the preparatory seminar: “I have never really applied for something, see”), but at least no response which she regarded as appropriate and legitimate.

As soon as it was clear that the client did not comply with her request, Mrs. Brühl took her “chance” (the fact that she uses this term conveys something of a strategy): “All right, then I had contacted a BMW dealer (…..)\(^{20}\). I went there and said, ‘That’s the situation. The participant has started already.’ I explained everything to them and they said, ‘Okay, we would take a look at him. But we also have certain criteria which the person has to fulfill let alone that he has to show up in a suit. Yeah, we do pay attention to someone’s outer appearance. And BMW has its own way of doing things, you know.’”

Working in a wide array of jobs and occupations. He also presents the personal story of a car salesman (pp. 303-309).\(^{18}\)

According to Mrs. Brühl every re-trainee gets a second chance for retraining in the same vocation if a first attempt did not work out. This is even the case if there are doubts if training in this particular vocation really makes sense for the re-trainee, since a negative evaluation by the firm might still be ascribed to relationship problems for which the participant cannot be held accountable. – According to Mrs. Brühl Mr. Scholz was dismissed in his probation time without the firm giving any reasons for this step. Therefore there was no base whatsoever to revise the decision for retraining in this field. There was considerable time pressure to look for a new place for retraining, since the chamber insists on a speedy training without interruptions because of the shortened (two year) period reserved for re-trainees.\(^{19}\)

In terms of the communicative scheme of argumentation the client does not seem to respect and to commit himself to the argumentative constraint of drawing conclusions (Schütze 1978).\(^{20}\)

Interviewer and interviewee join in laughter at this point of the narrative.\(^{20}\)
The narrator does not explicate her reasons for having contacted the BMW dealer, but her move also seems to have had a playful component: She certainly had not accepted his excuse that the Skoda brand was “below his level” as an explanation for the negative turn of events, she had sensed the self-deceptive quality of his account. If she now took him at his word that a brand has to fit with his own special (elitist) taste it reminds the listener and reader of a move in a (serious) game: Stop fooling yourself. If you will now have the chance to work at a place which is “on your level” - let’s see what you will do now. You cannot be so evasive anymore if you get into trouble again.

It had already become obvious before that an important and time-consuming part of social work in vocational rehabilitation consists of having to win the cooperation of firms which are willing to take re-trainees. When the narrator says, “I went there and said, ‘That’s the situation. The participant has started already.’”, it becomes obvious that such canvassing work can be rather complicated, especially if there is something about an applicant which appears unattractive or dubious in this context. The way in which the narrator quotes herself shows that there was something which she felt she had to confess: “The narrator has started already.” She does not go into interactional details, but it must have been difficult to successfully present the candidate as someone who deserved a second chance, especially since she knew so little about the first (failed) attempt of retraining which could have served to save his face. It appears quite remarkable that the firm went along and that she was told: “Okay, we would take a look at him.” I assume that part of her success in this situation had to do with presenting herself as a reliable liaison worker in case there were some trouble in the future and things had to be straightened out.

As the narrator remembers, “of course he (Mr. Scholz) was totally enthusiastic when he heard the word ‘BMW’. Then I told him about the conditions, he accepted them right away. That means, he went out to buy a suit right away and he also worked hard in preparing himself for the interview. Then he went there. Then the manager criticised some things. He had rather long hair and he had it pretty much styled with gel. And that was something which she didn’t like at all. – He couldn’t understand this at all. According to the motto, ‘They have to take me as the person who I am.’ I tell him, ‘Oh boy, Mr. Scholz. That’s your chance. If you don’t use this chance, this will be the end of it. Then I can’t help you any more.’”

One does not learn from the interview how often she saw her client in this phase, but there seems to have been a number of reviewing and coaching encounters: conversations in which she tried to sensitise him to the need to take over the perspective of others, especially others who are in a stronger position than him. When the client told Mrs. Brühl about the manager’s criticism of his appearance he apparently felt offended by what he perceived as intrusive: The manager, a woman, took the license to disapprove of the way he styled his body and presented himself as a man; and it was a meeting of strangers, too. The manager’s criticism reveals something of the relevance of style in the world of selling classy cars to affluent customers. The client did not seem to realise this general point and had difficulties in taking the perspective of the other while the social worker felt frustrated by his protest and implored him not to waste his last chance. When reading this sequence one could ask whether or not the client as well as other participants in the program had been prepared for the possibility of such criticism in the preparatory seminar. It is certainly a type of criticism which is hard to swallow for many people who had not been working in the world of selling (fancy) goods to (well-to-do) customers before: a criticism which could be felt as too personal and degrading. It must certainly have been a new situation for Mr. Scholz with his long history of manual work. – A part of Mrs. Brühl’s work in this phase also consisted in persuading the chamber of commerce (under a lot of time pressure) to grant the training license to this car dealer, i.e., there is a rather large arena in which she has to operate.
Two or three weeks after Mr. Scholz started to work for the BMW dealer, Mrs. Brühl got in contact with the firm again. (She does not remember if she was called or called there herself.) As she mentions, the manager told her,

"'You know what, Mrs. Brühl, the first thing Mr. Scholz asked was when he was eligible for a vacation.' I said, 'Well, all right, he has two children though. It must certainly be important somehow.' She said, 'But we want to retrain him. We have given him his second chance. He should go on a vacation with his children, but we found it somewhat inappropiate that this was the first thing he cared about. Second, he does not make any contact with his colleagues. And the worst thing is: He is sitting at his table which he had in his office in the end and when customers enter he doesn’t even look up. That means he doesn’t say hello to the customers and he doesn’t even look at them. He doesn’t show any reaction.' I thought, ‘Oh God, I don’t believe it.’"

As this very detailed sequence shows, the social worker was again confronted with multiple complaints about her client which focused on his supposed lack of civility and breaches of etiquette in this work milieu. At first she tried to introduce some exonerating background information (referring to his family obligations) in order to alleviate a specific faux pas which she was told about, but apparently she was overwhelmed by the overall negative information. This episode must have seemed to her like a replay of the first disaster. – Then she called her client in for a kind of crisis intervention, another attempt to talk turkey with him which she experienced as rather frustrating again:

"Then I invited Mr. Scholz again. I say, ‘Oh boy, Mr. Scholz, it doesn’t work that way. Don’t you notice? What do you think about the whole thing?’ Then he went again like, ‘But the others are to blame. They cannot accept me like I am. And it’s such a formal work climate there.’ I say, ‘But this is something which we knew from the beginning, didn’t we. But this is actually a brand which somehow fits with your notions. ‘Yes, that’s true, but the woman is totally critical of me. And, well, people / the customers, they are so formal, too.’ And the manager said that he eats and drinks in front of the customers – at his work place. And then he enters the firm and doesn’t even say hello to his colleagues and so on. All these kinds of problems. Yeah and I mentioned this and said, ‘Mr. Scholz, this is your chance. Don’t waste it.’"

The social worker obviously had the experience to be biting on granite even when the client conceded that he could identify with this kind of car. The social worker had expected to get into a better position in arguing with her client when choosing such a car dealer, but she now had to learn that the difficulties which he had run into again did not make him any more receptive for her criticism. Her imploring attempts to persuade him to take the perspectives of others apparently did not “reach” him.

After two or three weeks Mr. Scholz was fired without notice in his probation time. At this point the social worker “couldn’t do and didn’t want to do anything for him anymore.” She justified this in the following way: “Because there had to be some validity in the statements of the training firm somehow. It does not make sense to always blame the others. That had been my observation when he was with us. He always regarded himself as a victim, the others were to blame. And I always remembered the conversation when he told me, ‘The others are not on my level.’ And I could be lucky that he talked to me. And somehow this had gone on along these lines. And then I said, ‘No way. He has simply to learn that others have expectations of him, too. He cannot just demand things.’"

This quote reveals her great disappointment at this stage. Her statement sounds like a final verdict in which an early (shocking) encounter with the client and the pattern of blaming others (in her conversations with him) served as corroborating evidence for his basic problems in taking over the perspectives of others. At this point she did not feel any further obligation to work with him, she felt that he had to learn the lesson himself.
Mr. Scholz talks about his experiences with the two car dealers in a quite laconic way. He just mentions the eight-week-preparatory class at the vocational rehabilitation centre, but does not mention how he experienced it and how Mrs. Brühl shared her own (critical) impressions with him.

“Then I started in December. Car salesmanship. (......) Then they got me a car dealer. (I had an) interview. Then I started. But it only went okay for one and a half months in this firm because I said, ‘No way. I want to become a car salesman. I only have a period of two years. And I cannot wash cars every day.’ That’s it. And I said, ‘No’. And then I had some private, private problems, too, because a lot of people knew him. And I also knew him well. Yeah, they (     ) threw me out.

Then me and Mrs. Brühl worked pretty hard to get hold of a new car dealer since usually the apprenticeship would have been finished. Then we found one .. but that wasn’t anything good either. They couldn’t stand me right from the first day / they let me run the gauntlet. They told me (at the) interview, ‘(You got to wear a) suit every day.’ That was a BMW dealer. I bought three suits just for this (purpose). I arrive there on my first day wearing a suit. They ask me first of all, ‘Why do you wear a suit here? Please change your clothes.’ And stuff like that, let me put it that way. It didn’t work out for too long. Ehm, overnight too be/ because you were in a time of probation. And I was sacked immediately, let me put it that way. After that the car salesmanship was finished, because I didn’t have a training shop anymore. And let me put it that way and then I had to / overnight the LVA told me ‘good bye’. That was the end of it. Mrs. Brühl told me I wouldn’t get a retraining anymore. And then I said, ‘I don’t believe it.’”

It is noticeable that the client’s narrative reconstruction of his apprenticeship with the two car dealers does not contain any self-criticism and any reference to Mrs. Brühl’s criticism of his conduct and attitude during this time: his unwillingness to get attuned to the specific work milieu and to take over the perspective of others. Apparently he does not allow for the possibility of having contributed to the mess himself but emphasises the exploitative, arbitrary and degrading treatment which he suffered. In referring to his time with the first car dealer he also stresses his own willingness to stand up for his rights (as expressed in the quote which he attributes to himself). He also mentions the sensitive issue of being criticised because of his appearance: an example of what he experienced as having “to run the gauntlet”.

In comparing the two interviews one could make the mistake to privilege the viewpoints of one narrator (and not the other), especially the presentation of the professional – a tendency for which Howard Becker (1967) coined the critical concept of a “hierarchy of credibility”. There is no point in just marking what is supposedly missing in Mr. Scholz’s narrative. But the comparison apparently reveals that the social worker’s criticism did not have a lasting impact on the client’s theoretically coming to terms with his two defeats: Her voice does not seem to be a voice in his own conversation with himself in this context.

But maybe this is too easy, maybe the conversations with the social worker were somehow consequential for him in this regard even though he does not explicate it. Other parts of the interview reveal at least that he has arrived at the conclusion that he is really not suited for the work of selling cars and that the decision to become a car salesman was really not sufficiently grounded in his own biography. In retrospect he regards this choice as a mistake: “It is not possible for me to talk other people into

[21] The narrator probably refers to the manager.
buying something - or how should I put it? to get them round or to mother them – or how do you call it? that they buy a car from me. That’s nothing for me. I rather prefer to be straightforward and say, ‘You either take it or not’. That’s actually something which you shouldn’t do as a car salesman. I already had problems with this during my retraining.” But even if he admits that car salesmanship is not for him, there is no trace of self-criticism: When he talks about what selling cars is all about, his remarks sound derogatory. As he sees it, the manipulative character of this activity stands in a clear contrast with his own trait of being “straightforward”. At no point in his interview does he allude to any difficulties with taking the role of others and to the possibility that he somehow contributed to misunderstandings and a breakdown of relationships.

One topic is quite prominent in his narrative which is not mentioned by the social worker: Mr. Scholz’s specific vulnerability as an older apprentice who is treated like all the others who are much younger: “And then the fact that the car dealer firms didn’t function well, you just got exploited as an apprentice. And I have to say that’s especially hard on someone who is thirty-one.” His feeling of not being treated as an adult certainly contributed to the destructive dynamics of alienation and misunderstanding in the communication at his work places. There are several commentaries in the interview with him in which he emphasises that it has been difficult for him to relate to much younger people at work and in vocational school because their lives and interests seemed to be so different from his own concerns and obligations as an older person, a father of two children etc.. It is difficult to determine, but I don’t want to rule out the possibility that the social worker was not sufficiently sensitised to this biographical vulnerability of her client. When she remembers the complaints of the firms (“Scholz is not willing at all (…) to return to the role of an apprentice …”) there are not hints that she regarded them critically, they apparently fitted her own impressions of his basic difficulties to take the perspectives of other people, of his self-righteousness and his self-deceptive arrogance.

One final observation: Both narrators share the evaluation that Mr. Scholz’s idea to become a car salesman was ill-founded. The sequential analysis of the interview with him also leads to the insight that he has had difficulties in doing biographical work (cf. module B.2) and in developing vocational plans which are based on biographical meaning resources. But while the social worker stresses the one-dimensional and superficial character of his vocational decisions (the prominence of the topic of “earning good money” and his reliance on the example of “buddies” who had chosen the same occupation) one can discover that his considerations were really somewhat more complex. During the phase in which he still worked hard on construction sites he had the idea for some time to retrain as an occupational therapist. As he says, “In between I wanted to become an occupational therapist / that was a really strong wish / because that was a little bit like (work on) construction sites. But it was / but it didn’t work out because the first health reform started, all those things closed down”. Then I said, ‘That doesn’t have to be that I learn this now’, right, because / that was working with my hands and so on. I really could imagine to do that. (But I gave it up.) I really looked after this for two years, but then it wasn’t there any more.” Then (the idea) of becoming a car salesman came up.” I think two points are important: (a) his idea to do something which is founded in his biography and creates a link to something which he is good at (“a little bit like (work on) construction sites” means “using my own hands”), remember his proud biographical commentary: “well, things having to do

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22 Mr. Scholz uses the term „Schnellschuss“ (a „quick shot“ or „shot in the dark“).
23 He apparently refers to clinics of medical rehabilitation.
24 In German: „Aber das war dann doch nicht mehr so.“ This probably means: I lost interest in pursuing this goal.
with handcraft that’s something for me”;
and (b) his prognosis about the viability of a vocation. He had witnessed the breakdown of the industrial infrastructure of the GDR and had experienced himself that important vocational skills could suddenly be regarded as superfluous.

5 Down and out

After Mr. Scholz was dismissed by the second car dealer he did not receive any support from the pension fund any more. He contacted Mrs. Brühl in this time because he entered a protest against the discontinuation of the measure. “Because he did not think he was to blame. Yeah, and he went on to demand a new entry from the pension fund. He gave the reason that it had turned out that being a car salesman was not the vocation which he was really interested in. He had had quite different notions. And he had also found out that you cannot make as much money in this branch as he had imagined in the first place. There was an interruption of one year in which the labour office and the pension fund let him stew in his own juice so to speak.”

After receiving unemployment benefit for the first time, he got unemployment relief afterwards, i. e., his social and material situation became more and more critical.

6 Starting Anew

Mr. Scholz contacted the social worker again and told her about a new plan: he would like to get a qualification to work in tax consulting. When she asked him how he had come up with this idea he told her that he would have preferred to enter a retraining program in this field with a private educational agency (emphasising “theory”, a few practice placements). But since this didn’t work out he had to return to vocational retraining in firms. But he would like to look for a firm himself, he said he had “quite a few connections”. When Mrs. Brühl asked him about the reasons for this vocational choice he said that “one could earn really good money” as he had learned from a “buddy” who worked in this field. The social worker was critical of the prominence of this theme: “That had been his idea already when he wanted to become a car salesman. And I saw that is absolutely in the centre for him: to earn money. He had never come up with an individual idea. I never heard, ‘I am convinced’ or ‘I have chosen this because’, but he always just referred to an acquaintance who had done this: because he knew someone and he earns quite good money.”

This quote conveys the social worker’s disappointment about the fact that the client did not formulate any idea which would reveal more of a personal attachment to a vocation and his own biographical meaning resources. Maybe she tried to probe him in this regard, especially since the retraining in selling cars had ended in such a disaster, but she gave this up after some time.

The next step consisted of administering certain tests to find out if he was intellectually suited for this occupation. After these tests led to satisfactory results, she told him, “‘Okay, then go and look for a tax consulting firm, all right? Because I don’t want to push anything

25 In German: „Steuerfachangestellter“.
26 According to Mrs. Brühl she did not have the chance to probe deeper whether or not Mr. Scholz’s vocational reorientation was sufficiently grounded in his biography, since he had turned to the pension fund himself and had been successful in getting the fund to finance the retraining in his chosen field. Obviously he had given reasons for his prior failings which had sounded plausible. This created a lot of time pressure for her again.
on you, I don't want to say you must go there now.' And of course nothing happened. We had agreed on a certain period, I told him, 'I will give you two months.' But he didn't do anything in these two months. All the contacts which he had didn't (turn out to be solid).” I. e., the social worker tried to use the same strategy as she had done before but to no avail.

Mrs. Brühl decided to look for a training firm herself and finally found one in which Mr. Scholz had been working already for one and a half years at the time of the interview. In retrospect the narrator evaluates this time very positively: “I was extremely lucky that this firm absolutely fitted his ideas. (...) All the employees were older than him. He felt very comfortable there.” According to her this has to do with the fact that the employees understand his social situation and take into account that he had been sick and has to catch up with a lot which other apprentices already know. It seems to be important that older colleagues take care of him and appreciate him even though he is still “very, very quiet.”

The narrator uses the image of a quasi-adoptive: she thinks that the men in the firm “take on a father’s role for him (...) People there don’t want to push anything on him, but .... they have accepted him the way he is. And he must have accepted them the way they are. Because otherwise there would have been a showdown again.” She also mentions that he has had almost no health problems during his present re-training - in contrast to the time when he had worked at the car dealers’ places and had been on sick leave again and again (“I have problems with my back.”). She says that this could have been so because of different reasons: “It can be an escape. It can also be a psychological burden that something had really burdened him which he couldn’t cope with. But there haven’t been almost any problems with his health during his present training.”

During this phase he also has to attend classes in the vocational school. The narrator says that he has been “absolutely overstrained” in vocational school and has had a lot of problems in classes in which he has to take exams. In order to avoid falling back behind his classmates he made use of the (individualised) educational support offered by her vocational retraining centre. “Because he is aware of the fact that if he doesn’t make it this time, then the LVA will put an end to this. They have already told him: If the measure is broken off again because of the same reasons as the first time, then his rehabilitation file (will be closed) as they call it.” In order to stay attuned to his needs and problems the social worker stays in close contact with him and the firm (by phone calls and visits). This is the basis for organising some educational support at the centre which is sensitive to his particular situation. She says that it was important for her to learn that he should be given additional exercises for his homework in order to mark his own responsibility. (Other participants at the development workshop had come up with this idea when discussing the autobiographical interview with Mr. Scholz and learning about his dispositions. As she mentions, this change in practice had been a direct consequence of the work of the development workshop.)

Coaching the client includes asking very detailed descriptive questions in order to find out about his learning strategies and the conditions of his everyday life: “How do you learn? When do you learn?” She made suggestions about how to integrate learning and taking time for his family. And she also made flexible arrangements with his firm in order to support his learning process: “Could we just have him for a whole day to do some intensive training?”

Mrs. Brühl is still critical of what she perceives as her client’s tendency to put the blame on others, but she also evaluates the development of their relationship on the one hand and his identity on the other hand positively: “Of course he has found reasons again and again
to justify his bad results in vocational school. Of course somehow the vocational school was to blame. Yeah, and we have tried to support him but .. yeah I think he will always come up with reasons to claim, ‘The vocational rehabilitation centre hasn’t organised this in the right way.’ What ever. But at least I could now cooperate with him very very well, there was a quite different relationship than the first time. We treat each other very honestly. He took the initiative himself to contact me when he had problems.”

Even though she states that he still tends to put the blame on others – including her centre - if things become difficult, her overall evaluation sounds quite different from earlier references to their relationship which stressed the experience of futility: her inability to reach her client and to have any impact on (what she regarded as) his self-righteous and self-deceptive way of theorising about his problems at work and in relationships at his workplace.

In explaining this change in her client she is very modest: She does not attribute it to her own work of counselling and coaching him in the first place even though it must have played an important role in that Mr. Scholz has experienced her as someone whom he could rely on. (In a later part of the interview she also alludes to a deepening of their relationship due to the pressure which the pension fund had put on him. She thinks that he clearly understands that finishing this program is his last chance.) Primarily she develops a kind of theory of pauperization which reminds me of biographical theories which are shared by many professionals working with drug addicts and which are also widespread among self help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. By offering this theory she concludes her narrative: “And I believe that the first experience which he had was very important for his development: The experience to really fall very deep. Because he had fallen down to receiving unemployment benefit / unemployment relief during this year of interruption. And I think he needed this to think about it. .. Yeah that’s the story.”

She offers an additional explanatory theory in a later part of the interview when she creates a link between his present very supportive work milieu and the development of his identity: “They also give him the option to pass an additional examination because they believe in him. They have a clear understanding of his deficits and they try to really support him. And I think that they have found the right way. And he wants to work in this field if he passes his exam. And his personality has certainly changed during these years – for the better.”

One final comment: It is important to take into account that Mrs. Brühl is familiar with the narrative interview which had been conducted with her client. She mentions somewhat later in the interview that she had reacted quite emotionally when reading Mr. Scholz’s narrative, because (according to her) “this was really him: always putting the blame on others. (....) There was an indirect accusation of the vocational retraining centre (in the interview) that it hadn’t done anything for him.” She sounds bitter when she continues: “He is also quite clever in his way. He really tells people exactly what they want to hear. That’s what he tells people at the pension fund, what he tells the employment office, what he tells me, what he told Mr. Straus. Quite calculating.” While reading the interview partially confirmed her negative attitude towards her client (as essentially opportunistic), it also led to new insights in the context of the development workshop: Colleagues of hers came up with suggestions which were consequential for the practical work with the client. – But Mrs. Brühl’s disappointment in (what she perceives as) the strategic behaviour of her client is only one side of her evaluation of him. She also thinks that he has become a different and more open person and that their relationship is built on trust.

**Changing perspectives: The client’s evaluation of his present situation**
When Mr. Scholz is interviewed he has just been working in the tax consulting firm for four months – quite some time before the interview with Mrs. Brühl took place. He apparently feels accepted by his older colleagues and appreciates that they take his biography and everyday circumstances into consideration. (This differs from his irritating work experience when he was with the two car dealers.) He worries though that he lacks some important qualifications and that there might be not enough time to catch up, i.e., he feels an intense time pressure because of the two year time span which is reserved for his apprenticeship. Mr. Scholz thinks that at least three years should be reserved for retraining in vocations which are more demanding, vocations like the one which he is receiving training in right now. But he is optimistic and also develops plans for further qualifications in this field after having passed his examination.

One can also learn that this vocational choice was somewhat more complex than depicted in the interview with the social worker: He thought that this vocation might be suited for him because he always liked mathematics at school and that it would have a safe future (simply because taxes would always be collected).

In referring to Mrs. Brühl he never sounds critical, but there is a generalised critical tone when talking about proceedings of the pension fund and of the vocational rehabilitation centre: quite a few complaints about, e.g., a lack of interest in really finding out (via tests and interviews) about what an applicant might be good at and which vocational choice makes sense in terms of her or his life history and a lack of personal support during the phase of retraining. Maybe one could speak of a generalised claim attitude which has probably originated in a time when the socialist state had taken care of his life in a comprehensive manner.

As mentioned already, Mrs. Brühl’s reaction to this interview is rather critical, because she is angered by (what she perceived as) his tendency to put the blame on others – including the centre at which she is working. The client’s narrative does not appear to convey much self-criticism (even though he is critical of his idea to become a car salesman in retrospect), in any case he does not seem to be aware of how he contributed to his own defeat when he was an apprentice in the automobile firms. The social worker probably has the impression that she is also included in the client’s general category of professionals and officials who fail to meet his expectations, even though he never singles her out for his criticism. A careful reading of his interview leads to the insight that he is well aware of the work she has done with him, even though he does not explicitly appreciate it which must be disappointing for the social worker after having invested so much time and energy. One also has to take into account that the interview with the client took place long before the interview with the social worker. As she mentions, their working relationship had become closer in the last time when she and the centre helped him to prepare for his exams and to improve his learning strategies.
7 Aspects of an Analytical Abstraction

(1) Why triangulating perspectives?

In the beginning I mentioned the concept of a “triangulation of perspectives” in the social sciences (Flick 2003): the idea of grasping and relating the perspectives of different protagonists which appear in one’s data in order to arrive at a deeper understanding and to build up a more differentiated picture of (a) the biographical and social processes in the lives of the protagonists and (b) the structural conditions and historical circumstances which have an impact on how they act and suffer. In the context of a further training curriculum it made sense to focus on the experiences and perspectives of both a professional and her client in order to get sensitised to the tasks of the work, its consequences and possible blind spots. The idea has not been to thereby expose a professional or to debunk her ideas of what she has been doing, but to imagine that she is an interaction partner who could profit from learning how an outside researcher has looked at her work, has raised questions and has also taken into account the experiences and perspectives of her client. Beyond that I had in mind that other practitioners in the field of vocational rehabilitation might find it useful to read how such a researcher (who does not have their practice skills and does not share their experiential knowledge) takes the freedom to “stumble” over things which they take for granted, to ask naïve questions and to regard a client’s story as a valuable source of insights as well.

The sequential and triangulating analysis of the work processes of a professional and the processes in the vocational biography of her client has led me

- to appreciate the complexity of the work of the social worker who has been a sensible and reliable interaction partner of the client and has remained accessible for him in times of crises. The fact that he is still a participant in the program of vocational retraining and finally appears to be on safer ground has a lot to do with her continuous accessibility and her circumspect practice with her client and others in his work environment.

- to contextualise the process of vocational rehabilitation in the overall biography of the client. Such a stance could also help professional practitioners to become more sensitised to the structural processes of the life course, the biographical meaning resources and vulnerabilities of clients and the consequences of their own work for their clients’ life histories and life circumstances.

- to raise some critical questions with regard to possible blind spots and the adequacy of some views and evaluations of the social worker; e.g., her emphasis on the superficiality of her client’s vocational projects – the dominance of the money motif – contrasts with his own ideas of retraining in fields which are somehow grounded in his biography (the link between his manual skills and the temporary idea to become an occupational therapist; his liking for mathematics as a source for his present vocational project etc.). This does not mean that her criticism of the lack of meaning resources of his idea to become a car salesman is not right on target, but his own deliberations are at least not as superficial as it appears in her narrative. – It is also noticeable that the social worker never mentions her client’s experience of feeling degraded in terms of age (= being treated like an adolescent apprentice by his superiors) and his feeling not at ease with other apprentices who are so much younger. That does not mean that she is not aware of

The narrative interview with him would have contained more “biographical material” though, if the question had focused at his life history as such and not just his vocational biography.
such problems, but it is at least reasonable to ask if she is sufficiently attuned to them or merely regards them as more or less irrelevant.

• to develop a critical assessment of the structural conditions of vocational rehabilitation which make it difficult for a social worker to work with a client in a way which is sensitive to her or his biography. Such an analysis of work and biographical processes might be used to shed light on bureaucratic procedures which are too rigid and which discourage and devalue the professionals’ competencies in case analysis (cf. footnotes 7, 18 and 26) and adequate interventions.

(2) Elements of the work of the social worker

A close look at the social worker’s narrative leads to insights into the structural conditions and the “arc of work” in this field: the overall work which needs to get done sequentially and at the same time (Strauss et al. 1985, pp. 30-39).29 A reader learns something about her work in this particular case but also about general features of professional work in vocational rehabilitation.

It has become obvious that the work of counsellors and social workers in vocational rehabilitation cannot be just reduced to counselling in a narrow sense but consists of different elements which become visible over a longer period of time. I assume that the category of “coaching” as it has been used by Anselm Strauss (1969, pp. 109-118) in discussing “transformations of identity” could be helpful in thinking about such elements: “A coaching relationship exists if someone seeks to move someone else along a series of steps, when those steps are not entirely institutionalized and invariant, and when the learner is not entirely clear about their sequence (although the coach is).” (p. 110) I am not quite sure if the last remark in the bracket is really necessary since a coach can also lose control and lose sight of what is going on, but Strauss’s discussion of such an evolving relationship between someone who is a learner and someone else who has accumulated a lot of experience in guiding other people through an important status passage contains many fruitful ideas nevertheless. As the example shows, it can sometimes be difficult to develop a coaching relationship in this context, especially if someone who is supposed to be a “learner” already knows what is good for him and is quite reluctant to let the other person be his “coach”.

Mrs. Brühl’s story demonstrates that social workers in the field of vocational rehabilitation participate in an organisational division of labour, have to develop a lot of ties to the community and important agencies and utilise their “local knowledge” in order to help a client to move on. Quite often they act as interpreters, mediators and fire fighters on behalf of their clients, but they have to be aware of the risk of an “overdose” of such activities if they do not want to lose their reputation with firms, pension funds etc. They

29 Strauss’s concept of „arc of work“ was further refined in an unpublished manuscript by Fritz Schütze (1984). Schütze’s refinement was used among others by Karin Bräu (2002) to study the group work of high school students and by Nick Thräne (2003) to analyse the work of driving instructors. Schütze distinguishes between four components of activity of an arc of work: (a) the component of “installing” (like the work of exploring and securing information, of planning and articulation); (b) the “social” component (interaction work, sentimental work and biographical work); (c) the component of “evaluating” (in between and in the end); and (d) the “substantive” component (which includes all activities which are necessary to cope with the specific substantive requirements of a certain arc of work).
cannot “sell” clients very well if they do not have sufficient trust in them themselves or do not know enough about them.

One could get some insights into what is involved in finding out about a client’s history, resources and weak points, especially by encouraging him to narrate his experiences, e.g., during the initial “information talk”. Beyond that it was possible to learn how the social worker argued with her client over a long time span and tried to give him critical feedback when he got into trouble but failed to take into account how he contributed to the mess himself (even though she felt that her arguments and admonitions did not “reach” him and make him change his mind). This critical stance did not lead to a point where she gave up on him, even though her work experience must have felt like biting on granite in between. One especially interesting feature of her work is her engaging in a kind of field experiment (securing an apprenticeship with a BMW dealer) which can be regarded as an argumentative move in a (serious) game: The idea is to create conditions under which he can learn to be more honest with himself.

It becomes obvious that the social worker accompanied her client over a long period of time and could be reached by him, even in the time when he was not supported by the pension fund any more. He learned that he could trust her – despite or probably because of her reluctance to fawn on him. He knew that when she talked turkey to him, she was honest and serious. She did not have to agree with him.

I have also identified a few points in Mr. Scholz’s narrative which lead to critical questions as to the adequacy of some of Mrs. Brühl’s interpretations; e.g., his search for a vocation which fits him is somewhat more complex than depicted by the social worker. But it can also be seen that she had a difficult time in encouraging him to become more sensitive to the perspectives of others and to do biographical work.

(3) Recurring problems or even paradoxes of the professional work

There are recurring and obstinate problems in the work of professionals (doctors, lawyers, social workers etc.) which are part and parcel of their practice: problems which often have a paradoxical quality and which cannot be abolished once and for all, even though practitioners often try to ignore their complexity or develop and legitimise pseudo-solutions which lead to turmoil in their work with clients. Such problems and paradoxes which are constitutive of professional work have been at the centre of interactionist studies published in the last one and a half decades (e.g., Schütze 1992, 1996; Riemann 2000). One example of professional paradoxes analysed by Schütze is the unavoidability of having to develop prognoses of case developments even if the empirical basis is narrow and shaky. It is helpful for professional practitioners to clearly focus on such problems and paradoxes and to discuss possible options to cope with them, because ignoring them or developing simplifying routines and rationalisations in dealing with them leads to mistakes and “cumulative mess” (Strauss et al. 1985, pp. 160-181). Oftentimes they are not aware of their own contributions and entanglements but prefer to solely attribute a downhill course of events to the particularities of a client or patient which can be easily categorised and diagnosed as “whatever”.

A close look at the interview with Mrs. Brühl has revealed that there are also such obstinate and complex problems and tasks in her work (and in the work of other professionals in this field). I will just mention them at this point and will not go into details again.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\) Cf. Schütze (1997) with regard to (b) and Schütze (1992) with regard to (a), (c) and (d).
Gerhard Riemann: Working with a client in vocational rehabilitation

(a) the need to apply general categories on the single case while taking care that such typifications are not forced on the case and turn into stigmatisations;
(b) the need to focus on one client while also taking into account the interests and perspectives of others who are part of his network (cf. his relationship with colleagues and superiors at the automobile firms and the issue of the “hierarchy of credibility” as it was called by Howard Becker (1967));
(c) the need to demonstrate to a client how things get done vs. running the risk of creating dependencies;
(d) being sure about a likely down-hill course of a case development and the question whether or not and to what extent a client should be informed: the issue of “awareness contexts” (Glaser and Strauss (1965) in communicating with a client;
(e) finding the right “dosage” in negotiating on behalf of a client and risking the loss of one’s reputation with powerful others (firms, the pension fund) whom one will need in the future;
(f) the need to acquire a sound biographical knowledge base with regard to a client vs. the risk of asking too much and invading the other’s private sphere;
(g) the need for biographical counselling under restrictive conditions and bureaucratic directives (especially if dubious vocational decisions are treated as “givens” and are difficult to correct).

8 Exercises

• Professionals working in vocational rehabilitation are encouraged to compare their own experiences of working with clients with the experiences which Mrs. Brühl reveals in her narrative. What sounds familiar? What sounds strange? Are there certain junctures at which they would have acted quite differently?
• If they participate in workshops of professionals in vocational rehabilitation they should start to tell stories about their work with clients to each other (and to ask questions based on such narratives) – similar to what happened in the interview with Mrs. Brühl.
• They are encouraged to do such interviews themselves and to engage in sequential analyses of such texts (together with colleagues). How do their own orientations towards their clients change in this process?
• Another approach to their work would be to closely observe situations of their work practice and to turn these observations into detailed fieldnotes which could be shared and discussed with other colleagues (Riemann 2005). This could become an important element in (a) fostering a self-reflective professional discourse and (b) representing one’s work to a wider audience. Such detailed fieldnotes could also deal with the issue how structural conditions and macro developments impinge on the work with clients.

31 Mrs. Brühl is very careful in this regard, but it is possible to ask critical questions nevertheless. During her professional work she has developed typifications which have proven useful in her work with clients, e.g., the typification of clients who can be characterised by the dominance of the motif of “earning quite good money”. It is possible that such a category turns out to be too crude and to distort “what’s the case”. I have pointed out that the history of Mr. Scholz’s own deliberations about meaningful directions of retraining are more complex and also oriented by the question what he is good at.
References

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