

## TAKING A STAND AGAINST NORMATIVE BIOGRAPHY – A BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING CAREERS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF MALE SOCIAL WORKERS

### ABSTRACT

The paper discusses transformation of professional identity of individuals who have chosen work activity that is not traditional for their gender. Participants of our research are male social workers in Lithuania. The study on change of professional identity of male social workers presented in this article has revealed that the process of becoming a social worker among males is a sequence of complex decisions and experiences accompanied by critical incidents and changes in their life trajectories and learning careers. Trajectories of educational experience and life events of the research participants have revealed the choice in favour of non-traditional occupation as a defeat of traditional gender division of labour by opposing to “normality” – by undergoing and overcoming the crisis. One of interesting aspects of analysis is the issue of experiences occurring in the course of deviation from standardized, predetermined and preset life journey, i.e. normative biography. Such a complexity is caused by ideal norms of hegemonic masculinity that frame actual social structures and are introduced into the processes of socialization and habituation with the aim to form dominant masculine habitus. Analysis of biographical narratives of male social workers have disclosed learning careers and at the same time the balancing of the males between the normative trajectory of masculine behaviour and striving to find their own “self”.

**KEYWORDS:** *biographical narrative, male social workers, gender division of labour, professional identity, gender socialisation, traditional gender roles*

## INTRODUCTION

Educational trajectory and learning biography are considered to be one of the most important subjects of research in lifelong and continuing education. Researchers of education and learning seek to understand characteristic aspects of educational biography, the way it intertwines with life trajectory, as well as interaction between learning processes in different contexts of formal, non-formal and informal learning and social processes.

Biographical research reveals how individuals build their lives and social identities, design their life plans and life projects around learning, employment and careers. Analysis of biographies helps explain how such factors as social characteristics and social identity (for example, gender identity), social and economic capital, family predetermine decisions and life plans, choices of educational journey. Analysis of role of learners' social characteristics, their place in social field (the term coined by Bourdieu) in educational trajectory and relation with the process of lifelong learning plays yet another important role in biographical research. In this case, gender is one of the key factors. Gender research has made it possible to apply biographical method to the processes of lifelong learning. As L. West has noted (West, 2011), it is gender research that has formed the understanding that learning experience is gender specific and that women's learning experience should become the subject of research, just as other research of women's subjectivity. According to E. Ollagnier (2007), biographical work becomes learning process and learning event for women in informal learning. Biographical narrative is the space for construction of individual and collective gender identity.

Process of professionalization, choice of profession and construction of professional identity, improvement of professional competencies that depend on certain educational capabilities is also recognized as an important object of study. Biographical research becomes a unique methodology that allows understanding professional development and acquisition of professional identity in the process of life journey by identifying various factors related to professionalization. Research usually leads to conclusion that structure of professional identity and professional choice is predetermined by changes in personal life, education system and processes in society.

There is an evolving tendency to consider structure and outline of educational biography within the context and framework of life trajectory as a separate object of research. Similar to other authors (Riessman, Quinney, 2005; Larsson, Sjöblom, 2010) we acknowledge that narrative inquiry is cross-disciplinary and based on different epistemologies, theories and methods. Sociology-based approach and psychology-based approach have considerable significance for our study. We put particular emphasis on critical theory that manifests in the relation between our research participants' biographies and normative biography. Analysis of structure of life and educational trajectories starts focusing on critical incidents, influence of important figures – critical persons, and turning points. By analysing separate life trajectories, different authors distinguish common (repeating) models and patterns. Relation between an individual's decision and social structures from the perspective of events and turning points has become an important subject of research. In fact, this idea has been adopted from *sociology-based approach of narrative analysis and sociological tradition of biographical research*, where the aim is to see social reality of events outside the interview, interplay between social structures and process and an individual's life.

Another tradition of biographical research emphasizes an idea that an individual's consciousness is not only reflection of the objective social reality and discourses, but is itself a reality and must be studied as such. With this view, sociology and other social sciences, including education sciences, have been complemented by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. The object of psychology-based approach in narrative research has been shifting from external social structures to subjective, intrapsychic reality, inner life, intentionality of consciousness, language and textuality, structures of meaning having their own logic and dynamics.

We consider critical approach to be very important for a study on biographical narrative. In critical theory it is crucial to analyse the relation between social structures and subjectivity, between ideology, dominant discourses and individuals' narratives. This approach has prompted us to combine macro and micro levels of analysis and realise that an individual's narrative can be analysed not only as an internal reality, but also as possibly affected by dominant discourses and ideology, as a specific battlefield between

the self and the dominant discourses. Critical theory describes formation of false consciousness, which leads us to searching for traces of dominant discourses in an individual's narrative. A lot of researchers have noticed that individuals tend to perceive social transformations and crises, dramatic changes in social structures as their own fault, failure and worthlessness. For instance, in the narratives by representatives of marginalised groups, researchers often discover feelings of loss, guilt about inability to overcome hardships and control own lives, uncertainty, anxiety (Doray, Belanger, 2002). The feeling of guilt in biographical narratives may manifest itself as self-judgment, self-defence and self-justification, with the narrator taking in turns the positions of a self-accuser or a self-defender (Murard, 2002). At a certain point in life, critical incidents such as external circumstances (social transformations, economic crisis, changes, illness, acquired disabilities, loss of close people, job etc.), an individual's behaviour and decisions appear as shifts and turning-points that shape the individual's life trajectory. These events are reflected on the level of the individual's consciousness and subjective reasoning through conflicts, dilemmas, controversial judgements and arguments experienced and expressed in the narrative (Rustin, Chamberlayne, 2002). One of the possible expressions of the tension between individual consciousness and external structures is the way the narrator parallels own life with the standard life history established by the dominant discourses, i.e. with the normative biography. Numerous individual life practices appearing in biographies are not that successful and deviate from normative, standardized, institutionally regulated biographies.

One of the examples of narrative biography analysis from lifelong learning perspective is the study by V. Strootbants and D. Wildemeersch (2000). They note that women's biographies tend to deviate from the normative biography. Creation of standard career trajectories and educational biographies does not consider real life practices of women and other groups with special experience. Moreover, normative biographies are still supportive of patriarchal society and labour market. The notion of normative biography determines the understanding of the nature of education when dominating mechanisms and structures are reproduced through education and marginalize separate social groups. Hence, identifying the tension between normative biography

constructed by dominant structures and groups through discourses and the self would help better understand the process of submission and construction of the subject, as well as reach the state of understanding as a possible practice of emancipation and awareness raising.

## **TRADITIONAL GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR AS RESULT OF GENDER SOCIALIZATION AND HABITUATION**

Having reviewed the options of biographical approach towards development of professional identity and role of gender practices in the process of learning and professionalization, we have been able to formulate the problem of formation of professional trajectories of individuals who have chosen the occupation that is not traditional for their gender. Another interesting subject of analysis is the issue of experiences occurring in the course of deviation from standardized, predetermined and preset life journey, i.e. normative biography.

Participants of our research are male social workers in Lithuania. One of characteristics of social work is its gender characteristics – most of people working in this sphere are women. Males usually participate in this profession at managing positions. Current situation in this sector reveals typical gender division of labour determined by a range of historical, cultural, social and economic factors. Traditional division of spheres of activity into public and personal that has rooted in the culture ties males to social activity in public sphere, and women – to home environment and household, housekeeping, care and educative functions.

Gender socialization and gender education create premises for gender division of labour. Family, society, system of education are the institutes of socialization that directly or indirectly form normative gender characteristics, as well as other social identities. Role of women is related to maintaining relations, caring of others, concern about needs of others, cooperation, dependence and emotional sensitivity. Women's identity is characterised by the relation to others, usually by relations in personal sphere. At the same time, processes of socialization and education guide males towards self-realization in public sphere, domination, competition, freedom and independence, emotionally cold relations and rational and logical reasoning.

Entry of males into non-traditional professional sphere that is usually stereotypically considered to be normative activity for women becomes a particularly relevant object of research. Study of certain male's professional and educational life trajectories may help determine how normative biography of male's life and education is challenged and the prerequisites of this challenge.

Traditional stereotypical gender-based predetermination of professional activity primarily results from the process of socialization and education, and further manifests in the process of the choice of profession and professionalization.

In their analysis of formation of traditional gender roles, advocates of feminist criticism tend to focus quite a lot on the processes of social reproduction via *hidden curriculum*. In terms of gender division of labour and labour market segregation, the process of *habituatio*n linked to Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus should be considered besides the processes of socialization and hidden curriculum. Educational sociologists who deal with gender inequality analyse formation of gender identity, reproduction of masculinity and femininity by analysing the habitus (Dumais, 2002; McLeod, 2005).

*Habitus* means social life that has become part of a person's self, has been incorporated into the person; dispositions of body and mind, principles and cognitive schemata that are social practices and structures internalized and adopted by the individual. In Bourdieu's works, habitus is primarily defined as a way of class reproduction, but later Bourdieu uses this notion in explanations of gender differences (e.g. '*Masculine Domination*') (Bourdieu, 2001). Anatomic and biological differences between women and men, different roles in biological reproduction turn into socially constructed differences between genders, different social destinies and lives that men and women are subject to. Gender division of labour becomes both economic and symbolic act when a line is drawn between men and women's worlds, leaving public sphere to men, and household – to women. Habitus is engendered on the basis of possibilities available to each gender in a certain social field, in a certain structure. According to Bourdieu (2001), men and women's habitus are formed through symbolic and practical construction, cultivation (*Bildung*) and socialization by forming masculine and feminine

features, dispositions, behaviours, expectations etc. in boys and girls. Boys and girls, men and women acquire gender-specific habitus formed by the social structure in the process of habituation, i.e. conditioned by support/disapproval of family and community. This manifests later as different practices and life choices. Different behaviour, expectations, ambitions, career choices are manifestations of different habitus. According to Dumais (2002) who analyses Bourdieu's ideas, male's professional ambitions would match the dominant masculine habitus, whereas similar ambitions in women would conflict with the habitus, as traditional women's habitus prescribes against career development. Habitus manifests in males and women's different work and career aspirations and expectations, work and life practices.

Biographical method becomes particularly important in order to comprehend the process of social construction of masculinity and femininity, habituation, formation of masculine and feminine dominant habitus as well as gender segregation. On the other hand, formation of non-traditional habitus deviating from the 'prescribed' social field may also manifest via biographical narratives by individuals with atypical life courses. Biography, as a narrative, reveals culture-specific feminine and masculine discursive identities and shows conditions that lead to transformation and development of different social and economic conditions. According to the most prominent researcher of masculinity R.W. Connell (2005), studies on male subjectivity by applying biographical method have revealed construction of dominating and hegemonic masculinity in our society on one hand, and on the other hand, they have shown formation of specific types of masculinity in specific persons' life trajectories. According to advocates of third-wave feminism and modern masculinity studies, it would be wrong to divide social world (social field) into men and women's worlds and to split social identities (and habitus) by binary opposition – into male and female identities. Under the idea of *intersection* that has been gaining a foothold lately, an individual's position in the nowadays society is very individual and specific, as it depends on intersections and very complex configurations of specific class, gender, race, age and other positions and identities. According to R.W. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hierarchy functions under hegemonic masculinity type, where on one hand, men prevail over women, but on the other hand,

hierarchic relations between men are established when masculinity types that deviate from hegemonic masculinity are marginalized. Authors of masculinity studies note that various other types of masculinity may be found besides hegemonic masculinity. At the same time it must be admitted that masculinity types are ambiguous and variable due to big changes in society. Specific masculinity is formed by intersection of professional, gender identities in a certain historic, social context.

According to R.W. Connel and Messerschmidt (2005), studies of biographies provide the possibility to identify dynamics of masculinity, its internal complexity and contradictions, tensions and diversity. At this point it is important to also remember the concept of critical normative biography, which can be applied in the analysis of educational, professional and life biographies. Internal contradiction arising in narratives is caused by tension between an individual's contemplation on own life and the individual's internalized and acquired norms, ideals of normal life and life journey (normative biography), which is constructed via grand narratives by prevailing external structure acting upon the individual. Biographical method is particularly important here as well, as it allows identifying formation of discursive identities, change of identities at various periods in a person's life. Moreover, postmodern concept of the self should be considered. As noted by narrative researchers, the self is dialogic and contains many voices and different self-experiences. Self is comprised of different sub-identities and presented by several dialogic voices and also the conflicts and contradictions that may exist between them. During biographical research, such complex intersections of various identities, internal and external 'voices' and narrative in a specific person's narrative are complemented by contemplations on life and learning experience.

### **CONTRADICTORY INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES IN EDUCATIONAL AND LIFE BIOGRAPHIES OF MALE SOCIAL WORKERS**

Analysis of formation of professional identity in male occupied in professional area of social work that has clear horizontal segregation of labour market requires determining intersection between professional and gender

identity in professional and educational biography. For this reason we pose the following question: how do individuals who have chosen non-traditional area of labour market, males working in feminized area of social work, construct and present the change of own professional identity and learning experiences in their biographical narratives? How does this presented reconstruction of experience interact (or encounter) with normative biography, reflect the traditionally predetermined hegemonic masculine professional journey, choice of profession, traditional educational journey and educational trajectory? The ideal of hegemonic masculinity implies respective history of appropriately educated male's professional life with masculine work and occupation: graduation from studies, acquisition of proper profession, proper masculine work, career development, becoming a manager and successful leader with big salary. But what happens if biography of an actual man and his journey do not fit into this hegemonic masculinity schemata, dominant masculine habitus, normative masculine biography? Experience of overcoming this specific horizontal gender segregation and challenge to norm of masculine professional activity implied by the ideal of hegemonic masculinity have prompted us to analyse how male social workers construct and contemplate on their educational journey, professional becoming, professional and educational biography. By revealing reconstructed past events, sequence of individual's life incidents and trajectory in retrospect, biographical research in educational sociology and education sciences explains formation of social identity and formation of habitus in time, nature of social mobility, shows the link between different systems (in this case, between education and labour market) by taking into account person's turning points as well as individuality. We also hope that our research will help contribute to understanding of the possible ways for gender detraditionalization in labour market and education system, as well as possible ways for transformation of gender identity and change of traditional social field centred around patriarchal reproduction as well as transformation of social and economic structures.

During our research in 2010 in various cities of Lithuania, we held 7 biographical interviews with male social workers between 26 and 59 years old. Data were collected and analysed by applying biographical narrative research which helped analyse events not only as objective facts, but also as subjective

interpretation of professional biography and subjective reconstruction of personal professional development and education. Participants of our research were asked to answer the following question: *Could you tell us please from the beginning what happened in your life that you have decided to become a social worker and how it happened?*

Based on Giddens and other authors and following the tradition of analysis of subjectivity in biography, we consider narration by male social workers to be a reflexive project. This narrative about the choice of profession and entry into the sphere of social work includes both social and personal events and circumstances, values and attitudes present in society, as well as internal experiences, choice, attitudes, contemplations. Development of a person as a separate actor, his subjective life position and, at the same time, objective social structures are important in this process.

Many researchers state that narrative stories refer to discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events into a meaningful sequence; and ordering and sequence are characteristic of narration. Our research participants' narratives have revealed certain sequence of events of their life and learning experiences. Social work has turned out to be not their first profession they have chosen. This is their other profession, their second and third chances in lives. Almost all participants of the research started their careers in another sphere of education and activity. Data about the participants are presented under assigned fictional names in order to minimize negative influence of research on participants' personal and professional lives that might be caused by description and publication of events and experiences of their lives.

Data collected during the interview suggest a conclusion that entry into new profession, formation of new professional identity and further education are related to such factors as socialization, first education, social changes, absence of career perspectives in the former (first) profession, career opportunities noticed in a new profession (social work as the second chance profession), life experience and circumstances. Participants of our research had acquired their first education, had been occupied in the area related to their first degree, but later turned towards the sphere of social work. At the start of their professional lives, all interviewed men had acquired professions and education unrelated to social work. Research participant Jonas used to

be a tour guide for some time, then he tried to run business, and now he has been working at a special school and providing support to children. He also continues to deepen his knowledge in social work graduate studies. Karolis started his professional journey with educational work, he then worked in education system, and now his work is related to children. Karolis completed his first degree in a faculty of theology, worked with children, and then he realized that he wanted to study social work and work in that area. Tauras used to play music for a living, and now he provides support to men struggling against addiction. Nojus worked as a labourer for a long time, and now he is the head of organizations providing social services, a spiritual mentor. Žilvinas made several attempts to work in the area close to social work during his student years, but then he turned to private sector. He afterwards was offered a position as the head of organization providing social services. It should be noted that the first professions of most of the participants were of humanitarian and spiritual nature, which implied certain subtlety of feelings, kindness and mercifulness (theology, language and literature, music, history, animal husbandry as care of animals). Nojus' profession (carpenter) is an exception as it is merely male labour. Despite differences between our informants, their characteristics and individuality, certain common and similar collective experience may be noticed. On one hand, the participants of the research had made the decision to work and establish themselves in the professional sphere they had chosen at the beginning of their professional journey and they had acquired education for. On the other hand, by choosing the sphere of social work, they entered the sphere of learning as the second chance and became the participants of the process of continuing education.

According to various researchers of narratives, narrators create plots from their experiences, narratives offer insights about the world and people's experiences of it. Our research participants' narratives have revealed experience of life, change of professional identity and learning. Their life trajectories have all been marked by dramatic circumstances, critical incidents in personal lives that prompted their transition to the professional area of social work. Turning points that changed professional lives of our informants and directed them into the sphere of social work

were found in their narratives. These were critical incidents of significant importance, particular life circumstances.

Almost each participant of the research faced critical turns in his life in the form of crisis and under the influence of other people. Crisis became one of the most important factors. There were incidents of divorce, alcohol or drug addiction, personal issues, dissatisfaction and disappointment in own professional activity, deterioration of health. Three participants, Jonas (59 years old), Tauras (52 years old), Nojus (52 years old), faced crisis as a result of alcohol and drug abuse. Jonas and Karolis (52 years old) faced family and life crisis referred to by Karolis as 'personal problems'. The youngest participant Tadas (26 years old) described crisis and critical incidents in a different way and stated that he chose the path of a social worker because of economic crisis in the country.

Alcohol and drug addiction led to loss of family, connections, relations, job and activity. Crisis became the dead-end of former life and professional journey they had taken from the very beginning. On the other hand, this was also the experience that made them reconsider their lives and rediscover themselves. However, in order to do that, they needed help of other people who inspired them to start new lives, helped overcome the crisis. For one of them this was his wife, for others – religious community and brothers of faith or a supervisor. For example, a priest's invitation was a determining factor in Tadas' (26 years old) decision to study theology. Crisis situations created those critical moment that prompted the men to make a turn and choose the area of social work and make essential changes in own lives by not only changing relations with oneself and with relatives, but also change former career, continue education under the newly formed own concept of life. Social work was not the first profession for almost all men – it became the start of self-discovery, overcoming of the crisis, creation of new life or a consequence of the influence by people they met. The men choose profession of social work after certain dramatic period and circumstances. By revealing their biographical journey, they answered the question of 'who I am' and showed their subjective becoming.

Stories told by almost all research participants have revealed that certain incidents in life (personal issues, critical incidents, or inquisitiveness for

experiencing something not experienced before) directed men's professional careers and educational trajectories in another direction. It seems as if they faced hegemonic masculinity crisis before and during the crisis: having failed to meet the requirements established by the society and to fulfil themselves, they turned to alcohol, drugs, i.e. they were at the critical moment that changed their lives. According to Giddens (1991), biographical narrative reflects the sequence of breaking points, losses that prompt a person to start negotiating and, together with that, embark on new opportunities. Person's individual self-expression is the balance between opportunities and risk that gives the 'license' to leave the past. Men participating in our study showed conscious wish to risk, revealed negotiations on important changes in their lives, opening of new opportunities in case of personal crisis, e.g. encounter with unemployment, search for new job, establishment of new connection, starting addiction treatment, being torn between different areas. Critical incident became one of the key factors that determined the men's choice of social work, and later choice to continue education, expand own education. Such non-linear, indirect entry into profession is a certain deviation from normative educational trajectory. According to normative educational biography that formed in Lithuania before principles of lifelong learning were established, choice of profession is done in the following predetermined educational way: learning in general education school, studies at professional education institution and, finally, professional activity as a universally accepted completion of educational way and beginning of professional activity.

Analysis of biographical narrative as specific experience and as text expressing the way of speaking shows certain specifics of male narration about life crisis. It was not easy for men to reveal life crisis during the interview: *I don't want to talk about it*, – said Karolis in response to researcher's additional questions when the story touched cardinal changes in life. *Personal issues in family were such that I was heading into the unknown*, – stated Karolis, and he did not talk about this any further. As noted by Lithuanian researcher Tereskinas (2011) who analyses masculinity and male narratives, men who have encountered emotional vacuum in daily life feel unable and unwilling to express their feelings, they push aside their painful experiences ('I don't want to remember, I don't want to tell'). Similar situation has been noticed in Jonas and

Karolis' narrations as well – they do not elaborate on painful experiences. Such omissions become the most frequent in family-related issues. It is only possible to speculate on the reasons of such omissions, e.g. pain, shame or feeling of guilt:

*[Business] ended up quietly and in fact I was in the period of heavy drinking, I drank quite a lot, partied. <...> And then such <...> period started, I'd say, empty: no work, but I did not starve, people made jokes that I would soon move to live by the heating plants pipes (Jonas).*

Tauras has revealed his experience of a drug addict:

*And there I was, drowned in the ocean of drugs. Yes, I felt euphoric at first, but then all bridges between me and my loved ones were burnt. I lost my family, my job, my health, dignity, connections. The destruction brought by drugs into my life was so big that kind of emptiness appeared, this kind of cosmic sadness was so big that I even thought about suicide, non-existence. I was overwhelmed by depressive mood (Tauras).*

*I lost my family, my wife divorced me taking away my two children because of my alcohol addiction – says Nojus by clearly naming and not trying to hide what happened.*

Faith in God was one of the key factors in Tauras and Nojus lives' leading them into the sphere of social work and helping them break free from the crisis. Faith gives them strength to work, develop ideas and wish to do good to people. These men did not hide or omit the experiences that changed their lives. On the opposite, they share these experiences with other people who may find support in such experiences.

*Social work has started with religion, everything starts with religion and all values of social work are Christian values coming from the Bible <...> This work is a calling, and there is just no sense in learning [to become a social worker] if there is no calling. This work is extremely hard, it requires self-sacrifice and particular patience. You just cannot start if you have no calling. There are people who are soft-hearted, kind-hearted, people who can do this work.*

*If a person is not sensitive to the pain of others, he cannot do this work. He would be blind and deaf, because here, the tool is not your eyes or ears, but your heart* (Nojus, a clergyman of religious community, a director of non-governmental organization related to rehabilitation of people with drug addiction).

Empathy, self-sacrifice at work, calling – the informants considered these qualities to be the most important in social work. However, calling emerged only after personal crisis, after personal experience of suffering accompanied by very stressful and dramatic existential contemplations about the meaning of life. Entry into social work, further learning and continuous education originated from appearance of faith in their lives, from the striving to find stability and new meaning.

Research of professional choice of male social workers carried out by A. Christie (Christie, 2006) has determined that apart from women to whom the sphere of care is traditional and natural, males distinguish and stress particular causes of entry into this female profession that is not traditional to males. These are the so-called strategic and, at the same time, exceptional reasons – influence of other people, failure, absence of career perspectives in the first profession, life crisis. Entry into profession that is non-traditional to their gender was the result of their crises of hegemonic masculinity: failure to comply with requirements and expectations of society pushed males into crisis that could be overcome by escaping a certain realm of ideal hegemonic masculinity and entering an ‘unfamiliar’ territory. Escape from traditional field and entry into new and unfamiliar territory that was banned by norms doubtlessly caused certain pressure and conflicts. We discovered the internal dynamics of development of both professional and gender identity of our participants, complexity and controversy of internal practices and subjectivity of masculinity, their confusion between tradition masculine habitus and womanly care, kindness and mercy, between internal aspirations and discourses and stereotypes prevailing in society. According to Giddens, turning points in life bring not only opportunities, but also certain losses, and cause risk. As a result, such controversies, internal dialogues, doubts, trade-offs emerge in biographical narratives.

In their biographical narratives, participants of our research have discovered conscious wish to take risks, hold dialogue about determining changes in their lives, look for new opportunities in overcoming personal crisis. The revealed life facts, turning point in professional identity, changed learning trajectory (entered social work, gained education, are in the process of lifelong learning) are what is called transitional learning (transitorische Bildungsprozesse) referred to by Peter Alheit (2003, 2009). They overcame the traditional gender division, the dominant habitus that were traditionally ascribed to them (and to other males), life and professional line, normative biography determined by discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Transition happened through learning in the broader sense, i.e. through socialization, existential break and overcoming of crises, change of life, profession and education. They have found resources of 'half-lived' life as Alheit puts it, they have acquired new social orientation and became masters of their new lives by planning their lives and directing them intentionally. They have become the subjects of their biographies. Biographies of our participants demonstrate the example of self-empowerment, the example of how life lines and trajectories can be blocked in the beginning and later, how the participants dealt with and overcame crisis, how men could find strength to undergo treatment, establish new social relations, enter new professions, acquire new education after losing job, family, friends, good name and alcohol and drug addiction. Continuing education in this particular context could be understood as an important element of a new life, repair of biography, transition to their new lives, new lines and trajectories or biographies. Professional calling, sympathy, mercy are not only professional qualities and elements of professional competence and result of learning, but also consequences of deep existential transformation through suffering and choice.

Biographies with intertwining life, professional and educational journeys told by our informants have allowed them to look into their past and answer the question about their identity. Such narrated life histories help researchers understand subjectivity of individuals who narrate their lives, complex nature of lifelong learning and education processes, their organic and, occasionally, conflicting relation with social structures and discourses.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed complex chain of formation of male professional identities. On one hand, social structures (social field) aim at forming male and female *habitus* via hegemonic, prevailing ideal of masculinity that is introduced in the process of socialization, education, habituation and hidden curriculum, thus reproducing the historical division of labour and gender hierarchy. However, the analysis of biographical interview has led to doubts in strong determinist connection between structures and subjective reality through *habitus*. We would be more inclined to accept the Anthony Giddens' (1991) structuration concept of identity as a reflexive project. Peter Alheit's ideas on transformational learning also seem to be very valuable in this context. Biographical narratives by individuals who have chosen non-traditional profession and overcome traditional division of labour, violated the normative notion of masculinity and stepped out of the boundaries of traditional male *habitus* have revealed evolving tension between subjective reality of inner world, identity changes determined by life incidents and circumstances and objective dominant discourses formed by social structures. Trajectory of research participants' educational experience and life incidents has shown that the choice of non-traditional occupation as overcoming traditional gender division of labour opposes to 'normality'. This opposition occurs when crisis is encountered because of failure to meet the requirements or overcome by choosing non-traditional occupation. This shows specifics of educational biographies of male social workers. Biographical narratives reflect tense and uncomfortable dialogue between the self and the society, between the real self and the ideal self (in this case, hegemonic normative masculinity). Results of the study prompt to proceed with the research and develop new educational reality to form premises for detraditionalization of gender roles and labour market. The study has also demonstrated the importance of biographical work and transitional learning.

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