Narrative, Metaphor and the Subjective Understanding of Identity Transition

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of employing an oral history method and narrative interview techniques for business historians. We explore the use of oral history interviews as a means of capturing the expression of subjective experience in narrative and metaphor. We do so by analysing interviews concerning the transition of East German identities following reunification with West Germany. Self-expression emerges as critical to the vital identity work required for social integration following transformation, metaphor providing a means of articulating deep-rooted patterns of thought. We demonstrate that employing an oral history methodology can benefit business historians by affording access to the human dimension of a research project, unlocking the subjective understanding of experience by low-power actors among the non-hegemonic classes. Hence, employing an oral history methodology provides a valuable means of countering narrative imperialism, exemplified here by the dominant West German success story grounded in Western-style individual freedom.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Identity, Metaphor, Narrative, Oral history, Transition

Introduction

This paper adopts an oral history methodology in order to pose a key question: how and why are oral history and narrative interview techniques relevant for business historians? We address this guiding question through the medium of oral history interviews pertaining to the transition of East German identities following the reunification of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with West Germany. The uses and challenges of oral history methods in business history form an appropriate topic for a special issue concerned with the methodological and epistemological challenges of narrative analysis. Oral sources are

narrative in essence (Portelli, 1981). The interview material gathered on identity transition therefore provides a springboard for our exploration of a methodological innovation concerning the use of oral history interviews in business history. The interviews themselves reveal how East Germans made sense of their past, retrospectively and prospectively (Maclean et al., 2014; Ybema, 2010), and how they related their individual experiences to the wider social context, expressed through narrative and metaphor (Fenton and Langley, 2011; Frisch, 1990). The lived actuality of East German social agents during transformation is largely neglected in the literature on German reunification, which assumes a Western macro-actor perspective (Clark and Soulsby, 2007; Hensel, 2004). Hence, one of the primary purposes of adopting an oral history methodology in a case such as this is to facilitate the emergence of a bottom-up perspective that shines 'new light on unexplained sides of the daily life of the non-hegemonic classes' (Portelli, 1981: 99).

In an East German context, a notable fissure has emerged between officially sanctioned public acts of remembering, institutionalized through museums and exhibitions (Clarke and Wölfel, 2011), and the everyday memories of ordinary people of life in the GDR. Decisions about what should be publicly memorialized have tended to promote 'narrative imperialism' (Phelan, 2005), being taken with little consideration for the socio-cultural 'history of "everyday life" (*Alltagsgeschichte*)' that might have encouraged a grassroots perspective (Ludwig, 2011: 46). Commemorative practices have generated 'dominant cultural memories that both articulate and silence people's life stories' (Thomson, 2006: 59). The spontaneous use of metaphor in biographical accounts, afforded through oral history interviews, conveying an intensity of emotion, may nevertheless enable the memories of individual agents to be accessed and hence recorded for posterity. Narration facilitates sensemaking (Maclean et al., 2012; 2014; Weick, 1995), while metaphors determine 'our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3). In

this way they structure everyday thoughts, perceptions and actions, emerging as channels for the focused expression of subjective understanding (Lakoff, 1993).

Our paper is situated within the growing strand of organizational research that embraces a 'dialogue' with history (Kieser, 1994; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Suddaby et al., 2010). In keeping with the theme of this special issue, it is positioned within the 'narrative turn' in business history, which accords increasing attention to the narrativization of organizational life over time (Hansen, 2012; Rowlinson and Clark, 2004). More specifically this paper is located within what we call 'historical organization studies', organizational research that draws on historical data, methods and knowledge, locating organizing and organizations in a socio-historical context to produce historically informed theoretical narratives (Maclean et al., 2016). Narrative is central to helping agents make sense of the past. Oral history interviews provide a means of accessing such stories (Jones, 2004; Portelli, 1981; Thomson, 2006). Their value lies in affording interviewees the opportunity to record their own testimony, the 'uniquely subjective nature of life stories' (Kennedy, 1995: 344) enabling them to counter the 'grand narrative' of German reunification by articulating resistance (Mordhorst, 2008).

Transforming societies are sensitive environments described by Michailova and Clark (2004: 3) as 'very special research settings that require fieldwork researchers to develop special qualities'. An oral history methodology is well suited to the low-trust environment of the former GDR. Free speech was stifled by a deep-seated fear of the Stasi (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit), the secret service that used a wide network of informants to spy on its people (Jones, 2011; Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). To express criticism of a social policy was enough to attract the Stasi's attention and be designated a potential enemy of the State (Bathrick, 2011). Our research gains from the passage of time, the fieldwork for this study taking place 15 years after unification, encouraging disclosure on the part of interviewees

while permitting an opportunity for reflection and the distillation of memories. Oral histories thus open up the possibility of providing a new take on the process of East German transformation by enabling us to access 'the "hidden histories" of people on the margins' (Thomson, 2006: 584) so as to demonstrate 'respect for the life stories of people who might otherwise have been ignored' (Thomson, 1998: 590).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section briefly reviews the East German transformation process, establishing the context that allows us to explore a methodological innovation. We consider the use and value of narrative and metaphor in historical research, after which we explain our oral history methodology and provide details of the research on which our study is based. Next, we analyze our oral histories by focusing on the processes of symbolization accompanying post-socialist change and identity construction. We conclude by proposing a research agenda that advocates the extension of oral history research within business and organizational history.

Reunification and the problem of identity

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 precipitated a chain of events that culminated in the dissolution of the GDR as a sovereign state and its incorporation into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). We do not propose to provide an in-depth account of events which led the Germany's reunification after more than 40 years as divided (Bushnell and Leonard, 2009; Clarke and Wölfel, 2011; Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). For the purposes of what follows, however, we highlight its salient aspects, since it is within this unfolding process that the oral histories of research participants are embedded (Kupferberg, 1998). In particular, the fall of the Wall falls within that category of experience that Portelli (1981: 103) describes as a 'climactic moment':

> 'We may however come across narrators whose consciousness seems to have been arrested at the climactic moment of their personal experience – certain resistance fighters for example, or many World War I veterans, perhaps some student militants

of 1968. Often they are wholly absorbed by the totality of the historical event of which they were part, and their account takes on the cadences and wording of epic.'

Unification occurred at breakneck speed. West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's ten-point plan for unity was unveiled within three weeks of the fall of the Wall. An attempt to find a 'third way' agenda involving gradual reform towards a market-oriented planned economy – that might have avoided the impression of there being outright 'winners' and 'losers' in which Western liberalism triumphed over Eastern socialism – proved abortive (Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). Free elections to the GDR parliament were held in March 1990. These were followed by currency union in July; an event greeted rapturously by East Germans, who now had a stake in the mighty D-Mark. Yet currency union dealt a mortal blow to the competitiveness of the East German economy, triggering a loss of markets to the East (Maclean et al., 2003). It appeared that East Germans no longer wished to buy their own products, hastening the disappearance of countless home-grown goods and the businesses that supplied them. Two months after the abolition of the GDR in October 1990, when the five pre-war *Länder* (Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia) were incorporated into the FRG, the first post-war all-German elections saw Kohl returned as political leader of the reunited Germany (Bushnell and Leonard, 2009).

The widespread euphoria accompanying the disintegration of the GDR dissipated, however, as post-socialist reality emerged to reveal a pronounced East-West divide; 'national unity [being] fissured both by the past of forty years of separation *and* by the process of unification itself' (Huyssen, 1995: 77). The prediction by international institutions, including the International Monetary Fund, that transformation would be completed within a decade proved fallacious. Enthusiasm gave way to concerns about social security and employment. Economic transformation was accompanied by a massive decrease in social security for East Germans unparalleled in German history that continues to shape the socio-economic development of the region. Wage bargaining in the East after unification was conducted by

West German unions with a vested interest in stemming migration flows to the West. This resulted in an upward pressure on wages, contributing to persistently low employment and rising long-term unemployment in the Eastern *Länder*, double the rate in the West at the time of our interviews (Lechner et al., 2007). The privatization of formerly state-owned enterprises by the Treuhandanstalt (THA), the Trust Holding Company created to sell off East German national assets over four years (1990-1994), triggered the depopulation and de-industrialization of the East. At its peak, the THA was privatizing 30 enterprises a day. Businesses deemed no longer viable were closed. Some were purchased by foreign or West German buyers, and at times by West German rivals who shut them down to eliminate competition. Few were bought by East Germans through management buy-outs, for the simple reason that they lacked the economic capital to do so (Geppert, 1996; Howard, 2001). Countless privatizations failed, necessitating re-privatizations. This led to significant job losses in traditional industries, fuelling further migration to the West, especially among the young and ambitious (Geppert and Kachel, 1995). In the first ten years of unification, typical industrial towns in the East experienced a population decrease of 30% (Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). Since the mid-1990s, the wage gap between East and West has barely diminished: East German average pay being 82% of West German average pay, while unemployment rates in the East remain almost twice the level in the West (BMWI, 2014).

Most importantly, the speed with which reunification was effected left the East German people little time to perform the vital 'identity work' of coming to terms with their past, which they needed to accomplish before moving on (Brown, 2014; Clarke and Wölfel, 2011). Identity work concerns processes of identity shaping, defined by Snow and Anderson (1987: 1348) as 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept'. Identity construction and maintenance are especially important at times of crisis, being 'connected

strongly to past remembered and future projected selves' (Brown, 2014: 5). East Germans had achieved the overthrow of a hated regime, yet many lacked the 'identity capital' crucial to individual success in the new united Germany (Côte and Schwartz, 2002). The delegitimization of the GDR that accompanied unification allowed the FRG, in a display of narrative imperialism, to absorb its defeat of the communist state into its own success story grounded in Western-style individual freedom (Phelan, 2005: 210). Potential counter narratives concerning the social state or 'mass integration as a strategy of power' were obviated (Ludwig, 2011: 48). Likewise, the political dissensus in the East which had unleashed the chain of events leading to unification was neutralized by a 'closing-down of politics' (Beyes and Volkmann, 2010: 655).

Those who remained in East Germany, the so-called 'Bleibers' ('stayers'), assumed they would be social equals but found themselves viewed as inferior and having to adapt to a new culture, like immigrants, despite never having left home (Kupferberg, 1998; Sarpong and Maclean, 2016). East Germans found themselves 'robbed of their illusions of certainty' (Hensel, 2004: 163). Much of what they had taken for granted and presumed to form the parameters of their lives had to be jettisoned. The ontological security of existing life paths was disrupted by a new requirement to take responsibility for success or failure in working life (Diewald, 2007). Individual initiative had been stifled under communism (Burnett, 2007), but now individuals were expected to assume personally the risk previously borne by the State 'for which their biographical experiences had not prepared them' (Kupferberg, 1998: 243). It may seem self-evident, but East Germans had received no training in how to operate and thrive in a market economy (Geppert, 1996). Given what Kostera (2002: 115) describes as the 'common unidirectional managerial crusade from the West to the East', it was essential that East Germans 'co-operate with West German business experts who alone [had] the competence to compete in a globalized marketplace' (Kupferberg, 1998: 246). Many found

this problematic due to naïvety, lack of trust and at times absence of scruples on the part of West German 'collaborators'. The upshot was a sense of displacement, of being 'outcasts on the inside' (Bourdieu and Champagne, 1999: 421) reminiscent of Berger et al.'s (1973) notion of the 'homeless mind' (Kupferberg, 1998). The East German novelist Christa Wolf (1984) describes this as a sense of 'estrangement from ourselves', articulated by Tonkin (1992: 135-136) as 'the problem of finding a secure identity when history-as-lived has destroyed the literal place of one's social identity… and the goal of an expected life trajectory has disappeared'.

Narrative, metaphor and oral history

Oral history interviews with participants who have experienced dislocation at first hand creates the opportunity to 'give voice to the fears, dreams and struggles of people who have entrusted [us] with stories about them, composed in short narratives' (Kostera, 2002: 113). Oral sources are narrative in nature (Portelli, 1981). History's very 'historical character' is grounded in narrative because the meaning of history can only be apprehended though textualization (Ricoeur, 1984: 177; White, 1987). Narrative concerns the 'thematic sequenced accounts that convey meaning from implied author to implied reader' (Barry and Elmes, 1997: 431). Human existences become more 'readable' when couched in and illuminated by the stories people tell about themselves (Ricoeur, 1991: 73). How individuals recount and remember their past impacts on how their lives evolve prospectively (Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Ybema (2010: 482, 484) describes this as 'nostalgic' and 'postalgic sensemaking'; the narrative accounts of individual agents subtly recasting a future identity while preserving 'continuity with a past self to alleviate the "pain" of change'.

Barry and Elmes (1997) highlight the importance of narrative metaphor to the mode of telling and the told. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980: 6; 1999) theory of metaphor suggests it lies at the root of everyday cognitive frameworks, 'the human conceptual system [being]

metaphorically structured and defined', so that the study of metaphor becomes a route to uncovering deep-seated patterns of thought on the part of both individual and collectivity. Hence, the metaphorical structure of a culture is likely to be congruent with its underlying values. Lakoff (1993: 244-5) argues that metaphor provides a key mechanism whereby complex subject matter can be depicted and conveyed, enabling us 'to understand inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete… subject matter', and that for some topics it represents the primary medium for assimilation and comprehension. Similarly, Morgan (1980) asserts that breaking out of orthodox, conventional metaphors that lie beyond individuals' 'cognitive comfort zone' (Oswick et al., 2002: 294) can prove a liberating experience. Viewed thus, metaphors can function as a channel or bridge to prospective futures based on retrospective (re)interpretation.

Grele (2007: 584) defines oral history as 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction'. Here, however, we follow Portelli (1981: 99) in contending that oral histories 'tell us less about events as such than about their meaning' (Portelli, 1981: 99). Most research subjects consent to take part in oral history interviews because they wish to share their stories (Jones, 2004). This is important in an East German context, where archival documentation is sparse and untrustworthy (Ritchie, 2003). Written records, often grossly unreliable, were systemically destroyed in the run-up to unification, including many of the notorious Stasi files on GDR citizens. The subjectivity of oral history, previously seen as contentious (O'Farrell, 1979), thereby becomes a key asset in opening up a direct channel through which the personal feelings of research participants can be accessed; many of whom used to keep their own counsel through fear of retribution. Subjective sensemaking by participants is hence to be welcomed in its capacity to illuminate the meaning of events (Frisch, 1990; Thomson, 1998). The significance accorded to events is apparent through the choice of metaphors employed by

participants whilst engaging in meaning-making. Since oral history, by definition, refers to more or less distant events, the vestiges of emotion which endure and are enhanced through metaphor can be particularly powerful. In this way, oral history can help historians and organizational researchers better understand how individuals construct and defend identities through narrative work.

Texts and discourses are bound up with their specific contexts (White, 1987: 185). Oral histories do not merely pertain to individuals; their significance is broader than this, being 'tied to the period' and context to which they relate (Ashplant, 2004: 105, cited in Keulen and Kroeze, 2012: 180). Brown and Humphreys (2002) emphasize the role played by nostalgia in shared self-narratives which, in combination, engender a collective identity (Ybema, 2010). The sentiments expressed by participants in our study resonate with the East German collectivity as a 'macro-actor', since they speak also on behalf of others and interpret what they wish to say (Robichaud et al., 2004: 629). The collective identity created through shared narratives is bound up with a sense of space as well as time (Bourdieu, 1999; Schultz and Hernes, 201). Unification prompted the erasure of place names associated with the communist regime. In 1990, for example, the city of Chemnitz in Saxony, known as Karl-Marx-Stadt under communism (1953-1990), reverted to its original name; implying a return to the self but also the effacement of what people had come to know; contributing in this way to narrative imperialism. The rise of memory as an object of study by historians accompanies the 'pervasive cultural sense of an end of an era', which events in East Germany reflect (Bartov, 2001: 660, cited in Thomson, 2006: 65). Placing personal histories in the context of an era in history enriches our understanding of 'a community, a place, and a time that was quickly disappearing' (Mirabal, 2009: 12).

Methodology

Numerous general accounts exist of the socio-economic and political dimensions of German unification at the macro level (Bushnell and Leonard, 2009; Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). These are invaluable in establishing the bigger picture, but at the cost of overlooking the lived experience of individual actors (Hensel, 2004; Mordhorst, 2008). To understand the gravity and amplitude of unification – involving the discontinuation of institutions, the abandonment of espoused values and practices, and the wrenching apart of long-established networks and relationships – demands a more fine-grained approach, complementing the top down with the bottom up (Thomas, 2008; Thomas and Busch, 2008). Oral history interviews which record the experiences, thoughts and feelings of actors who lived through unification provide an opportunity to reclaim what might otherwise be lost (Mirabal, 2009; Tonkin, 1992). As a tool of data collection, such interviews enable researchers retrospectively to explore complex questions relating to the personal challenges of profound societal change.

It is important to clarify at this juncture that the interviews which provided the material for our study of East German identities and their transition were not collected for the purposes of discussing a business historical methodology question. Their provenance is as follows. In 1994-1995 a former doctoral student of the lead author undertook 45 interviews with individuals at the heart of the vast privatization programme being implemented in the Eastern *Länder* in a study of privatization and the workings of the Treuhandanstalt. Many were directors of privatized companies or employed by the Treuhandanstalt or one of its successor organizations or involved in privatization through political or labour organizations (see Howard, 2001). A decade later, the decision was taken to return to East Germany to locate these individuals and invite them to reflect on their experiences of transition over the preceding 15 years, asking them in particular whether in their opinion the transition to a reunified Germany was complete (or not). Many privatized companies had folded by then; however we managed to reach a good number of former interviewees, with one interviewee

coming out of retirement for interview. Twenty-five interviews were deemed sufficient to elicit data relating to similarities and differences in lived experiences (see Table 1). To broaden our understanding of the lived experience of social actors, interviews were conducted in Berlin (15 interviews) and a smaller town in Saxony-Anhalt (10 interviews). All interviews were conducted in German by a member of the research team born and raised in East Germany. The role of the interviewer was important. Sharing a common background with participants, she could empathize with their life stories, promoting trust, which Thomson (1998) sees as vital to encourage disclosure (Śliwa, 2013), while eschewing the power relations associated with the 'Western gaze' (Beyes and Volkmann, 2010: 252). As the interviews unfolded, identity began to emerge as a key theme, which we openly reflected on during the interview process.

Following the interviewer's retirement, however, the project was left in abeyance until several years later when, now with a reconfigured team of researchers, we returned to the transcribed interviews with a new purpose in mind: namely, to reflect on oral history interviews as a means of capturing the expression of subjective experience of identity transition in narrative and metaphor. This new topic was, of course, at one remove from our original intention in conducting the interviews. However, we recognise that this is a regular challenge for business historians who often need to draw on oral history interviews collected years before their own research questions emerged, frequently for a different purpose. Many oral history programmes in the US are intended to capture material 'for stock', for the archive, that which would otherwise be lost, without pre-specified use.

One question which arises is whether historians can simply draw on these interviews selectively, or is it that crucial aspects of the specific interview process get lost? What we found in using the interview data collected several years before our research on oral history methodology came into being is that the interviews themselves do not fade over time. Rather,

the sentiments expressed remain fresh such that in rereading the interviews with the 'benefit of temporal distance' (Rowlinson et al., 2014), they come to life in the manner of Proust's madeleine moment recounted in *Remembrance of Things Past*:

> 'so in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's park, and the water-lilies on the Vivonne and the good folk of the village and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea'. (Proust, 1954/1981: 51)

This capacity of oral history material to retain its freshness implies that revisiting an existing body of oral histories can yield new potentialities; so that these can be used and re-used for different purposes. Herein lies a key advantage in adopting an oral history methodology. What we found in returning to the interviews with a new purpose was that many participants had told a series of rich, emotionally charged stories. Two interviewees, for example, had been imprisoned under the GDR (see Table 1). Nearly all interviews, while differing in style, were insightful, yielding abundant data for exploring the use of oral history interviews as a means of capturing the expression of subjective experience in narrative and metaphor.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Prior to analysing our interview data, all interviews were transcribed in German and translated into English. Translation often involves a degree of alteration, as Michel Tournier who worked as a translator from and into German has written (Maclean, 2003); however we took care to ensure translated sentiments were accurately expressed. The lead author is a German speaker who studied German at university. What was striking about the transcripts, through which the participant 'appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life' (Ricoeur, 1988: 246), was that they often drew on metaphor which became a lens through which to view the past, present and projected future. We assembled metaphors into clusters according to their nature and substance and grouped them into two broader second-order categories, one identity based and the other temporally based (Berg, 2004). Our approach

follows that of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in focusing on metaphor as a means of articulating deep-rooted patterns of thought through its capacity to encapsulate subjective understanding while channelling emotional intensity. Applying this to oral history interviews, we suggest, may permit deep-seated thought patterns to be accessed years after the event. The interview material below pertaining to East German identities and their transition provides a springboard for our exploration of the use of oral history interviews as a methodological innovation.

The subjective understanding of transition

Our material on East German transition reveals how agents make subjective sense of transition, retrospectively and prospectively, and show how they relate that lived experience to its socio-historical context and the evolution of identity (Frisch, 1990; Keulen and Kroeze, 2012).

Identity and inferiority

Hayden White (1987: 27) writes that 'the story told in the narrative is a mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is to be considered a truthful account thereof'. Portelli (1981: 100) concurs, arguing that the significance of oral history may reside 'not in its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in'. Close reading of our transcripts revealed that these processes of symbolization, where imagination burst in, were *collective*. This resonates with Maurice Halbwachs' (1950) view that groups, families and ultimately societies share recollections of a common past, strengthened by the regular exchange of impressions among members, such that while individuals remember, these memories may be collective. In this sense memory is at once 'collective, plural, and yet individual' (Nora, 1989: 9). This was exemplified at interview by the recurrence of particular metaphors across individual interviews, often revolving around the notion of identity. With

the hiatus caused by the demise of the GDR, the collective memories which derived from it had been rendered invalid by this break. Participants felt strongly that with reunification, the East German identity had ceased to be socially validated and its intrinsic values had been discredited. Transformation had rendered their sense of habitus incongruent without, as yet, a new identity founded on a common future having been able to evolve (Bauman, 2004; Bourdieu, 1999).

This dislocation of identity echoes the notion of the 'homeless mind' (Berger et al., 1973) caused by the delegitimization of the society in which interviewees had previously participated. It gained expression at interview in the metaphor of the mirror in the form of an 'Eastern gaze', the corollary of the 'Western gaze' identified by Beyes and Volkmann (2010). As Hugo put it, East Germans look in the mirror and no longer recognize themselves in its reflection:

> I did identify with the GDR – of course, there were aspects that concerned me, for example, when the University church in Leipzig was blown up – but generally, I was at peace with the GDR. But let me tell you about "delegitimization". It is like this: the East Germans look into the mirror and see their mirror image and take it to be their real self – and they cannot find themselves again. (Hugo, retired University professor)

Johannes, a trade union manager, echoed this view, claiming: 'A large majority of the East German people is still looking for an identity'. This lost identity which cannot be discerned in the mirror is likened by Johannes to a bridge which has vanished in the fog without re-appearing, so that the East German people is caught in limbo, still waiting for the time when the bridge will emerge from the mist and assume shape and form. This notion of a vaguely discerned bridge in the fog suggests an incomplete transition, the bridge linking the old GDR identity with a potential post-transition identity, unable to assume definition (Beech, 2011).

The lack of 'identity capital' on the part of social agents in East Germany was apparent in the goods it produced (Côte and Schwartz, 2002). It seemed everything Western was to be emulated and everything Eastern discarded. As Hugo reminisced:

> There was only advertising for Western goods! And what followed was a rejection of East German products – people just preferred Western products. I remember when [X] stood on the Alexanderplatz and appealed to the people: "East Germans buy East German products!" (Hugo, retired University professor)

This created another form of mirror-image for East Germans to live up to, whereby everything Western was desirable, including goods and structures, even when deficient. That 'Reproduction West' ('*Nachbau West*') provided the sole point of reference was deeply demotivating (Thomas, 2008: 7). As Heinrich explained:

> Many honorary structures traditionally present in the old FRG are really antiquated and urgently in need of reform. The old FGR is thus systematically becoming less of a role model for the new regions and that has an effect like a mirror, naturally quite awful in terms of lethargy. (Heinrich, public relations director)

This chimes with the view expressed by Dutton and Dukerich (1991) that institutional identity mirrors individuals' sense of how they fit into society, and is crucial to determining levels of motivation.

One story told at interview involves two 'brothers-in-arms' who had shared a prison cell, and even the same plate, who become as mirror-images of one another. One inmate, on release, moved to West Germany while the other remained in the East. According to the account given at interview, their differing trajectories caused them to grow apart, such that when they met up years later, they allegedly had little in common. As Horst recounts:

> I had a friend, I was in prison with him for a long time – he always felt a bit beholden to me – I helped him a lot. He got out of prison and came home earlier than me. When I came back home, he had already gone over to the West, as the borders were still open. Then he wrote to me: "You can come any time you like, you can stay with me, I've just got a little flat, but you can come." But I couldn't leave home, my mother was ill. Then the Wall was built, we didn't correspond with each other much and then he wrote a book and hailed me as his sort of life saver. Then he invited me to Cologne, I had not followed his career, so I was of course astounded to find a very beautiful villa, but apparently a humble man, who had come here with nothing but a Persil box – he'd worked his way up from gardener's apprentice to General Sales Manager at [chemicals company]. He offered me everything he could. But you could also tell that, although we practically had suffered the same, literally ate out of the same plate, he could not come to terms with the time and overcome this. He hated communism *ad nauseam*. But his environment, his acquaintances… they could not get into the GDR way of thinking. (Horst, master baker)

In this moving account of friendship, Horst suggests that outward success may mask an inner inability to come to terms with the past through acceptance of what has transpired. Despite his career success and affluent lifestyle, Horst claimed his friend was unable to discard his inner GDR persona. According to Horst, his friend lacked sufficient 'identity capital' to overcome his GDR 'refugee' status and attach himself fully to his new Western existence, with which he remained somehow at odds, despite his deep-seated antipathy towards communism (Côte and Schwartz, 2002). This strikes a chord with Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) notion of being an 'outcast on the inside'. Helmut, a politician, explains this as follows: 'there is always a matter of the background of GDR experience… because that is always the standard of reference for a lifetime's memories'.

At the heart of this GDR identity which adheres to individuals in the manner of an enduring habitus is an innate sense of inferiority (Bourdieu, 1990). Feelings of inferiority on the part of former GDR citizens were accentuated by the belief that their state had been 'taken over' by the FRG. As Hugo expressed it: 'the words "accession territory" ("*Beitrittsgebiet*") and "transfer" ("*Übertragung*") say it all! Much has been simply put on ("*übergestülpt*") to the East'. This sense of subordination appeared so ingrained as to be almost a matter of class (Kupferberg, 1998; Thomaneck and Niven, 2001). This is where oral history interviews can play an important role, permitting a 'more socially conscious and democratic history' (Thompson, 2000: vi) that enables 'history from below' (Thomson, 2006: 52) on the part of the non-hegemonic classes to emerge. Paul, a senior trade union manager, compared the East-West class divide to having a 'rich brother sitting in the same country'. Rolf, a managing director in petrochemicals, likened it to buying an aristocratic title *vis-à-vis* inheriting one (*Geld-Adel and Erb-Adel*), such that the East could never equal the West. Central to the problem was the relative absence of middle-class society in the Eastern *Länder*: 'A predominantly middle class society is still not present in the GDR', Heinrich insisted.

Another interviewee, Helmut, saw what he described as his 'disadvantaged, undesirable GDR status' not as a form of discrimination but one of 'disenfranchisement', implying that underlying it might be 'a desire to be re-included' (Thomaneck and Niven, 2001: 5). The problem is that the discarded GDR habitus, which no longer fits within the new Germany, persists in dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990). As Werner, head of policy at an employers association, clarified: 'the habits of thought and perception, as Pierre Bourdieu described, cannot be got rid of, and they play a part too'. Other participants made analogous comments. Helmut predicted that while a new generation could be expected to move on, it would always bear the stamp of its East German provenance: 'there will nevertheless still be something which will show this particularity of East German origin'. Heinrich noted that there was something 'quasi genetic' about the East German identity, such that 'even young people who only experienced the GDR as small children still behave today like GDR citizens'. Karl recounted how European intellectuals had visited the research institute in Berlin where he worked, and reached similar conclusions:

> Bourdieu was here in our institute, and Castoriadis and many others, and Habermas said: "Well, it's interesting; of course you will be shut down, because you don't fit into the West German structure". (Karl, head of research)

The above points suggest that the accrual of 'identity capital' in the new Germany may remain problematic for East Germans in the future, despite the likely accumulation of other forms of capital by the younger generation (Bourdieu, 1990). The implication is that 'inner unification' is a far longer-term affair that 'outer unification', and that it may be some time before the 'Nahtstelle' or join along the former intra-German border is fully knit up.

Nostalgia and projected futures

The dominant motif of Chancellor Kohl's promise of a better life after unification was one of 'flowering landscapes'. Kohl depicted a new world of 'green pastures', which East Germans were eager to buy into. However, this metaphor was also used to legitimize the THA's

privatization policy which brought mass unemployment to a region that had not experienced

unemployment in 40 years. At interview we found that visions of 'blossoming landscapes'

had atrophied, supplanted by images of a 'wasteland' or a 'no man's land between West and

East', as Renate observed. The 'official' (West German) narrative attributes the socio-

economic problems of the East partly to the failure of the GDR, not to the economic policy

pursued after 1990. Many interviewees expressed disillusionment, having discovered that

Western capitalism could be every bit as harsh as communism. Detlef, a senior manager in

transport engineering, admits he found working for a multinational after a takeover

comparable to life in the GDR:

> What I had not expected was that our endlessly developing creativity, after
> reunification, in this newly found freedom which we East Germans had come to
> know, that there would be an abrupt brake applied to this with a takeover by an
> international group. You are tied into a system, which in turn is very reminiscent of
> centralized organizations. It reminds me of the GDR. The one was an unequal state,
> and the other is a company which probably can only develop further in this
> centralized fashion. But since then I have missed the flowering of that creativity.
> (Detlef, senior manager in transport engineering)

> Ewald, an entrepreneur in tile manufacturing, shared this view, describing the arrival

of West German businessmen in the East after unification as 'a swarm of locusts… [who]

made big money and disappeared again'. Ewald initially acquired a managerial position with

a West German firm. Unprepared for the ensuing pressures, he quit his job, comparing

himself to a 'slave' in a 'golden cage':

> An incredible amount of pressure started, the kind of thing I could not have imagined
> up to then… I was suddenly a "slave". I was working till eleven at night and starting
> at five in the morning. So I quit, and the West German entrepreneur couldn't
> understand that at all, because as far as he was concerned there were only three ways
> to leave a company: reaching retirement, getting the sack, or dying. I couldn't put up
> with it, because I wanted to be free and independent, and I was actually in a golden
> cage. (Ewald, entrepreneur)

The shock that Ewald claims his boss felt when he left his job to start his own business

reflects the fact that East German actors are rarely perceived as architects of their own

destiny, with specific competences and resources at their disposal. It is worth pointing out

that this observation, like Horst's above, is second hand, reporting on sentiments that Ewald and Horst attribute to others. Conducting oral history interviews does not mean that the researcher should take an informant's statements at face value. In this case, we do not know whether Ewald's boss was really shocked and unable to comprehend the situation when Ewald decided to leave. The researcher needs to be clear that these are individuals who use narratives to create and (re)construct their own identities in the light of the disruption to their life stories brought about by imprisonment, unemployment, German reunification etc. As Seebohm (2004: 94, cited in Ericson et al., 2015: 515) asserts, 'We have only their life expressions as indicators of their own lived experience'. Maintaining an analytic distance at all times in response to this tension is therefore critical.

What Mirabal (2009: 17) terms the 'collective memory of space' sparked a nostalgic longing for the erstwhile GDR, so widespread that it gained its own word, 'Ostalgie'. This was largely a reinvention of meaning or 'mistaken memory' (Portelli, 1981: 585), which overlooked the regime's shortcomings and the torment it caused its citizens. This rose-tinted revision of the GDR promoted memories of belonging 'in which friendships and neighbourhood relations were somehow better', according to Marianne. The regime's records on childcare, women's employment, agriculture and medical surgeries were systematically praised and their passing lamented. Thomaneck and Niven (2001: 4) assert that such nostalgia for the GDR is misplaced:

> The image is a distortion because it conveniently excises all that was bad about the GDR and results in an idealization. This identity formation through imagined reconstruction of the past is also deeply ironic, given that the GDR population never identified with their state as much as they do now that it has gone.

Beyes and Volkmann (2010: 655) warn against turning the GDR into 'the stuff… of ideological fantasy', hindering adaptation. Yet the self-deception entailed in such nostalgia does not make it any less real for individuals, in terms of their subjective experience.

For some, bad experiences in the united Germany had coloured their perception of a putative projected future. For Heinrich, long-term planning had ceded to such short-termism that it prevented looking ahead:

> Yesterday, it was the words of Willy Brandt [former FRG Chancellor]: "Every time needs its decisions". For the *Zeitgeist* we have at this moment in time, I would say every week needs its decision at present, or in the Berlin vernacular, "we think no further than a pig shits". (Heinrich, public relations director)

Dieter, an architect, compares this inability to envision the future to plunging off a diving board into an empty pool: 'I have likened it to someone standing on the 10-metre diving platform with no water in the pool, and he dives in the hope that someone will fill it with water'. Werner makes a similar observation: 'the new entrepreneurs and the self-employed were simply thrown into the water and asked to swim'. The inability to manage risk, Dieter claims, fuelled recklessness resulting in numerous 'shipwrecks' and the destruction of livelihoods: 'The ability to take risks had to be learned after reunification, but many learned too well. They ended up shipwrecked and took others down with them'.

As Kupferberg (1998: 246) writes, 'life in modernity has a projective quality about it'. However, participants' narratives were more embedded in the past than in projected futures (Fenton and Langley, 2011). Signs of a more promising future were relatively rare. Werner espied little trace of any 'phoenix [rising] from the ashes', because the industrial companies had disappeared and the integrative structures needed to support a service sector were lacking:

> Those who thought differently from me emphasized the potential of a service sector. "In East Germany," they said, "we have the opportunity to start afresh, like a phoenix from the ashes. Why not develop the service sector?" But what is that supposed to achieve? A service industry here in East Germany, and then 500 km or 800 km away some industrial companies which can be found in the old *Bundesländer* anyway. That's not acceptable. There has to be a certain amount of mutual integration, of meshing together. (Werner, head of policy, employers association)

Some beacons of success indicative of new competences were nevertheless apparent (Buss, 2014; Kollmorgen, 2005), particularly in the cities, Jena, Dresden and Leipzig, described by Werner as growing 'like cancerous tumours'.

Some interviewees were willing to admit the overriding reality that the dissolution of the GDR had been an enormous boon for its populace. To have resisted progress would have been, for Christof, 'a case of keeping a dying man alive unnecessarily'. As Karl acknowledged:

> Maybe in this interview I didn't balance my critical point of view enough with positive views. All in all the disappearance of the GDR was an enormous historic gain for us. (Karl, head of research)

Yet even those willing to admit a return to the GDR would be a retrograde step remained apprehensive about the future. These included Doris, who implored: 'Never back again!'

> I see the whole thing today more realistically, but despite that, for God's sake, *never back again!* Everyone says that, even those where the husband is unemployed, or something else is wrong. Nobody wants things back the way they were. Even the ones who don't have any privileges any more, because even for them things are better overall. But the problem now is fear of the future, because the press is frightening us! (Doris, owner-manager)

The main message conveyed here and perhaps by all the narratives in combination is that being 'on the cusp of change before an ever-shifting horizon' is a deeply unsettling experience (Thomson, 2006: 70).

What we found in analysing our interview data was we were dealing with not one but two transitions, which were out of synch. The first transition involved the transformation from GDR to a united Germany through a process of assimilation with the West German model ('outer unification'). The second much slower transition, invisible to the eye, concerned identity ('inner unification'); our perception being that the laggard East German identity was struggling to keep up with events. We found that the way in which interviewees anticipated their future was also determined by how they experienced their past. The East German collectivity as a whole is implicated in the personal testimony recorded here since we

become what we are through 'being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Somers, 1994: 606, cited in Ezzy, 1998: 247).

Discussion and conclusion

This paper makes an important methodological contribution to the literature on narrative in business history. We show that employing an oral history methodology can benefit business historians by tapping into rich seams of human subjectivity that 'allow the sources to enter the tale with their autonomous discourse' in a particularly effective way (Portelli, 1981: 106). The unlocking of subjective experience in oral history interviews enables the emergence of silenced stories that do not conform to hegemonic accounts, such as that of German unification (Mordhorst, 2008; White, 1987). 'Winners' tend to write history, not apparent 'losers'. However, as Thompson (2000: 7) asserts, oral history 'makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated'. By examining oral history interviews, albeit conducted earlier for a different purpose – a common challenge for business historians – we are able to isolate the metaphors and tropes within those testimonies and access deep-rooted patterns of thought on the part of low-power actors, thereby 'introducing new evidence from the underside' to address narrative imperialism (Thompson, 2000: 8). In so doing we are able to recover the voices of those who are disregarded by macro-accounts as they renegotiate memories of identity, place and belonging, in this way 'bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored' (Thompson, 2000: 8). Individuals construct such narratives over time as a means of locating the self in a wider narrative not of their own making, to bring back a small measure of control over their own destiny. Listening to their voices is important if business historians are to avoid falling into the trap of extending narrative imperialism. We are nevertheless conscious of a limitation of our research in this regard: by interviewing only East Germans,

and not including the voices of West German managers, entrepreneurs and administrators who worked in the former GDR during the 1990s, we risk recreating a categorization that East Germans themselves have constructed (i.e. victims/prey *vis-à-vis* exploiters and money-makers), which is of course only part of the socio-cultural reality.

The use of metaphor is an integral part of meaning-making in human living, structuring everyday reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metaphors puncture the 'platitude of consensus' instigated here by German reunification (Rancière, 1995: 104, cited in Beyes and Volkmann, 2010: 656). Their strength lies in their subjectivity, which provides a route to apprehending deep-seated cognitive patterns (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metaphor is substantiated through striking visual imagery, providing an effective vehicle for expressing the past and projected future, through which events appear to solidify:

> 'Because they are expressed in metaphor, events become fantasies that congeal into images; like illustrations or photographs in history books, they generate affective charge through their stenographic reduction of information. They "freeze" continuous process into emblems.' (Conley, 1988: xv).

Viewed in this light, narrative and metaphor emerge as an important means of performing ongoing identity work. Isolating these in oral history interviews allowed us to learn more about the ongoing identity work in which these low-power actors were engaging.

Memories are central to processes of meaning-making in modern society, and oral history interviews facilitate access to undocumented experience that might otherwise be lost (Grele, 2007; Portelli, 1981). The interviews conducted as part of this study were pervaded by a sense of the end of an era, a disappearing world which could nevertheless still be retrieved in testimony before all vestiges of it had faded, in the manner of time recaptured through narrative and memory explored by Proust (1954/1981). As Ritchie (2003) relates, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, attempts were made to revisit its official history by gathering oral testimonies to facilitate the 'democratization of memory and history' (Thomson, 2006: 590). Engaging in an oral history interview provides an opportunity for

reflexivity and represents an affirming, empowering process (Bornat, 1989). Identity, memory and narrative are intricately related (Thomson, 2006), such that oral history interviews have the potential to help preserve a faltering identity, individually and collectively.

Identity is also closely bound up with history. To 'own' or appropriate the past is ultimately determined by possession of the history of identity in particular temporal and spatial topographies (Ybema, 2010). This has important socio-political implications (Ezzy, 1998). As Friedman (1994: 85, cited in Bendle, 2002: 4) argues, 'history is the history of identity, [and] the question of who "owns" or appropriates the past is a question of who is able to identify him- or herself and the other at a given time and place'. The takeover of the GDR by FRG systems and structures accompanied by narrative imperialism contributed to the attrition of 'identity capital' on the part of East Germans, who found its 'purchasing power' reduced in the new Germany (Côte and Schwartz, 2002). This is not to imply that the East German identity had vanished completely. As Horst implied, there may still be hauntings of the inner GDR persona which endure after decades spent in the West (Mirabal, 2009: 21). Nevertheless, as Hugo expressed it, East Germans now look in the mirror and 'cannot find themselves again'.

The notion of the elusive identity that has been lost and cannot locate itself, whose contours are no longer visible, is an interesting one. In this regard, whilst attending a conference in Chemnitz, one of the researchers visited the medieval town hall which survived the carpet bombing by Allied airmen at the end of World War II. On the night of 5th March 1945, townspeople sheltered in the town hall which remarkably escaped the bombardment amid a sea of destruction. At the time of this visit, hanging on the walls of the town hall's central chamber were two large, imposing canvases, both of which were blank. On enquiring further, we learned their history. It transpired the canvases had first exhibited, from 1911,

portraits of Kaiser Wilhelm II and King Friedrich August. These were replaced in 1933 by paintings of Hitler and Göring, supplanted in 1945 by images of Grecian gods, much favoured under communism. These deities remained *in situ* until the *Wende* of 1989-1990. Thereafter, the citizens of Chemnitz were at a loss to know who or what to display, since nothing and no one seemed appropriate. So the frames were simply left vacant, an enduring (if unintended) symbol of the fugitive East German identity. Dominant cultural memories can both express and suppress self-narratives (Thomson, 2006). On this occasion, the stymieing of the 'official' remembering process symbolizes the displaced East German identity of being 'outcasts on the inside' (Bourdieu and Champagne, 1999: 421). The two blank canvases hang as a symbol of the silencing of the East German collective life story following a century of upheaval (Elias, 1996).

It would be inauthentic to suggest we should mourn the passing of the GDR, an unjust regime that harmed its citizens; as Doris stressed, 'Never back again!' Yet this does not mean that the story of the *human* processes of transformation should not be captured and told. Narrative has a healing power, instigating through talk and recollection the beginnings of a process of reconciliation and recovery, which might help knit up the fissured East-West divide by inducing 'a sense of continuity between who they have been and who they are becoming' (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010: 136). Engler (2002) asserts that instead of imitating the neoliberal Western model, there is a need for a new form of business and personal life to evolve, leading to a new German identity that incorporates elements of East *and* West. As Thomaneck and Niven (2001: 6) state: 'only a preparedness on the part of west Germans to rethink their own identity, hitherto very much based on material wealth and economic power, will help to create an overarching sense of national togetherness'.

History and biography are closely entwined (Mills, 1959/1970). We conclude by proposing a research agenda for the future which entails the extension of oral history research

in business and organizational history to elicit its human dimension. The research agenda we propose focuses on drawing out bottom-up perspectives from peripheral, low-power, ethnically diverse actors normally excluded from mainstream business history research, which, as Scranton and Fridenson (2013) point out, is overly American and Western in outlook and orientation. Dominant cultural and political narratives regularly conspire to 'efface past events' (Judt, 2013: 268). The use of oral history and narrative interview techniques by business historians can help to bring silenced stories into the open by affording access to otherwise inaccessible domains including underlying perceptions of personal and collective identity, fostering pluralistic understanding and enabling 'a return of the repressed' (de Certeau, 1988: 4). This research agenda is in keeping with the conceptualization of historical organization studies elaborated by Maclean et al. (2016), for which it proposes an important methodology. Business history is regularly criticized for focusing disproportionately on the lives of great men to whom the majority of archival documents relate (Ericson et al., 2015). Oral history and narrative interview techniques can provide a powerful corrective and antidote to this. We have shown that the intrinsic subjectivity of recollected experience does not detract from its meaning, but uncovers instead how this has been subjectively derived. Oral history methodologies might also be employed to apprehend and pin down other nebulous issues of longstanding interest to business historians and organizational theorists, including social class and power dynamics and asymmetries. Oral history data remains fresh over time so that revisiting an existing body of oral histories, even collected years earlier and for a different purpose, can yield new potentialities. Greater use of oral history research that contributes to the 'narrative turn' in business history by exploiting the spontaneous use metaphor, through which participants depict complex subject matter of personal and collective importance, is especially to be welcomed.

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Table 1: Oral History Interviewees

Pseudonym	Occupation	Sector	Biographical details
Harm	Senior Civil Servant	Agriculture-Forestry	Speaker for management of limited company for privatisation of agricultural and forestry land
Hugo	Professor of Economics (Retired)	University	Formerly clerk to head of managing board of Bundesanstalt für Vereinigungsbedingte Sonderaufgabe
Reinhard	Senior HR Manager	Elevator Engineering	Managing Director and head of Legal Affairs in elevator engineering firm
Klaus	Senior Researcher	Policy and Lobbying	Senior Researcher at German institute conducting economic research
Christof	Legal Manager	Hotels and Hospitality	Manager of Legal Department of German subsidiary of international hotel chain
Rolf	Managing Director	Petrochemicals	Managing Director and head of Legal Department of German subsidiary of international petrochemical company
Paul	Senior Manager	Trade Union	Senior Manager of Legal Department of major German trade union
Detlef	Assistant Manager	Transport Engineering	Assistant to chief country representative of major international transport engineering company
Georg	Professor of Economics	University	Professor of Economics and Management at East German university
Ewald	Entrepreneur	Tile Manufacturing	Proprietor of specialist tile dealership, self-employed
Corinna	Industrial Artist	Decorative Arts	Attended industrial design college and joined Artists' Association, but suffered from being offspring of church minister
Horst	Owner-Manager	Baking	Master baker and member of guild and city council, imprisoned under GDR
Dieter	Managing Partner	Architecture	Architect and member of town council. In his youth mother fled to West and left him behind in East
Wilhelm	Technical Director	Agriculture-Forestry	Mayor of small town after reunification, then mayor of a neighbouring town
Doris	Owner-Manager	Retail	Proprietor of pharmacy, self-employed
Reinhold	Senior Civil Servant	Department of Economy	Based in Berlin Senate Department for Economy, Employment and Women
Dietrich	Senior Partner	Cosmetics	Senior partner in East German cosmetics company in existence for 50 years
Walter	Policy Advisor	Christian Democratic Union	Political spokesman on education, youth and cultural policies for German political party
Heinrich	Public Relations (PR) Director	Transport Engineering	Head of PR in automotive firm. Imprisoned under GDR, bought out, then served as FRG adviser in de Maiziere government
Werner	Head of Policy	Employers Association	Head of policy department in German Association of SME employers

Helmut	Politician	Social Democratic Party	Formerly scientist in GDR, now secretary of committee on fundamental issues for German political party
Marianne	Managing Director	Government Agency	Member of party executive of German political party, representing women's issues
Karl	Head of Research	Party of Democratic Socialism	Established committee for German political party concerned with future of work in united Germany
Johannes	Senior Manager	Trade Union	Special representative on board of directors for new federal states and Central and Eastern Europe
Renate	Senior Manager	Employers Association	Senior manager of employers' association for chemical industry in north-east Germany