



Life Re-Decisions – Stories That Divide in Order to Connect ***Re-decyzje życiowe – historie, które dzielą, aby połączyć***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is to explore the narrative thread *My Own Voice – (Not) My Own Voice*, reconstructed through an analysis of the life stories of women who have declared making significant, transformative life changes.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The central research question is: *What do the collected narratives of these women reveal about the individual and social contexts surrounding major life transitions?* The study employs a narrative-biographical approach, utilizing both the narrative interview technique and a proprietary tool called the *Life Line*. The analysis of autobiographical material is grounded in four interconnected and mutually influential life contexts: personal, interpersonal, social, and historical.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: 1. Presentation of the theoretical foundations rooted in humanistic and narrative psychology. 2. Overview of the research process. 3. Analysis of the narrative thread *My Own Voice – (Not) My Own Voice* as an expression of the search for autonomy. 4. Description of the process of narrative redefinition. 5. Discussion of the practical and educational implications of the research, along with prospects for extending it through a quantitative framework.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The study found that, in order to narratively understand significant others – such as parents, caregivers, or peers – the women first needed to find *Their Own Voice*. This involved distancing themselves from familiar narratives and identifying what differentiated them from others. In doing so, they developed a new, integrative perspective that enabled deeper, more empathetic understanding of others, including their families and social peers.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: The findings are already being applied in developmental and therapeutic work with women across

age groups and are currently being extended through quantitative research, including the development of a *Life Re-Decision Questionnaire*.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **LIFE RE-DECISION, WOMEN'S NARRATIVES, BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH, SPEAKING WITH ONE'S OWN VOICE, SELF-ACTUALIZATION**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie wątku narracyjnego *Swoim – (Nie)Swoim głosem*, który został zrekonstruowany dzięki analizie narracji kobiet deklarujących dokonanie istotnych zmian życiowych.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Problem badawczy sprowadza się do pytania: Co pozyskane narracje kobiet mówią o indywidualnych i społecznych kontekstach znaczących zmian życiowych? Badania prowadzone są w podejściu narracyjno-biograficznym. Zrealizowane zostały przy użyciu techniki wywiadu narracyjnego i autorskiego narzędzia – *Linii życia*. W analizach materiałów autobiograficznych uwzględnione zostały cztery przenikające się i warunkujące konteksty życiowe: osobowy, interpersonalny, społeczny i historyczny.

PROCES WYWODU: 1. Prezentacja teoretycznych założeń badań sformułowanych na podstawie założeń psychologii humanistycznej i narracyjnej. 2. Przybliżenie procesu badawczego. 3. Analiza wątku narracyjnego *(Nie)Swoim – Swoim głosem* jako przejawu dążenia do autonomii. 4. Przybliżenie procesu redefinicji narracji. 5. W podsumowaniu wskazujemy praktyczny/edukacyjny wymiar badań oraz możliwości ich kontynuowania w podejściu ilościowym.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Badania pokazały, że aby podjąć narracyjną próbę zrozumienia swoich bliskich – rodziców/opiekunów bądź osób z tego samego pokolenia – narratorki w swoich historiach najpierw musiały odnaleźć *Swój głos*, czyli oddalić się od tego, co znane, dostrzec, co je dzieli od innych. To dawało narratorkom nową, „łączącą” z innymi perspektywę postrzegania (m.in. rodziny pochodzenia, rówieśników).

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Realizowane badania nad znaczącymi zmianami żywotnymi znajdują już swoje zastosowanie w pracy rozwojowej z kobietami w różnym wieku oraz kontynuowane są w badaniach ilościowych (testowanie kwestionariusza do badania re-decyzji żywotnych).

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZE:** **RE-DECYZJA ŻYCIOWA, NARRACJE KOBIET, BADANIA BIOGRAFICZNE, MÓWIĆ SWOIM GŁOSEM, AKTUALIZACJA JA**

Introduction

Is it possible to plan and initiate a major life change?
(Jacobsen, 2007, p. 119, as cited in Oleś, 2015, p. 237)

This article presents selected findings from a narrative-biographical study focused on women's stories of significant, transformative life changes, which we refer to as *life re-decisions*. The prefix "re" in *re-decisions* points to the redefinition of the self. Our focus here is on the core process of re-decision – finding and speaking in one's Own Voice. This process entails the crystallization of a new way of thinking about oneself, the emergence of new emotional patterns, the pursuit of entirely different professional activities, and sometimes a change in place of residence or even lifestyle (Chmieleńska & Modrzejewska, 2020a, 2020b). The resulting construct is tied both to the summoning of voices of significant others as one's own and to a gradual ability to recognize and express one's Own Voice in a personal story shaped by one's own beliefs and desires, often through the questioning of deeply ingrained family, intergenerational, or cultural scripts.

The Actualizing Tendency – a Humanistic Perspective on the Authors' Research

When speaking of the human being as a naturally evolving entity striving for a fuller personal and social life, we might ask: what developmental process enables the continual differentiation and becoming of a person? At the heart of the humanistic approach presented in this article is the assumption of an *actualizing tendency*, also referred to in the literature as the *self-actualization tendency* or the *organismic tendency* (Kaczmarek, 2019). Carl R. Rogers, the founder of person-centered theory (Rogers, 2014, 2016), proposed that every living organism is guided by a constructive, directional, motivational force that promotes life, growth, and development. He wrote that "the organism has one basic tendency and striving – to actualize, maintain and expand the experiencing organism" (Rogers, 2003, as cited in Kaczmarek, 2019).

This means that the human potential for energy allows a person to move from dependence and lack of autonomy toward increasing self-direction and self-determination. Life moves forward and continues when we act in harmony with our internal states – whether a physical need like hunger or thirst, or a psychological need for connection or achievement (see Gendlin, 1964). Even when the organism becomes stuck in some area of life, it still strives to move forward. Humanistic concepts of development describe a continual life force that propels individuals to reach for what they need.

A healthy organism is one in which the actualizing tendency is active and capable of overcoming obstacles posed by the external world (Kaczmarek, 2019) – like a river that finds its way around barriers and branches out into new channels. According to Rogers, a fully functioning person is someone who "experiences themselves in the full richness

of their being. They become who they truly are" (Rogers, 2014, p. 148). Such a person is characterized by: (1) increasing openness to experience, (2) trust in the wisdom of their own body, which they perceive as unfailing, (3) an internal locus of validation – that is, placing the "center of command" within oneself rather than in the external environment, and (4) a willingness to be in a continual process of becoming.

Rogers argued that when we reach the core of a person, we discover something constructive, inherently good, and striving toward harmony. This means that under favorable conditions, the actualizing tendency steers a person to make choices that promote the well-being of both themselves and others. The ways in which the actualizing tendency manifests can also be observed in biographical-narrative research (a topic we expand on below), which focuses on key moments of self-actualization – such as unusual or transformative life experiences. Examples include studies on the Paul Gauguin Syndrome (Oleś, 2019), research on positive orientation as a marker of one's capacity to regenerate after major losses, and the authors' own studies on life re-decisions (Chmieleńska & Modrzejewska, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

A Humanistic Research Approach: Narrative-Biographical Studies

Adopting a humanistic lens to explore individual experience – and given our research objective of reconstructing biographical processes surrounding major life transitions – we selected a method corresponding to these priorities. The biographical, or more specifically, the narrative-biographical approach (also referred to as the narrative perspective), proved especially well-suited. This methodology involves "examining the story of a person's life, their life trajectory" (Lalak, 2010, p. 133). As Oleś (2015, p. 130) notes in his analysis of autobiographical material, such inquiry seeks to uncover patterns in the interpretation of life events, personal meaning-making strategies, value systems, life assessments, and characteristic emotional responses. We assumed that by examining women's elicited narratives, we would gather autobiographical material that would allow us to explore the interviewees' experiences and capture the subjective meanings that they assign to major, transformative life changes.

We understand the concept of narrative here as "a process of presenting subjectively experienced content" (Borkowski, 2018, p. 153), and we use it interchangeably with terms such as life story, life account, or self-narration (see Borkowski, 2018). These spontaneous autobiographical accounts (e.g., those shared in narrative or open-ended interviews) are not only consistent with the actual sequence of events but also represent a reflective (narrative) understanding of one's life and oneself as the protagonist of that story – endowed with specific motives, patterns of behavior, and emotional responses. Through a supportive research process (such as a narrative interview), in which the narrator constructs a personal story, they also identify their own needs, assign meaning to their emotions and actions, and shape their identity. Narrative thus becomes a means of uncovering how they reformulate the structure of the self. Telling one's life story becomes

a health-promoting activity, as it enables the integration of past experiences into a coherent narrative, facilitates reinterpreting those experiences, and ultimately supports a more intentional and self-aware approach to life.

Research Procedure – Analytical Activities

Our interest centered on the processual dimension of consciously initiated changes described in women's life stories. We were curious about the events, themes, and life stages that our interviewees would choose to share. This led us to formulate the following research question: *What do the collected narratives reveal about the individual and social contexts of significant life changes?* To address this question, we employed two research techniques: the narrative interview and a complementary linear method that we termed the *Life Line*. The structure of the interview was modeled after the narrative interview methodology (Schütze, 2012; Rosenthal, 2012), as well as the understanding interview method (Kaufman, 2010). Each interview followed the full sequence of narrative interview stages: introduction, narrative stimulation, core narrative, follow-up questions, and closing.

The *Life Line* technique, developed by the authors, was designed to complement the diachronic dimension of the research by organizing the chronology of life events in their historical and external context (see Bertaux, 2012). We invited women who self-identified as having undergone major, transformative life changes – such as radical career shifts, lifestyle changes, relocations, or major reorganizations of family or spiritual life. The participants were not high-profile artists, scholars, or public figures. We defined “major life change” as one subjectively recognized by the women themselves.

Over the past several years, participants were referred to us through word of mouth, a recruitment method commonly known in social research as the “snowball method.” Our research spanned from 2017 to 2024 (with a pause during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022). To date, we have conducted 18 interviews with women aged 30 to 75. Most are professionally active, one is retired. Sixteen of the women have completed higher education, and two hold secondary education degrees. All participants declared that they had made a significant life change. This article is the first to include interviews conducted between 2023 and 2024, which expand on the analyses from our earlier studies (Chmieleńska & Modrzejewska-Świągulska, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

The research procedure involved transcribing the interviews and reconstructing key biographical events. Inspired by the approaches of Daniel Bertaux (2012) and Aneta Ostaszewska (2018), we structured our analysis around four intersecting and mutually influential life contexts:

- Personal (descriptions of the inner world),
- Interpersonal (accounts of relationships with significant others),
- Social (descriptions of social roles and expectations),
- Historical (accounts of the external reality in which the person operates).

Our analytic process moved from individual analysis by each researcher to collaborative analysis in pairs, which allowed us to compare and cross-validate our interpretations of the interview data.

Results of Narrative Analysis

Humanistic-experiential psychology posits that as “beings who are not self-sufficient, we require interaction with our surroundings; and as distinct individuals, we need our unique qualities to be acknowledged, with clearly defined boundaries” (Król-Fijewska, 2019, p. 17). Human functioning involves the interplay of two fundamental needs – the need to be accepted and the need to differentiate ourselves. In other words, we simultaneously seek connection and the affirmation of our personal identity. Two narrative threads emerged from the life stories of the women we studied – *In One’s Own Voice* and *(Not) In One’s Own Voice* – which reflect the dialectical relationship between external influence and inner authenticity, as conceptualized in experiential theory (Rogers, 2003). The key analytical category distinguishing *(Not) In One’s Own Voice* from *In One’s Own Voice* is the notion of “voice” – specifically, whose voice the women used when describing their journeys of growth and change. These voices are woven together in a web of relationships and form a dynamic force in the process of self-actualization.

The narrative category *(Not) In One’s Own Voice* – heterogeneous by nature – touches on the tension between unity and multiplicity in our internal experience of identity, which becomes visible in the way we tell our life stories (Królak, 2019). Many of the voices heard in the interviews – through which the women justified their choices, justified certain actions, and dismissed others – were found to be borrowed from others: absorbed, internalized, and claimed as one’s own. The life choices made by these women in the first half of their lives, often influenced by external expectations and internalized values, differed markedly – both in nature and intention – from the decisions made later in life during what we call *life re-decisions*.

These accounts reveal not so much a continuous life narrative, but rather processes of rupture – conscious breaks from former identities – and the emergence of multiple internal voices representing diverse aspects of experience that had previously gone unexpressed, either subjectively or in familial or intergenerational settings. As Carl R. Rogers explains, as the individual perceives and accepts into his self-structure more of his organic experiences, he finds that he is replacing his present value system–based extensively on introjections which have been distortedly symbolized–with a continuing organismic valuing process (Rogers, 2003). Similarly, our analysis identifies two main sources from which these voices originate and are constructed: the external social realm and the internal (organismic) self.

The First Dimension – *(Not)One’s Own Voice* – refers to a voice that is socially constructed through adaptation and assimilation in the family environment and a specific sociocultural context. This dimension, therefore, indicates the influence of the external world. In the narratives, it manifests in:

- Frequently invoking others' voices (introjects) – statements or beliefs internalized from significant others that define values and act as internal imperatives when making major life decisions (“my mother always said...”);
- Internal dialogue with imagined versions of important others, often revealing inner ambivalence – conflicts between obligations and desires, a need to prove oneself to others, and comparisons between one's own choices and those made by women in the family lineage;
- Justifying life paths by referring to intergenerational patterns and “natural” roles of women in the family – and identifying with them (“that's how I was raised; all the women in our family,” “that's just how it is”);
- Easily conforming to social, professional, and relational roles that reproduce learned behaviors and internalized models of femininity (Chmieleńska & Modrzejewska, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

The Second Dimension – One's Own Voice – is a voice that emerges from the depths of the self: autonomous and guided by the person's current desires and values. This voice represents a personally constructed mode of understanding oneself and the world. It typically arises in moments of subjective discomfort and perceived misalignment between the self and one's group of origin, generation, or socio-historical reality. Speaking in one's own voice means acting based on an internal, individual sense of truth. It could be likened to the experiential process of organismic evaluation: turning inward for answers – toward one's own felt experience, in pursuit of coherence with the self – guided by the courage to detect what feels false, imposed, inauthentic, or dishonest to one's true self, and to reject it.

This form of self-actualization was more closely associated with the re-decisions made by the women in the second half of their lives. The narrators described moments when they were able to detach not only from their current circumstances, but also from previously held versions of themselves – to reconsider and reselect their attitudes toward life and their place within it. This process required them to revisit key identity questions. Despite the personal and professional upheaval that these re-decisions often brought, the women described them as the only choices that made sense.

The Process of Narrative Redefinition

Two guiding questions posed in this journal issue invite reflection: *When does narrative thinking help construct a more authentic and nuanced view of the world? And when, instead, does it deepen divisions between people by reinforcing hermetic stories through selective representations of facts?* Our research suggests that the process of life re-decision involves three interwoven narrative-biographical threads. Creating space for these threads in personal development is essential if one's narrative is to contribute to the process of becoming more fully oneself. These are as follows:

1. **ADOPTING AN EXTERNAL NARRATIVE** – This refers to accepting familial, intergenerational, and cultural narratives as one's own. It involves building a narrative

backdrop during the first half of life: settling into what already exists, getting to know oneself through fulfilling expected social roles, and being mirrored in the stories of significant others (meeting the need for connection, acceptance, and belonging).

2. **REJECTION** – This stage entails breaking away from a previously accepted narrative about oneself – distancing from a socially sanctioned, cohesive worldview. It involves questioning the stories and values that have shaped the image of the self; pulling away from one's family; stepping back from inherited narratives of womanhood; and rejecting prior choices in search of an identity that lies "just beyond what is expected or considered right." Here, the need for autonomy and individuation comes to the fore.
3. **RERAFTING THE NARRATIVE** – At this stage, individuals create a unique, personal story that incorporates both lost and newly discovered aspects of the self. It means tuning in to one's Own Voice by consciously affirming what is truly one's own, rejecting what is not, and selectively adopting elements from external narratives that resonate and serve the self. This process allows for an honest response to the question, "Am I living in a way which is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?" (Carl R. Rogers). This is a state of internal coherence in which it becomes increasingly difficult to deceive oneself, to ignore or distort one's own experience.

Although these stages may seem linear, the process of narrative redefinition is inherently recursive, renewable, and dialectical. The three dimensions frequently overlap – not only in the broader arcs of life stages and cycles but also in any significant decision point, when, as Jacobsen (2007, p. 119, as cited in Oleś, 2015, p. 237) describes, a person wants to "initiate a true change in life." The recurring pattern of distancing from and returning to one's own story becomes an intricate act of searching for meaning and weaving a life narrative.

To summarize, the process of life re-decision involves change on two levels. On the one hand, it concerns the collective – emerging from the "inherited" narratives, such as family stories and the intergenerational experiences of women. On the other, redefining the self allows accessing what is deeply personal and unique: the individual biography and the sense of self rooted in one's identity. This process alters the direction and structure of life, as well as one's self-narration, by changing how experiences are gathered and interpreted. It involves a transformation – a restructuring – through the incorporation of entirely new life experiences that propel the individual toward self-discovery and becoming ever more fully oneself (Tyszkowa, 1988).

Conclusions and Practical and Research Recommendations

The life re-decisions of our interviewees represented an existential and meaning-making process – one unfolding through the creation of new stories and narratives about themselves. These changes were fluid and multidimensional, highly context-dependent, and

difficult to predict (Trempeala, 2000). As the women chose to follow their Own Voice, the resulting changes extended beyond “normal structure” in three key ways: (1) through objective turning points (such as career changes, significant achievements in previously unexplored areas of life), (2) through deep, subjective inner experiences (assigning new meanings), and (3) through tangible outcomes or creations (such as creative products, new spaces, or initiatives) (see: Bühler, 1999).

In other words, a story told and viewed in a new light can transform one's self-perception. The concept of Speaking in One's Own Voice resonates with the narrative understanding of the actualizing tendency. In the humanistic tradition, discovering and following one's Own Voice becomes a metaphor for self-actualization. Our narrators described a growing inner discord, discomfort, misalignment, and internal conflict with the value systems they had inherited from their families. They came to realize when, in their earlier lives, they had spoken in a voice that was (Not) Their Own – their early narratives were built on a distorted sense of self, heavily influenced by introjects (internalized voices of significant others) or by sociocultural pressures to conform to traditional female roles. Thus, telling one's life story can offer a fresh perspective on past experiences and open up new ways of understanding them – making it possible to redefine a person's view of themselves and their personal narrative about who they are.

Based on the women's narratives and reflections, and inspired by our own theoretical explorations, we have developed a set of questions/areas to guide workshop and therapeutic work with women. We believe that these prompts can support the path toward self-realization, strengthen the actualizing tendency, and cultivate a deeper sense of authenticity:

- Perception of reality: Whose voices act as your inner compass when making the most important life decisions?
- Openness to experience: What efforts are you making to discover what you truly feel called to do, and when do you feel most like your authentic self?
- Integration, wholeness, and unity: When do you feel most fully yourself?
- True self, autonomy, uniqueness: What helps you stay true to your values and beliefs, even when they are unpopular in your environment?
- Self-transcendence: Can you recall a challenge in which you surprised yourself in a positive way – when you felt like a different, more empowered version of yourself?
- Democratic character structure: In your relationships, do you give yourself and others the right to individuality – to think, feel, and express themselves differently?

The findings of this narrative-biographical study, along with the Life Re-decision Model (see: Chmieleńska & Modrzejewska-Świgulska, 2020a, 2020b) referenced throughout this article, have motivated us to expand our qualitative research with a quantitative component. We are currently developing a Life Re-decision Questionnaire designed to psychometrically assess different dimensions of readiness for significant life change.

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