

Meaning in Life in Incoherent Life Stories

A Comparative Literary Analysis concerning Subjects of Disability Narratives

as portrayed in Postmodernist Autobiographies

Rong Zwemmer

rongzwemmer@hotmail.com

Master thesis for Humanistic Studies

University for Humanistic Studies

Utrecht, The Netherlands

Supervisors: prof. dr. Aagje Swinnen / dr. Hanne Laceulle

Co-supervisor: prof. dr. Arjan Braam

Examiner: prof. dr. Laurens ten Kate

Course coordinator: dr. Wander van der Vaart

British English

Abstract

An autobiographical life story portraying elements of coherence is traditionally attributed to provide its storyteller with psychological well-being, a meaningful sense of self-identity, and meaning in life. Autobiographical life stories disrupting and transgressing this dominant ideal of coherence have received significantly less attention. The aim of this research was to examine 'incoherent life stories' and its subjects, particularly in relation to the (humanistic) concept of meaning in life, by analyzing three autobiographies of individuals living with either depression, autism, and dementia. The findings of this study show how first, all three narrative subjects of incoherent life stories appear concerned with meaning in their lives. Second, subjects convey meaning in their lives to significantly varying extents. And third, disabilities in subjects' lives prominently affect experiencing meaning in one's life. A successful integration of effects and acts of disabilities into one's life appears to positively contribute to meaning in one's life.

Preface

The idea for this thesis emerged from reading McAdams' article 'The Problem of Narrative Coherence' (2006) for a master-course I attended roughly a year ago. It was one of those texts that truly struck me when reading it. It sparked my enthusiasm and occupied my mind for a while. When I began thinking about a potential topic for my thesis, I turned to McAdams' text again and felt sure that I wanted to further delve into this idea of (in)coherence in life stories. While writing my thesis I never doubted whether this topic was the topic I had to write my thesis about. I could tell I was emerging myself into something that was close to me and my interests.

Now that my thesis is finished, my deepest thanks goes out to Aagje. For many reasons I could never have begun writing and eventually have completed this thesis without her guidance and support and I am tremendously grateful for that. We connected through our mutual admiration for, and academic backgrounds in literature and we found a way to make literary autobiographies as well as literary research relevant for my research in the field of humanistic studies. Aagje's enthusiasm and belief offered me the confidence to fully devote my time to this academic project for the past few months.

Thank you to Arjan, Laurens, and Wander for their feedback and engagement during my process. I furthermore must specifically thank Hanne, who was willing to abruptly get involved with this project in a late stage and therefore helped me out a lot. She has been very helpful and engaging in my final process. During a relative short period of time we did a lot of work on my thesis and had frequent contact and discussion concerning its form and content. Her new perspectives and precise feedback made me re-examine my overall work critically and pushed me to further clarify and strengthen my arguments.

Also, I must thank my sister Roos. Seeing her defend her PhD during my writing-process offered me renewed encouragement for my own research. Occasionally, when I was doubting how to write specific parts of my thesis, I would turn to her inspiring research to see how she had approached certain parts.

Lastly, I want to thank everyone I casually spoke over coffee or during lunch breaks in the canteen or garden at the University for Humanistic Studies where I worked proper office-hours for eight months; in particular Sylwin and Janique. They were always asking after the progress of my thesis. They offered support and made 'thesis-life' overall more fun.

The 'unconventional nature' of this literary-analysis research was pointed out by both examiners from early on. Although this reaction gave me some nervousness at one point

along the way, I now enjoy the fact that my approach is not common within humanistic studies and I feel immensely proud that I completed this type of research. Doing a master-thesis project that is not typically supposed to be done, only made me more eager to prove its relevance to the scholars of my university. As an admirer of literature and believer in its relevance, I hope for a change in attitude within humanistic studies so that more research on literary works will be possible in the future. Hopefully this thesis adds to that. I am satisfied with every word written below and I hope it will be of interest to you too. This finished product certainly feels like ‘a coherent whole’ which in the case of an academic piece is without a doubt the appropriate way to tell a story.

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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEMATIC PURSUIT OF COHERENCE IN LIFE STORIES

“My self is only what I say, and only by opening myself to the pain of my words can I attain the redemptive pleasure of claiming to be a self at all.”
(Saunders, 2017, p.50)

“Telling chaos stories represents the triumph of all that modernity seeks to surpass.”
(Frank, 1995, p.97)

1.1. Introducing the ideal of the coherent life story

In the late modern age we live in, tradition is increasingly losing its hold, and the tremendous growth of knowledge urges us to constantly re-adjust ourselves to our social and cultural environment (Giddens, 1991). In other words: our contemporary and ever-changing world no longer tells us who we are and how we should live, but instead we must figure it out on our own (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1993). More than ever we are challenged to create our own meanings and discover our own ‘sacred truths’ (McAdams, 1993). The ‘demythologized world’ (McAdams, 1993) might provide the individual with a greater sense of freedom, but to be forced to explore your own meanings and negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options, also significantly contributes to feelings of doubt, fear, and existential anxiety (Bohlmeijer, 2007).

Since the early 1980s, scholars (Schafer, 1981; Bruner, 1986; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Linde, 1993; Frank, 1995; Schechtman, 1996) within different fields – sociology, psychology, philosophy – highlighted the importance of constructing one’s own life story. This paradigmatic ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences and humanities that gained momentum in the 1990s, argues that through the construction (and possibly telling) of one’s life story, based on our own personal experiences, we can (re)discover what is true and meaningful in our existence (McAdams, 1993). Your life story serves as an explanation of how you came to be who you are today. The composed narrative of the self illustrates ‘essential truths’ about ourselves and how we perceive the world (McAdams, 1993).

Psychologist Bruner (1986) was one of the first who addressed and highlighted the relation between autobiographical narration and personal identity, known as ‘the narrative identity thesis’, that was initially met with reluctance and resistance, but has since then become an increasingly important topic for academic research. Scholars (MacIntyre, 1984; Bruner, 1986; Taylor, 1989; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Linde, 1993; Schechtman,

1996) embrace the idea that constructing autobiographical stories about one's life are seen as a precondition to both *have* and *maintain* self-identity. They believe that there is neither a primary biological base to have a self nor a pre-discursive self; there 'merely' exists a type of 'secondary construction' of the (narrative) self as a purely linguistic arrangement (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010; Van Goidsenhoven, 2017).

Zooming in on more specific definitions regarding this 'narrative self-identity', sociologist Giddens (1991) sees self-identity in our late modern age to be a *reflexive project* of the self "which consists in the sustaining of a coherent, yet, continuously revised, biographical narrative" (p.5). Narrative psychologist¹ McAdams (1993) holds the central idea that without the creation of a life story an individual has no identity: "In the modern world in which we all live, identity is a life story" (p.1). A life story is what we know when we know a person, and what we know when we think we know ourselves (McAdams, 1993). In philosophy, Schechtman (1996) defends what she calls the 'narrative self-constitution view', which contends that a person's coherent and meaningful sense of identity is created by constructing, telling, and enacting an autobiographical narrative.

Within this theory concerning the concept of life story for meaning-making and self-identity, scholars (MacIntyre, 1984, Giddens, 1991; McAdams; 1993; Linde; 1993; Schechtman, 1996; Bohlmeijer, 2007) specifically strongly emphasize that human life is ideally represented through a *coherent* life story. Coherence, in its broadest understanding, means that parts go together very well (Delaere, 2010, p.66). Coherence in a story – also referred to as 'narrative coherence' – refers to a state in which separate story-parts can be linked together well and thus forming a *united whole*, such as a sequence of events or an overarching theme or message (McAdams, 2006). The idea of narrative coherence can historically be traced back to the well-structured 'Aristotelian narrative' consisting of a clear beginning, middle, and end with a fully resolved plot (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). McAdams (2006) says that many coherent life stories seem to follow a predictable grammar that usually consists of a character that wants to accomplish something and the story chronicles that effort, typically according to a linear: beginning, middle, and ending, creating full closure. MacIntyre (1984) sees coherence as a type of *unity*. For him, the unity of an individual life is the unity of an autobiographical narrative "which links one's birth to death as narrative beginnings, to middle, to end" (p.205). Linde (1993) considers two fundamental

¹ Narrative psychology refers to a specific focus within the academic field of psychology, concentrated on how human beings deal with their experiences through constructing and 'taking in' stories.

‘coherence principles’ in life stories to be ‘causality’ and ‘continuity’. For Schechtman (1996), coherence in autobiographical narratives is constituted when portrayed experiences and actions can be interpreted as parts of a broader, ongoing story. This sense of coherence takes the form and logic of a ‘conventional’ narrative characterized by ‘linearity’².

Based on definitions given by multiple scholars, I formed a preliminary definition of a coherent life story. The coherent life story is the constructed story of one’s life, focused on the portrayal of the *development over time* concerning the central human figure, that is: the narrative subject. Its events are arranged according to linear chronology and causality. The ending is characterized by a convincingly sense of closure in which the subject reaches a form of positive, personal transformation. To its audience, coherent life stories are characterized by ‘making sense’ in three ways: they fit content expectations regarding what is perceived as normal ‘typical’ human nature (which is partially dependent on the context of one’s society); they fit expectations regarding the dominant master narratives existing within (Western) societies; and lastly, these stories can be both adequately followed and understood.

The tendency to display coherence in life stories is generally positively associated with independent measures of psychological well-being (McAdams, 2006) and is linked to the ability to sustain continuity, directionality, and meaning in life (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). An individual’s story that has the power to tie together past, present, and future, is able to provide *unity* and *purpose* in the life of the individual (McAdams, 1993). When our life stories appear to be more coherent, it provides us with a greater sense of basic trust in the world and ourselves (Bohlmeijer, 2007). Schechtman (1996) strongly emphasizes how autobiographical narratives must show a sufficient degree of coherence, in order to provide the person with a meaningful sense of identity. Linde (1993) formulates the overall idea of the value of the coherent life story as follows: “In order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story” (p.3). More specifically, developing a coherent story which explains an addiction and shows ‘the way out’ is seen as an essential part of the recovery process (Hänninen & Jännes, 2010) and a coherent life story is even considered to be *the outcome* of full recovery if not redemption (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Also, constructing coherent life stories might not solely be relevant for the storyteller. Main (1991) argues that people who are able to tell coherent stories about particularly their childhood experiences, have children who develop into psychologically

² Delaere (2010) likens Schechtman concept of ‘narrative self-conceptions’ to ‘coming-of-age’ stories (p.59).

healthier adults. In sum, traditionally, coherence is considered a virtue, a guarantee for ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ life stories, and it is believed that persons live better if they have a coherent life story (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010).

These definitions regarding narrative coherence are also used to assess and examine deviations and transgressions from this idea if not its direct opposite, that is: narrative *incoherence* in life stories. Smith and Watson (2001) state that narrative coherence ‘breaks down’ when a story portrays: digressions, omissions, contradictions, gaps, silences, and multiple and conflicting voices (pp.169-170). Deviations from narrative coherence appear further characterized by unrelated, abrupt, and inappropriate topic shifts (Caspari & Parkinson, 2000) as well as deficits in logical, causal, and temporal coherence (Coelho, 2002). Other characteristics include ambiguity (Hydén, 2010), as well as incompleteness, multiplicity and hybridity (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). Strawson (2004) zooms in on an ‘Episodic’ aspect in life stories that is paradoxically likely to have “no particular tendency to see [...] life in narrative terms” (p.430). This ‘Episodic’ element is characterized by a ‘lack of linkage’ and a failure to consider oneself as something that is the same self over time (Strawson, 2004). Speaking concretely of narrative incoherence, Wasson (2018) highlights how described events ‘stand alone’ rather as parts of a coherent sequence or progression, and McAdams (2006) underlines a non-linear portrayal of events and a tendency to not reach a culmination. Incoherent life stories furthermore might defy audience’s expectations by depicting uncommon human behavior and thinking within society (McAdams, 2006). Generally, most concepts regarding incoherence in autobiographical narratives depict their disorganized nature.

Based on definitions given by multiple scholars, I formulated a preliminary definition of an incoherent life story. The incoherent life story is the constructed story of one’s life, focused on the portrayal of the central narrative subject. Its events are presented in a non-linear and non-causal chronology. For the audience, its ending does not cause a satisfying sense of closure. Incoherent life stories are furthermore characterized by causing confusion to its audience in three ways: they defy content expectations regarding what is perceived as ‘normal’ human nature (which is partially dependent on the context of one’s society); they defy expectations regarding the dominant master narratives existing within Western societies, and the audience is struggling if not failing to follow and understand these stories.

Psychological problems and emotional suffering partly derive from our failures to make sense of our lives through creating coherent life stories (McAdams, 2006). Although this belief has been debated, it is traditionally the general assumption in narrative psychology

that when a person's life story appears incoherent, this mirrors an 'incoherent self' which implies that the individual is psychologically unhealthy and troubled (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Following this belief, Eakin (1999) claims that "narrative disorders and identity disorders go hand in hand" (p.124). In narrative therapy, a therapist works with a patient to transform a disorganized and confused life story into one that expresses more coherence "in the hope that more coherent life stories, will translate into more coherent and more effective lived experience" (McAdams, 2006, p.120).

Debating the causes for incoherence in life stories, Laceulle (2016) says that in particular 'disrupting events' such as losses or sudden illnesses tend to perturb our life stories and therefore the coherence in our life stories (p.161). Disrupting events can be difficult to integrate with one's life story of self-understanding and confront human beings with their limits of control, unity, and coherence (Laceulle, 2016). Furthermore, Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou (2010) point out how people working in the arts, people living with traumatic political experiences and, lastly, people living with illnesses, are often more likely to 'threaten' the ideal of coherence in autobiographical stories.

In line with people living with illnesses, I concentrate my research on people living with disabilities. Following Van Goidshoven's (2017) definition, disabilities refer to types of biological aspects, personal experiences as well as social exclusion, and subsequently how they relate to each other. It is an umbrella-term that includes illnesses, and therefore allows to look at a broader group, rather than specifically people living with illnesses. Disability studies (Kleinman, 1988; Frank, 1995; Goossensen, 2016; Van Goidsenhoven, 2017) have shown how unconventional narratives of patients' lives that significantly lack coherence, yet could provide rich, detailed accounts of what it means to live with disabilities³.

1.2. Problematizing the coherent life story

Although most scholars do not deny the importance of some form of, or at least some degree or narrative coherence in one's life story, the positive value attributed to a coherent life story is also questioned and criticized⁴. It is important to realize that the attitude privileging coherent life stories gives rise to, at least, four problems, that are now detailed below.

³ In *The Illness Narratives* Kleinman's (1988) main point is that talking to patients about their experiences and interpreting these stories is a core task in the work of doctoring, since there is a fundamental difference between the patient's experience of illness and the doctor's attention to the disease.

⁴ I found the most insightful and relevant publications criticizing narrative coherence to be the collection of articles in *Beyond Narrative Coherence* by Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo and Tamboukou (2010).

First, aiming for the construction of a coherent life story of your life might not be desirable. Although research (Linde, 1993; McAdams, 2006) suggests that people who live well do tell especially coherent life stories, we need to understand that coherent life stories do not necessarily equal ‘happy’ or ‘more fulfilling’ life stories and therefore ‘better’ lives. A coherent life story is ‘not enough’ when it is a story that the individual wants to reject (McAdams, 2006). People who are suffering from depression are for instance living with a life story that is too tragic to live with, even though this could still be a coherent life story (Brugman, 2007). Debating the limitations of coherence, McAdams (2006) also reaches the conclusion that researchers are stretching the notion of coherence too far:

if [life] stories are to advance living action, if they are to inspire lives wherein protagonists love deeply and work effectively, lives in which people make positive contributions to the world around them, then life stories must express more than mere narrative coherence. (p.122)

Although he does not explicitly elaborate on what ‘more’ is needed, he continuously stresses that the stories we live by influence how we live and how we treat and affect others. Given this ‘real world significance’, McAdams (2006) highlights the importance to explore the moral assumptions and ideologies underlying the stories we tell. Psychologist Freeman (2000) furthermore illustrates how an overly crafted and coherent life story could even lead to significant constraint of life options, by coining the concept of ‘narrative foreclosure’. The term refers to “the premature conviction that one’s life story has effectively ended” (Freeman, 2000, p.83). Narrative foreclosure implies that one already knows the ending of one’s life and no other alternative endings are considered as realistic (Freeman, 2000). Hence the individual simply accepts the ending he or she envisioned, which limits other potential possibilities in life.

Second, the construction of a ‘coherent life story’ is an illusion, in the sense that it is impossible to create a fully-accurate representation of the complexity of lived experiences in the form of a coherent life story. Gergen (1991) claims that the coherent life story is something we tell ourselves in order to create a satisfied and saturated self. Lived experience is however chaotic, messy, confusing, and even ‘multiphrenic’ for many individuals. The modern self is experiencing such a variety of many diverse stimuli and shifting demands that a coherent life story can never convey the complexity and messiness of these experiences. If life stories are true to lived experience, they are therefore likely to be unstable, indeterminate and incoherent (Gergen, 1991). Stories that succumb to a single perspective, no matter how

coherent they may seem to be, are too simplistic to be true and fail to reflect lived experience (McAdams, 2006). Thomä (1998) rejects the idea that life can be captured in one overarching coherent narrative, since there will always be elements and experiences escaping this narrative structure.

Third, by privileging and legitimizing coherent life stories as ‘better’ life stories, other ‘different’ and more challenging life stories – among which incoherent life stories – are undervalued *in society*: they are marginalized, oppressed, excluded, neglected, or even denied (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). The dominant narratives in society that attempt to provide a singular and overarching explanation as well as a preferred script for human behavior, refer to what philosopher Lyotard (1979) calls ‘master narratives’⁵. Both McAdams (2006) and Frank (1995) elaborate on concrete examples of these culturally preferred master narratives in – at least – American society, which interestingly all can be considered as forms of particularly *coherent* life stories. McAdams (2006) distinguishes different types of life stories of ‘the good life’: ‘rags-to-riches’ stories of the American Dream, Protestant conversion stories, narratives of liberation and freedom, and self-help narratives about recovery and the actualization of human potential⁶. Frank (1995) speaks of ‘the restitution story’, which follows the basic plotline: “Yesterday I was healthy, today I’m sick, but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again” (p.77)⁷. Although this plot certainly reflects a natural human desire to get well and stay well, it also powerfully illustrates the dominating demand of contemporary culture that treats health as the normal condition that people ought to have restored as quickly as possible (Frank, 1995). Both McAdams’ and Frank’s examples strongly display human progress over time, accumulating into a significantly positive and satisfying sense of closure.

The problem with these culturally preferred life stories based on the coherence oriented model, is that it leaves limited space for more unconventional stories in society, and thus they are not being heard (enough). Society might fail to hear people behind incoherent

⁵ In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) Lyotard uses both the terms ‘master narratives’ and ‘grand narratives’ for the same concept. I will exclusively refer to this concept using the former term.

⁶ Although these different types of life stories are critiqued for their presumptuousness, their lack of ambivalence, and their embrace of the expansive individual self, they are widely celebrated in American society (McAdams, 2006)

⁷ To illustrate this master narrative, Frank (1995) gives a recognizable example of either the most pervasive or most insidious model of the restitution story: the television commercial for non-prescription drugs. Frank analyzes three movements in the plot. First, the ill person is shown in physical misery, highlighted by the fact that some activity with a member of the family is to be canceled. The second movement entails the protagonist taking the remedy; a subplot may involve an initial rejection of taking the remedy. In the end, the physical comfort is restored and social duties are resumed. The protagonist is enjoying life again (Frank, 1995, pp.79-80).

life stories and subsequently will fail to properly recognize, understand, look after, and care for their needs and wishes in multiple ways; either financially, through specific health care services, or by giving them renewed respect and empowerment within society. Thus, the strong preference for coherence constitutes forms of social exclusion. The imposition of this idealized narrative of coherence also constitutes a norm wherein some types of individuals fit in and others are deemed to be unconventional, which poses pressures upon narrators. Individuals will either be forced to reshape their incoherent life story – and therefore who they are – to fit into the dominant frame of coherence, or they will be marginalized in society. It is important to realize that it might not be desirable or might even be harmful for an individual to pursue the construction of a coherent life story. This would for instance be the case in a therapeutic setting, where a client might be urged to describe his life according to a specific format regarding the dominant embraced idea of ‘the good life’. Part of the reason why coherence appears widely celebrated, is because an absence of coherence in a life story might be experienced as difficult, uncomfortable or even threatening for the audience (Frank, 1995). The teller is not heard to be living a ‘proper’ life and the audience may also have trouble facing what is being said as a possibility or even a reality in their own lives. The anxiety that incoherent life stories provoke further inhibits properly ‘taking in’ these stories in society (Frank, 1995).

Fourth, in the academic context, scholars concerned with life stories privilege coherent life stories as more ‘rich’ representational material for analysis and therefore may neglect other more challenging cases, among which incoherent life stories (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010). The academic mission to find and value coherence marginalizes many narrative phenomena, omits non-fitting narrators, and encourages scholars to read obsessively from the perspective of coherence (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010, p.1). I want to address this point specifically in relation to the notion of ‘meaning in life’ as a part of life stories, since it serves as a central topic in my research. The correlation between living a coherent life and living a ‘meaningful’ life has been elaborately highlighted by scholars in the field of psychology and philosophy (Van Praag, 1978; Baumeister, 1991; Linde, 1993; Medved & Brockmeier, 2010; Derkx, 2011), but how meaning in life and incoherence in life stories are potentially related has not been explored and remains to be debated.

In line with this addressed problem, I shall now elaborate on the concept of meaning in life, which serves as an essential concept in both humanism and humanistic studies where it is seen as a fundamental need for human existence (Van Praag, 1978). For humanists,

meaning in life is not ‘given’ but must constantly – as an ongoing challenge – be looked for, found, interpreted, and acknowledged in one’s own experiences (Derkx, 2010). In Van Praag’s (1978) understanding, meaning in life refers directly to *the coherence* between one’s lived experiences: meaning in life is about trying to justify the meaning behind your actions and your life as a whole, in light of what you strive for and want in life (p.228). Derkx’ (2011) broad definition of meaning in life is about *placing* one’s own experiences and one’s own life as a whole into a broad framework of coherent meaning. More precisely, Derkx furthermore – building on Baumeister’s (1991) theory – distinguishes seven ‘needs for meaning’ that form this framework of coherent meaning, that are: purpose, moral justification, self-worth, efficacy, coherence/comprehensibility/intelligibility⁸, connectedness, and transcendence. The extent to which these needs for meaning appear *fulfilled* in one’s life, further suggests whether one’s life is experienced as meaningful⁹.

Derkx’ (2011) definition of meaning in life is used in this research for three reasons¹⁰. First, his concept is the most commonly used concept in research and teachings within humanistic studies. Second, his concept is a detailed one, which allows for a precise analysis concerning meaning in life. And third, he concretely considers coherence as one need for meaning, understood as the need to understand the worldly reality in which one lives. It is “the ability to situate something in and connect it with what one knows already, and in this way to produce coherence” (Derkx, 2013, p.44). Derkx (2011) describes that we create this order to make life more intelligible and more manageable. I see Derkx’ idea of coherence as specifically an ‘intelligible’ type of coherence, given its focus on *understanding* one’s actions and life as a whole within the context of the worldly reality; I point this out, since coherence appears as a complex and layered concept that can be looked at in multiple ways.

⁸ In his 2011 article, Derkx refers to this need for meaning as both comprehensibility and intelligibility. More recently, he added coherence as another equivalent regarding these terms (2015). In my thesis, I will exclusively refer to this need for meaning as (intelligible) coherence since this term stands in line with the central theme of this research.

⁹ Hence, for instance, a meaningful life (partly) entails a life in which one can adequately connect lived experiences with one’s purpose in life, or in which one can adequately see one’s daily actions standing in line with one’s ideology concerning the ‘good’ moral life (moral justification).

¹⁰ I initially set out to use a concept of meaning in life that concentrates or relates to the broad idea of incoherence for this research, but this was not possible since to my knowledge no definitions of meaning in life are based around the idea of incoherence. Nevertheless, using a concept of meaning in life based around coherence, will also allow me to carefully explore a potential relation between incoherent life stories and meaning in life.

1.3. Research aim

This thesis proposes the idea that life stories that appear to resist coherence can turn out to be rich sources for meaning-making and exploring self-identity. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine incoherent life stories, and thereby challenging the dominance and idealization of coherent life stories as represented in academic disciplines in both the social sciences – psychology, sociology – and the humanities – literary studies, language and cultural studies, philosophy – since the 1980s. My research furthermore serves as a reaction to the growing importance of constructing coherence in life stories as can be found in forms of (primarily narrative) therapy in health care. This thesis neither attempts to reject the value of a coherent life story nor does it romanticize incoherence in life stories. Instead, it seeks to broaden the ways that life stories are approached. Hopefully, this research will lead to a re-thinking and a more critical approach for specifically both scholars and therapists, and broadly for anyone thinking about one's own life story in terms of (in)coherence.

Apart from an analysis on the level of narrativity, this research is furthermore characterized by an exploration of 'meaning in life' as can be traced and interpreted in life stories. By adding this distinct focus on 'meaning in life' this thesis serves as a humanistic project striving to expand the understanding of this concept. By specifically focusing on life stories that are lived with disabilities, this research is part of a larger societal and academic project that seeks to expand the critical vocabulary of people living with disabilities, whose marginalized voices are not heard enough (Wasson, 2018). Despite being fully aware that language, and therefore storytelling, can merely (try to) 'grasp' these experiences with disabilities, it is the only tool we have to try to tell, explain, and better understand these experiences and thus these individuals.

1.4. Research questions

The central question of this thesis is:

How do subjects of depression narratives, autism narratives, and dementia narratives in incoherent life stories negotiate meaning in life?

In order to answer the central question I will focus on four subquestions:

1. *What forms does incoherence take on the dimension of the story-form and to which effects?*
2. *What is the relation between incoherent life stories and subject formation?*
3. *Which ‘needs for meaning’ as aspects of meaning in life, come to the fore in incoherent life stories?*
4. *How can incoherent life stories enhance our understanding of meaning in life?*

1.5. Methods

1.5.1. Corpus

My thesis is a comparative literary analysis concentrating on the cultural-philosophical theme of ‘meaning in life’, through the angle of coherence and incoherence in life stories. Within the field of humanistic studies this is considered an original type of research, since literary analysis is relatively uncommon in this field. I will analyze three cases of incoherent life stories, as portrayed in literary postmodernist autobiographies. Autobiographies as representations of life stories are chosen for three reasons. For Linde (1993), the autobiography is the ‘textual form’ “closest to life story and is used, like the life story, to constitute the social self” (p.37). Giddens (1991) sees working through specifically an autobiography as a central recommendation for sustaining an “integrated sense of self” (p.76), since it constantly calls for input; one must keep this autobiographical narrative going¹¹. Autobiographies are also considered to be the most powerful forms to represent disability life narratives, since they allow for sharing both personal experiences and longings with the audience, as well as informing them about a broader group of people that is traditionally ignored and marginalized (Van Goidshoven, 2017). The following autobiographical works are chosen: Yiyun Li’s *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017), Temple Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures: And Other Reports from My Life*

¹¹ Around 1800, when the ‘modern problem’ of identity was increasingly growing among, initially, middle-class Westerners, the writing of autobiographies strongly developed, although there certainly have been examples of autobiographies before that period in history. Among the most celebrated and most notable early (forms of) autobiographies are St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (written at the turn of the fourth and fifth century), Cellini’s *My Life* (1558) and Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays* (16th century). The notion that we should create a unique self may not have been crucial before that time, since personal exploration was minimal and children followed the footsteps of their parents (McAdams, 1993).

with Autism (1996), and Gerda Saunders' *Memory's Last Breath: Field Notes On My Dementia* (2017)¹².

Although these decisions will always be idiosyncratic to some extent, these life stories are carefully chosen for four reasons. *First*, they all portray disabilities, and furthermore portray three different types of disabilities, which will allow for and provide an interesting comparison between a variety of experiences as a result of living with different disabilities. Each of these authors gives words to their subjects' life stories in different styles of writing, different tones, different contexts, and in different forms which will provide interesting material on multiple narrative levels in order to compare the literary works. *Second*, all three autobiographies portray unconventional life stories that appear to show elements of incoherence at least partly (and arguably mainly) as a result of living with disabilities. *Third*, rather than a narrow modernist focus on 'conquering' disabilities aiming for complete closure, all three autobiographical subjects consider their situation as an opening: a possibility for a rich literary exploration in order to inform the audience about ways of integrating disabilities in their lives. Due to these more creative ways of living with disabilities, all three works could be considered to be placed in the tradition of the 'quest story'¹³ as defined by Frank (1995). Whereas the restitution story is primarily about the triumph of medicine and are self-stories only by default, quest stories afford people living with disabilities their most distinctive and unique voice (Frank, 1995). Therefore, these particular life stories are fruitful sources for examination. And *fourth*, these books are chosen because they are recent works, which make them relevant portrayals and reflections of life with disabilities in our contemporary societies¹⁴.

Dear Friend is written over a two-year period while Li lived with severe depression and was hospitalized for two periods of time. The melancholy work is distinguished by an interior exploration of what makes life worth living, written in a clear, sober tone. Li

¹² To improve the readability, this thesis will refer to these books as *Dear Friend*, *Memory's Last Breath*, and *Thinking in Pictures*, although I shall mainly speak in terms of 'Li's, or Saunders', or Grandin's, life story'. This thesis analyzes these life stories in each chapter in the same consecutive order: Li, Grandin, and lastly Saunders.

¹³ Frank's (1995) use of the term 'quest story' might cause confusion, since in literary studies the 'quest story' is traditionally recognized to be a plot-story that involves a knight going on a quest to conquer a form of treasure towards the ending of the journey. Frank's idea of the 'quest story' means paradoxically the opposite of this: the patient's quest is not primarily directed to conquer or capture anything specifically, apart from some potential insight that might be obtained *along the way*.

¹⁴ Several other incoherent life stories as portrayed in autobiographies were read and considered but in the end rejected for different reasons. Some life stories did not adequately portray concrete disabilities (Ariel Levy – *The Rules Do Not Apply*, 2017; David Sedaris – *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, 2004; Nina Riggs – *The Bright Hour*, 2017; Roxane Gay – *Hunger*, 2017) and other life stories were not chosen because they only described parts of one's life rather than a full life story, such as Donna Williams' autism narratives: *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (1994).

interweaves reflections on her literary influences and their words with personal experiences both in her country of origin China and the United States where she currently resides. The depth of her prose pondering life's fundamental questions, meandering from one concept into another while barely holding on to life, makes the work a unique case of an incoherent life story.

Temple Grandin is a professor of animal science, but perhaps more widely recognized as one of the world's most prominent spokesperson for autism by publishing several books and giving talks on this topic. Through several essays in *Thinking in Pictures*, she gives clear insight in both the challenges and possibilities of perceiving and coping with the world through her autism. By combining autobiographical memories of growing-up and working as an animal scientist with findings from academic research on autism, Grandin not only elaborates on her own subjective experiences, but also carefully informs its reader about the large variety of experiences connected to different forms of autism in order to better understand how the autistic mind works. The account on how the autistic life works allows for interesting research on incoherence in life stories.

After being diagnosed with an early stage of dementia, Saunders started writing what would eventually result into *Memory's Last Breath*, to work out fundamental life questions – what is memory and identity? – and to help shed light on the complex 'dementia experience'. The autobiography follows at the same time an honest account of 'daily misadventures'; an objective examination of the brain and mental decline; and a moving portrayal of the main events of her life and family in both South Africa and America. Its portrayal of living with dementia as well as the creative way in which it is arranged, allow for relevant research on incoherence.

1.5.2. Literary research methods

Each subquestion will be answered in one chapter. In answering any of the subquestions in the corresponding chapters, all three life stories will be referred to, analyzed, and compared to each other, making this thesis a comparative literary research. In analyzing these autobiographies, this research uses the post-classical method in literary theory that refers to a variety of methods that emerged in reaction to the traditional classical structuralist approach to literature (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001). Within this broad post-classical movement, this thesis uses in particular the post-structuralist and post-modernist method to analyze the literary works.

Structuralists in literary theory look for features in the text such as parallels, symmetry, and patterns, with the effect to reveal textual unity and coherence: “to show a unity of purpose within the text, as if the text knows what it wants to do and has directed all its means toward this end” (Barry, 2002, p.69). By contrast, post-structuralists seek to show that the text is characterized by disunity, by looking for evidence of contradictions, paradoxes, conflicts, breaks, absences, inconsistencies and other discontinuities of all kinds (Barry, 2002) which makes it a relevant method to analyze elements of incoherence. Post-structuralism reads ‘the text against itself’ with the aim to show that the text is at war with itself. It unmask the disunity which underlies the apparent unity, whereas the aim of structuralism has been to show the unity beneath apparent disunity. Thus, for post-structuralism it becomes impossible to sustain a univocal reading and the language explodes into multiplicities of meaning (Barry, 2002).

Postmodernist critics discover postmodernist themes, tendencies and attitudes within literary works and explore their implications (Barry, 2002). This means that they concretely foreground: shifting identities, hybrid forms of literature mixing literary genres, intertextual elements, irony, and they challenge the distinction between high and low culture as was established in modernist literature (Barry, 2002). Due to the complex, hybrid form of the three autobiographies, as well as their nature as alternative mini-narratives that provide a reaction to the coherent master narratives of human progress and perfectibility, they allow for an analysis by postmodernist methods in literary theory.

Both methods focus on elements of narrative incoherence, which perfectly allows for an analysis of this phenomenon. However, the potential danger with this specific focus is that this implies it might deny or fail to recognize coherence, and furthermore might fail to recognize the contrast between narrative coherence and incoherence. In realizing this potential weakness, I strive to beware for an approach that is too narrow when analyzing these life stories.

1.6. Relevance

The societal and academic relevance of this research is as follows.

1.6.1. Societal relevance

The societal relevance of this thesis lies mainly in providing insight into the lived experiences of individuals living with disabilities. Their life stories suffer from a representational crisis, struggling to communicate their experience amid stigma and invisibility (Wasson, 2018), and

their stories are forced to fit into society's dominant, preferred master narratives that emphasizes modernist ideals such as: coherence, progress, and restitution (Frank, 1995). Standardized narratives of the 'coherent good life' may be too limited and generalized to grasp experiences of disabilities and might reduce our abilities to better understand individuals and who they really think they are. Understanding how disabilities are perceived and represented through life stories could positively change the experience of disabilities for those who live with it, for those who anticipate living with it, and for those who care for people living with disabilities. Society will only recognize and become more familiar with people living with disabilities if they truly allow to take in their life stories. When people turn away from these stories, they keep them at a distance and put more labels on them and its narrators which only further diminishes their status in society (Frank, 1995).

Apart from this relevance for a moral change of attitude on a wide societal level, providing insight in incoherent life stories could, second, contribute to specifically the clinical uses of life stories in humanistic or psychological therapy settings. Individuals living with incoherent life stories might need professional support. It is important that therapists become more familiar with, and convey an open attitude towards incoherence as an element of life stories in order to affectively treat and engage with their clients.

1.6.2. Academic relevance

This thesis responds to the call for a "paradigmatic turn in narrative studies as regards to the coherence thesis" (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010, p.1). In light of the dominant focus on narrative coherence in different academic fields, Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou (2010) highlight the importance of more studies concentrating on life stories that transgress the idea of narrative coherence. Relatively little research concerning specific examples of autobiographical life stories disrupting coherence have been conducted. Also, none of these studies refer to these stories and approach them as specific cases of *incoherent* life stories. Thus, no studies have been conducted that examine how multiple subjects of incoherent life stories negotiate meaning in life in postmodernist autobiographies. My study is furthermore especially relevant with regard to people living with disabilities: no other studies have been conducted that zoom in on the dynamics between individuals living with different disabilities and the elements of narrative incoherence in their life stories. Based on my concrete findings as a result of analyzing three particular life stories, this thesis also contributes to a critical theoretical reflection on narrative coherence in life stories within the dominant academic discourse.

1.6.3. Humanistic relevance

My thesis stands in line with fundamental humanistic values that all people convey human dignity and are intrinsically valuable in their own unique ways (Derks, 2011). Individuals whose life stories fail to fit into the preferred coherent master narrative of society deserve equal recognition and respect as individuals who do live with coherent life stories. An enhanced understanding of incoherence in life stories is needed, since it is the profound reflection of lived experienced reality in people's lives. For humanistic studies specifically, its relevance lies, first, in the exploration of meaning in life. Second, since these subjects are living with dementia, autism, and depression, this research will fit into popular topics of research and teachings, as well as 'chairs' of the University for Humanistic Studies, that concern: 'ethics of care', 'meaning in life', 'international humanism and art of living' and the 'empowerment of elderly that are vulnerable'. Third, by thoroughly analyzing three autobiographies this research is involved with another side of humanistic studies that is concerned with art and its relation to the individual and society.

1.7. Definitions

Life writing

Life writing serves as a general term for "writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.3).

Autobiography

Autobiography refers to a particular popular practice of life writing that emerged in the Enlightenment and is now privileged as the most commonly used term for life writing (Smith & Watson, 2001). The dictionary definition of autobiography is the story of one's life written by her- or himself (Smith & Watson, 2001). French theorist Lejeune (2016) famously expanded that definition as follows: a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (p.34).

Life story

The life story is the created story of one's life. It is an 'act of imagination' (McAdams, 1993) and therefore a 'construction', consciously and unconsciously (re)made in our own minds, based on an interpretation of an enormous collection of a person's experiences, values,

characteristics, and future-plans (McAdams, 1993; Brugman, 2007). The life story is a subjective and selective construction of the past, that is less concerned about facts, but more about meanings and interpretations that are attributed to lived episodes.

Coherence

Coherence, in its broad understanding, means that parts go together very well (Delaere, 2010, p.66). Coherence is a broad concept that includes connectedness and consistency. Coherence is normal in the sense that it obtains for the most part: for most of us, most of the time, things do make sense, hang together, and are going somewhere (Delaere, 2010).

Incoherent life story

The incoherent life story is the constructed story of one's life, focused on the portrayal of the central narrative, autobiographical subject. Its events are presented in a non-linear and non-causal chronology. For the audience, its ending does not cause a satisfying sense of closure. Incoherent life stories are furthermore characterized by causing confusion to its audience in three ways: they defy content expectations regarding what is perceived as 'normal' human nature (which is partially dependent on the context of one's society); they defy expectations regarding the dominant master narratives existing within Western societies, and the audience is struggling if not failing to follow and understand these stories.

Autobiographical subject

Following Lejeune (2016), the subject treated in the autobiography is the: "individual life, the story of a personality" (p.34). The autobiographical subject gives him- or herself reflexively form through language, and more precisely through narrated experience. These experiences are a part of him or her, defining who that subject is (Hydén, 2010). Through narrated experience the 'identical narrator/character' becomes a particular kind of subject owning certain identities in the cultural and social realm. The autobiographical subject is unstable and therefore complex: the subject might 'cycle' through many self-identities in the course of a day (Smith & Watson, 2001).

Meaning in life

This thesis uses Derkx's (2011) definition of meaning in life, which primarily builds upon psychologist Baumeister's (1991) definition and was furthermore inspired by definitions formulated by humanistic scholars Van Praag (1978) and Smaling & Alma (2010). For Derkx

(2011) meaning in life is broadly about placing one's own actions and one's life as a whole, into a broad framework of coherent meaning. Derkx (2011) distinguishes seven 'needs for meaning' as parts of this framework of meaning, that are: purpose, moral justification, self-worth, efficacy, coherence, connection, and transcendence. The extent to which these needs for meaning are fulfilled, suggests whether one's life is experienced as meaningful.

CHAPTER 2: THEORIZING INCOHERENT LIFE STORIES

“Life narratives appear to be transparently simple. Yet they are amazingly complex.”
(Smith & Watson, 2001, p.15)

2.1. ‘Making sense’: coherence in life stories

Coherence is a property of stories (Linde, 1993). It derives from relations that separate parts of a story bear to one another and to the whole text, as well as from the relation that the text bears to other texts of its type (Linde, 1993). As an example of the former: the separate parts of a story might be all connected in that they portray an overarching message or morality, or they might portray a sequence of events. The latter means that a story as a whole must be recognizable as a specific type of story, with its own particular content, form, and development. In the case of stories that are texts, Rimmon-Kenan (2002) refers to this latter notion as ‘literature model of coherence’ that makes elements of the story intelligible by reference to specific *literary* institutions. For instance, a ‘cowboy story’ is recognizable as it stands in the tradition of prior cowboy stories. Its conventions establish a contract between the text and the reader, so that elements which would seem strange and unfitting in another context *are* made intelligible within the genre of the cowboy story. Squire (2008) points out that we tend to expect ‘autobiographical life narratives’ to include: family members, education, work, leisure, major life defining events, and to provide a “more or less resolved account of them” (p.53). Nevertheless, he criticizes this conviction, saying that we cannot say what events ought to be mentioned in life stories or strictly decide how they must be talked about.

Also, apart from being a property of a (textual) story, coherence must further be understood as a “cooperative achievement of the speaker and the addressee” (Linde, 1993, p.12). The storyteller constructs a story in order to communicate something that can be understood, which implies a sense of coherence. The addressee works to reach a (coherent) understanding of this story. A fundamental property of stories in general, is that they exist to be told and therefore to be shared: either verbally, written down in books, through film, or through other forms of media (McAdams, 2006). Thus, in the most basic sense, no matter how simple the message, the motive, or the function of any constructed story might be, stories must be coherent enough in order to communicate something that the (implied) audience will understand. If the audience cannot make any sense of what the story conveys,

then, arguably, there might be no point in sharing and perhaps constructing the story in the first place.

This sense of coherence of the life story in its cooperative relation is thus twofold: it relies largely on the narrators' powers of reconstruction, imagination and synthesis, but the audience also plays a significant part in creating intelligibility (McAdams, 2006). As Rimmon-Kenan (2002) points out, making sense of stories as an audience requires an integration of its elements with each other, which involves an appeal to various familiar models of coherence (p.124). Through 'models of coherence' – or 'deja-vu models' – we understand stories, because these models of coherence are already natural and legible for the audience. By naturalizing a story we bring it into relation – we assimilate the story – with a type of model of coherence. Subsequently, our model of coherence offers a hypothesis for answers to questions such as: What is happening? What are the motives? This allows us to understand and follow the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Models of coherence can be so familiar that they seem natural and are hardly grasped as models; examples include: chronology, causality, or contiguity in space. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that there are models of coherence that are not as natural but recognized as generalizations and stereotypes by a given society (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Thus, as McAdams (2006) emphasizes, what makes a story coherent is also based on the content expectation that people within society have regarding human nature and social relationships.

As I elaborated on earlier¹⁵, there seems to be a significant consensus regarding the characteristics of coherence in life stories among the most prominent scholars writing about this topic (MacIntyre, 1984, Giddens, 1991; McAdams; 1993; Linde; 1993; Schechtman, 1996). It is widely recognized that among the most convincing coherent life stories are those that show how a developing protagonist gains insight, wisdom and self-understanding through a series of chronologically and causally arranged life episodes¹⁶ (McAdams, 2006). It is generally assumed that the coherence of autobiographical stories correlates with psychological functioning, health, well-being, and a high extent of meaning in life for its teller (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Although most scholars share a belief in the qualities regarding coherence in autobiographical life stories, scholars in recent years debated its

¹⁵ See chapter 1.1.

¹⁶ In his work *The Stories We Live By* (1993), McAdams does not elaborate on the concept of coherence in life stories; it is only briefly addressed. In *The Problem with Narrative Coherence* (2006) his ideas concerning (in)coherence in life stories are elaborately discussed.

limitations and its role as the sole preferred moral standard, since many life stories remain do not fit into the coherent standard (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010).

2.2. ‘Not making sense’: incoherence in life stories

As opposed to coherent stories making sense, incoherent life stories tend to appear confused, disordered and incomprehensible for its audience (McAdams, 2006). When reading or listening to incoherent stories, the audience might just give up, concluding that the story simply does not make (enough) sense (McAdams, 2006). Although multiple scholars (Frank, 1995; Smith & Watson, 2001; Strawson, 2004; Hänninen & Jännes, 2010; Medved & Brockmeier, 2010; Tamboukou, 2010) discuss life stories that are transgressing, disrupting, or rejecting narrative coherence, to my knowledge exclusively McAdams (2006) and Wasson (2018) speak concretely of ‘incoherence’ in life stories as a separate narrative feature with its own set of characteristics. Perhaps because the unity of coherence is easier to conceptualize than the ‘chaos’ of incoherence, scholars appear restrained in defining the opposite of narrative coherence. Although the term is not commonly used, I choose to work with ‘incoherence’ in life stories, because it appears to me as the most accurate term to define the opposite of a coherent life story.

The standard view in narrative psychology assumes that narrative incoherence correlates with an incoherent subject and therefore a troubled sense of self for its teller, although this one-to-one, direct relation between a mentally organized life story and the state of the storyteller has been criticized (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Critics (Strawson 2004; McAdams, 2006, Hänninen & Jännes, 2010) suggest that it would be too simplified to draw conclusions for one’s inner state, based on the features of a constructed life story, because the relation between one’s story and the storyteller’s inner state is more complex than assumed. For instance, contextual factors in which the story is told must also be taken into account, since they tend to shape both the content and form of one’s constructed life story (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010).

Two prominent aspects of incoherence – non-linear chronology and types of ‘anti-closure’ – will be further detailed below, since these aspects will be used in my discussion of the life stories¹⁷.

¹⁷ These two aspects will be elaborately analyzed in relation to the life stories in chapter 3.

2.2.1. Non-linear chronology

In the field of narrative psychology it is customary to think that people have a natural or at least culturally pervasive tendency to mentally organize their life by constructing it as a “linear, temporally unfolding story” (Hänninen & Jännes, 2010, p.103). Linde (1991) argues that although the narrator could describe the events of one’s life in a random order, its readers – and perhaps the storyteller as well – feel that they do not really understand one’s life story until they know the *proper order* in which the subject went through these events. Whereas a coherent life story requires a linear sequence with continuity and causal accounts of events, the form of incoherence referred to as non-linear chronology, entails a life story that is not chronologically organized in time (Linde, 1991).

In autobiographies, portraying the conventional form of a linear chronologic progressing rendition of one’s life has prevailed since Rousseau’s *Confessions*¹⁸, although modernist autobiographies and in particular postmodernist autobiographies have sought to break this convention (Hänninen & Jännes, 2010). In fact, strict linear chronology is neither natural nor an actual characteristic of most stories. Strict linear succession can only be found in stories with a single line or even with a single character; when there are multiple characters, the story is often multi-linear rather than uni-linear. Rich, detailed life stories, that multiple characters tend to be a-chronological (Smith & Watson, 2001). Linearity in storytelling is a conventional norm, which has become so widespread as to replace the actual multi-linear temporality of the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

2.2.2. Types of closure

Narrative closure appears as a significant part of the common idea of narrative coherence, which can be traced back to the ‘Aristotelian narrative’, that includes “a clear, temporally ordered plot with a dramatic complication that is eventually resolved” (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010, p.19). Autobiographical stories in which the subject – typically after a series of misfortunes and setbacks – at the end reaches either inner peace, renewed strength, new insight, love, or a similar type of closure characterized by a happy-ending, are considered to be significantly powerful cases of coherent life stories¹⁹ (McAdams, 2006).

¹⁸ Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* was completed in 1769 but not published until 1782. The work covers the first fifty-three years of Rousseau’s life. Although forms of autobiographies have been published before Rousseau’s work, *Confessions* is considered to be the first ‘proper’ example of the genre of autobiography in the field of literary studies.

¹⁹ See chapter 1.2. for McAdams’ and Frank’s examples of these cases.

Incoherent life stories are likely to never reach closure in the form of a culmination, resolution, or other type of a satisfying sense of an ending (McAdams, 2006).

What is a ‘proper ending’ to a story and what does it do to its reader promotes much debate within literary theory (Stanzel, 1992). Traditionally, there is the distinction between closed and open endings: a closed ending provides full closure in the form of a resolved plot, whereas an open ending leaves at least one conflict unresolved. But closure can furthermore be found in two other ways: on the story-level, primarily concerned with the sequence of events, and the discourse-level, concerned with the narration: the ways in which the story is told (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001). Closure on the story-level is traditionally a wedding or the death of a character; since none of us can narrate beyond the end of our lives, autobiographies will always conclude prior to the death of the subject. On the discourse level, closure could for instance be *the divergence* of the lines of inner development of both the narrator and the protagonist (Stanzel, 1992).

However, the discussion of the ending of a story has increasingly centered on the effect it has on the reader’s expectations to see the structure of a work ‘rounded off at the end’, which derives from the reader’s desire for coherence, where the world seems to offer disorder and incoherence. The sense of closure of a story is largely related to the reader’s perception and experience of the structure of the story as a whole. Even an open ending in the form of a story that abruptly seems to stop, can still be tightly integrated into the whole structure of the story by the reader (Stanzel, 1992). In their discussion of coherent closure in the life story, Smith and Watson (2001) also suggest how the reader must consider if the ending seems to bring the narrative to a “tidy” and “permanent” closure (p.172).

2.3. Disability life narratives

Disability life narratives refer to life stories that illustrate both the individual experiences of living with disabilities as well as the social consequences, cultural construction, and societal discourse related to disabilities Van Goidshoven’s (2017). Carrying the potential to change the cultural image of certain disabilities, disability life narratives provide insight in what it means to live with a disability and tend to deconstruct one-dimensional, popular or even fictive (mis)representations of disabilities and the individuals who live with them. Below, I shall further detail subsequently autism narratives, dementia narratives, and depression narratives, since these disabilities are portrayed in the three chosen autobiographies for this research.

2.3.1. Depression narrative

Generally, a depression narrative is an account of “what went awry” in the subject’s life and subsequently caused depression (Kangas, 2001, p.80). Its main storyline tends to describe multiple elements leading to the explanation of the emergence of depression. Painting the scene for the onset of depression frequently entails describing these lives in great personal detail. “Even to a larger extent than physical or chronic illnesses or conditions, depression is deeply interwoven into everyday life,” says Kangas (2001, p.80). Depression narratives are also usually significant cases of *life* narratives, since depression is acquired *over time* rather than abruptly: depression frequently tends to be rooted in early childhood experiences that from then on convey a recurring impact through multiple stages in life.

The majority of subjects in depression narratives describe depression as a “threat” and use the metaphor of the “enemy”, which is “paralyzing, suffocating, or even destroying the person” (Kangas, 2001, p.86). Recurring themes in depression narratives are: problematic relationships with parents; misfortunes; adversities; specific traumatic scenes; and feelings of loneliness, inferiority, despair, dissatisfaction, exhaustion, desperation, ‘wishing death’, suicidality, and hopelessness. By telling what the subjects were deprived of or what they had to endure, they implicitly illustrate what ‘the good life’ is supposed to entail (Kangas, 2001).

Although telling disability narratives is widely recognized as a vital component for healing, Smith (1999) emphasizes that in the specific case of depression narratives telling does not come easy and neither does listening. Listening tends to be difficult, because the experience of depression is often incomprehensible for those that are not suffering or not having suffered from it (Kangas, 2001). This raises questions regarding how to *really* listen to and ‘take in’ these stories as an audience, especially since failure in understanding the narrative could further contribute to feelings of loneliness and hopefulness for the storyteller (Kangas, 2001).

2.3.2. Autism narrative

Although autism narratives show an enormous diversity, they are primarily characterized by an author who has received the diagnosis of autism, and tells about his or her experiences with that label (Van Goidshoven, 2017). Autism narratives portray, and are in itself, ways to deal with the label, to understand it, to use it, and to turn it inside out. By focusing on lived experiences, which is very prominent in the autism-narrative, many of these stories try to challenge the cultural image surrounding autism. Van Goidshoven (2017) distinguishes five recurring themes in autism narratives: the quest for a diagnosis, (not) accepting the diagnosis

of autism, (not) communicating having this diagnosis, sensitizing autism, and lastly, conceptualizing autism.

Autism narratives are important for people living with autism in order to be recognized (Van Goidshoven, 2017). The problem is that these stories are not typically conceptualized by the culturally preferred standards of coherence, for instance through the use of unambiguous perspectives on language and narrativity, and thus, their stories have more difficulty being heard and recognized. A debate concerning autism narratives concerns the question of how to represent these stories to the public: Should the stories stay true to lived experiences, or should they be (professionally) edited for coherence purposes? (Van Goidshoven, 2017).

2.3.3. Dementia narrative

Under the term ‘dementia narrative’ scholars understand a narrative concerning a prominent subject who is experiencing a form of dementia (Krüger-Fürhoff, 2015). Many of these stories strive to offer a holistic view, which does not reduce the protagonist to its declining memory, reflexivity, and – more broadly – rationality. Dementia narratives tend to challenge reductionist biomedical views of dementia by giving voice to- and providing incentives for an ethical stance that supports contemporary approaches in critical gerontology and person-centered care (Krüger-Fürhoff, 2015). Especially the creation of a sense of selfhood in the midst of its perceived loss appears as a prominent theme in these works (Basting, 2003). Since living with dementia appears by nature “an associative, episodic [and] momentary existence” (Kruger, 2015, p.124), dementia narratives tend to significantly deconstruct the conventions of literature. Krüger-Fürhoff (2015) mentions how dementia narratives tend to portray challenging “post-narrative conditions” (2015, p.92).

These stories aim to help the millions of people concerned with dementia, for whom little is written from personal, first-hand experiences to better understand the complex world of dementia (Basting, 2003). Dementia narratives are characterized in that there are not many examples in which the author of the work lives with dementia (Basting, 2003). As a result of living with dementia, the ability of the storyteller to tie together the past and the present into a coherent unity declines and appears as a difficult task (Kruger, 2015). Kruger (2015) points out how dementia could be seen – among other things – as “the inability to construct stories or to be assimilated by anyone else into a coherent narrative view of life” (p.109). Due to the irreversible loss of personal narratives and language, a prominent debate within this field of research is how individuals who are living with dementia can put their lived experiences of

both the present and the past directly and profoundly into a story form, without the help of an editor or other form of co-authorship.

2.4. The autobiography

2.4.1. Writing

Throughout history, a prominent place to work out life stories has been in writing. Writing is a popular form of self-expression that leads to a higher level of thinking and is characterized by providing a broader perspective, an increased creativity, and a significant awareness of emotions (Bohlmeijer, 2007). According to Frank (1995), a storyteller needs to distance oneself from his or her life in order to reflect on it and construct a carefully mediated sequence of events. Therefore, writing serves as a perfect space for reflection that allows for the creation of a ‘proper’ story that presupposes this mediation (Frank, 1995). In particular for people living with disabilities writing as a means of communication provides benefits such as “an increased level of control and empowerment,” as well as “more time and greater flexibility for constructing thoughts” (Ryan, Bannister, & Anas, 2009, p.145).

2.4.2. The autobiographical pact

Lejeune’s (2016) widely used definition of autobiography is as follows: “a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence where the focus is his individual life in particular the story of his personality” (p.34). In order for there to be an autobiography, the author, the narrator, and the protagonist must be identical, says Lejeune. Although this ‘identicalness’ within the autobiography raises questions and is the topic of much debate within literary studies, Lejeune (2016) reacts to that with his idea of the ‘autobiographical pact’, that revolves around his idea of the ‘identity of name’.

Lejeune (2016) says that the autobiography supposes there is a similar ‘identity of name’ between the *author* (which is the name that can be found on the cover of the book), the *narrator* of the story, narrating the reader about the events, and the *character* who is being talked about. Thus, when both the narrator and character share the name of the author on the cover, the ‘identicalness’ of the name between ‘author-narrator-protagonist’ is established and the work is considered an autobiography. The audience might quibble over resemblance between the author, narrator, and protagonist, but never over identity, since the same name is used. If the name of the protagonist equals the name of the author, this fact alone excludes the

possibility of fiction. Even if the story is false, it will be in order of the lie – which Lejeune considers to be an autobiographical category – and not of fiction.

2.4.3. Subject formation

The autobiographical subject, or just ‘subject’, is the central ‘construct’ within a life story (Van Goidshoven, 2017). Storytellers are carefully and retrospectively constructing the subject through the life story form. Given the multiplicity of language, words, and meanings, subjects come to reveal who they are through complex narrative language-discourse (Van Goidshoven, 2017). For the audience, the construct of the subject is arrived at by assembling various character-indicators concerning the subject that are distributed in the life story. Autobiographical subject formation refers to the assembling of these indicators in the story. In principle, no elements of the story are excluded to serve as indicators for the construct of the subject (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). However, the two most basic character-indicators for the subject are ‘direct definition’ and ‘indirect presentation’. In the case of direct definition, the subject’s specific traits or identities – amongst other things – are directly named by an adjective. The second type, indirect presentation, does not mention explicitly certain labels, but displays and exemplifies them through various ways, such as actions or speech (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

It is further important to realize that autobiographical subjects in life stories do not *have* experiences, but the other way around: subjects are constituted *through* experience. Experience is the process through which one becomes a certain kind of autobiographical subject owning specific identities and social statuses that are known in the social realm (Smith & Watson, 2001, p.24). Subjects come to know themselves to be a ‘woman’ or a ‘child’ or a ‘worker’, because these categories come to seem characteristics of one, given the lived experiences. These self-identities or ‘subject positionings’²⁰ are usually marked in terms of category in relation to opposites (Smith & Watson, 2001). One is for instance ‘disabled’ in relation to someone who is ‘abled’.

But self-identities are not stable: a person can ‘cycle’ through many different identities, in the course of a day (Van Goidshoven, 2017). Because of this constant placement and displacement of who we are, subjects, and therefore our social statuses, are multiple, contextual, contested and contingent. The subject is a production that is never

²⁰ Throughout my thesis I will exclusively use self-identities, rather than subject positionings. These terms refer to the same concept, although the term subject-positionings specifically highlights the fact that it concerns a ‘subject’. Nonetheless, this term might cause more confusion compared to self-identities, which may appear more familiar.

complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. Interestingly, autobiographical material tends to show the desire to describe a coherent subject, including a clear, stable identity²¹. Rich, more complex and unconventional autobiographical stories tend to confront the audience with subjects who experiment with ambiguity and complexity (Van Goidsenhoven, 2017). The standard view in narrative psychology assumes that narrative incoherence in autobiographical life stories correlates with an incoherent subject and therefore a “disturbed sense of self” for its teller (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010, p.21).

Whereas the narrator of the story should be seen as a narrating *voice*; the subject of the story should be seen as a more or less ‘open’ *construction* for the reader, built from indicators in the story as put forward by the narrator.

²¹ Such a stable subject with a clear identity is sometimes referred to as the ‘subject-of-will’. This is the subject that desires for recognition of itself. That recognition is seen as an affirmation of what it ‘really’ is: a reality that is taken to exist prior to any act of actual recognition (Van Goidsenhoven, 2017, pp.94-96).

CHAPTER 3: TWO FORMS OF INCOHERENCE CONCERNING THE STORY-FORM AND THEIR EFFECTS

“Our memories tell more about now than then. Doubtless the past is real. There is no shortage of evidence: photos, journals, letters, old suitcases. But we choose and discard from an abundance of evidence what suits us at the moment.”
(Li, 2017, p.5)

3.1. Introduction

It is the purpose of this chapter to analyze what forms incoherence in life stories takes in *Dear Friend*, *Memory’s Last Breath*, and *Thinking in Pictures*, and to which effects. This chapter focuses on elements of incoherence related to exclusively *the form* of the life story. Story-form as a ‘dimension’ of the story is an important term in narratology, referring to the *organization* of the story (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). This chapter highlights two elements of incoherence in life stories concerning this dimension that are: non-linear chronology and types of anti-closure²². These elements are specifically chosen since they come to the fore as the most recurring aspects pointing to narrative incoherence in the academic literature regarding life stories. These two elements shall be analyzed separately and both parts will discuss all three literary autobiographies. A concluding paragraph compares the elements and effects of incoherence between the three life stories and summarizes my main findings. Lastly, this chapter provides a critical reflection on the academic theory concerning these forms of incoherence in life stories.

3.2. Non-linear chronology

3.2.1. Li’s ‘timeless’ internal thoughts

Dear Friend consists of eight autobiographical essays, each revolving around a concept such as: time, melodrama, ‘I’, writing, and language, to name a few. Since the exploration of these concepts is the work’s central feature, the autobiographical episodes of the subject’s life that are described are in service of these explorations. Based on their relevance and connection to the concept autobiographical events are picked and added to the exploration and are therefore not lined up in a chronological order. While reading the work, the audience is forced to tie

²² For the specific theory concerning non-linear chronology and a lack of closure in life stories and how they both relate to the concept of (in)coherence, see my discussion in parts 6.1.2.1. and 6.1.2.2.

together these different fragments of Li's life in order to construct a chronological timeline of her life: a sensible linear arrangement of events that the narrator is not giving directly.

The narrator is not an omniscient, overarching voice, narrating a version of: 'In the year (...) 'this' happened and as a result 'that' happened', and thus explicitly stating time and causality. The autobiography only gives rare hints concerning the time of specific events and furthermore shows a complete and therefore very significant lack of causality between events. Any autobiographical event that is described is never directly followed by another event, constituting an actual sequence; in a way, the portrayed events 'stand-alone'. This lack of causality gives the fragments an isolated nature, unattached and unrelated to any other autobiographical episode, but rather placed in the midst of the subject's meandering thoughts. It appears as if actual life events are displayed on the background of her internal life, which is far more essential. The story dwells in the 'timeless' internal universe of thoughts and reflections, instead of focusing on the portrayal of (chronological) external events. Striving for more self-understanding seems to function as the prominent motive of the text, which is reflected by an authentic inner narrative displaying all but linearity. The narrator is focused on sharing subjective perceptions. Due to the absence of causality in the narration, the isolated nature of events, as well as the very few hints suggesting the time the events took place, the reader has to make an extra effort to construct a chronological sequence of events.

Moreover, only very few autobiographical events are actually revealed in the end, and those that *are* portrayed are never longer than a few paragraphs, which underlines that they only play a minor part in Li's story. The text certainly provides pieces of the puzzle, but only very few pieces and they are small pieces: they cannot be assembled into a full picture. Since much of her life is not told, the audience will feel that there are major gaps in her life story, which might be unsatisfying or perhaps frustrating to them. It makes it difficult to see and trace an accurate development in the subject's life.

Why does the narrator then choose to share very few events? It seems that Li wants to leave her past behind. "Harder to endure that fresh pain is pain that has already been endured: a reminder that one is not far from who one was. Why write to open old wounds" (Li, 2017, p.26) In most of the few autobiographical events she does share, she places either her parents or the Chinese society in a bad perspective, which reflects her unhappiness and frustrations of growing up. Talking of her childhood, she describes "The unhappiness I knew well – my mother's shrill, my father's reticent, my sister's bitter – was to be endured as weather or national politics" (Li, 2017, p.37). It appears that Li does not want to be reminded of her youth.

Li (2017) furthermore briefly reflects on the sense of temporal incoherence in the ‘Afterword’:

Sentences and paragraphs were written and rewritten under different circumstances, arguments reframed, thoughts revised; most of these essays took a year or longer to write. Coherence and consistency are not what I have been striving for. (p.201)

Explicitly stating that she did not strive for ‘coherence and consistency’, underlines that this has never been her intention and seems to show that Li *embraces* ‘incoherence and consistency’ as element in the literary product. By addressing that she has never been striving for coherence and consistency, she acknowledges that these elements are typically included in a life story. Although she is certainly not apologizing for the lack of coherence, she does feel the need to address and perhaps even to ‘defend’ her ‘alternative’ choice, with the audience and their expectations on temporal coherence in mind. A profound reflection of her authentic, ever-changing, and, at times, ambiguous, personal thoughts, appears to Li of more importance, than to fit into the audience’s expectations concerning coherence.

3.2.2. Grandin’s chronological trajectories

As its subtitle says, *Thinking in Pictures* consists of eleven ‘reports from my life with autism’ that could be considered as autobiographical essays. Each essay sets out to discuss one specific aspect of autism among which: visual thought, diagnosing autism, and emotion and autism. Similar to Li’s work, specific autobiographical events are selected and included in the life story based on their relevance for the explored theme, but in Grandin’s case of a particular facet of autism. However, unlike Li’s life story, Grandin does offer a highly chronological and causal sequence of autobiographical events within the large majority of these essays, since it appears that it is the narrator’s motive to elaborately portray her development from being a troubled young child initially labeled as ‘brain-damaged’ (since the term ‘autism’ was not well-known at that time) to a highly-functioning and successful academic who has found a way to adequately understand and live with autism. Most of the stories follow a strongly linear chronological trajectory of living with one feature of autism over the course of her past life in order to show her personal development with this facet. The narrator is proud to share her precise chronological trajectory by documenting every small step she took.

Further adding to the sense of linear chronology, is that the narrator significantly categorizes her life into stages, which usually refer to phases of her education: names of subchapters include ‘High School’ or ‘College’. The narrator typically begins a chapter with the portrayal of her very first early childhood experience related to a particular facet of autism and subsequently moves through the educative phases of her life. Thus, seen as whole, the overall autobiography appears non-linear, since many chapters start *again* from childhood experiences; the autobiography portrays not one, but multiple trajectories over time. However, most of these essays portray a linear chronology of life-events that is easy to follow for the reader and provides a clear overview of her trajectories in life.

Particularly in the fifth chapter in which the narrator portrays her development of ‘autistic talent’ the paragraphs follow an elaborate, chronological trajectory with autobiographical fragments from being two and a half years old, three years old, kindergarten, elementary school, high school, college, graduate school, and lastly her working life.

Although many autobiographical events are described, every chapter is ‘disrupted’ by almost just as many pages providing an objective overview of academic findings concerning the topic. These overviews can be seen as ‘narrative pauses’ which could be seen as significant non-narrative interruptions from the narrative.

3.2.3. Saunders’ incoherent life story of reorientation

Unlike *Dear Friend* and *Thinking in Pictures*, Saunders’ autobiography does appear as one story, although it is arranged in a complex manner. Since the autobiographical events jump back and forth between different episodes throughout the subject’s life without a clear pattern, her life story significantly shows non-linear chronology. It can be difficult to make sense of a new paragraph after a blank line set in a different time and place, and seeing its place in the larger chronological order of her life events. The fact that the narration of Saunders’ life is ‘intertwined’ with both her journal entries as well as informative parts informing the reader how the brain works with drawings and pictures included, further increases its discontinuity and fragmented nature²³. *Memory’s Last Breath* is highly

²³ In order to illustrate what one chapter consists of and how the different parts jump through time, here follows an overview of the contents of chapter 4: a family legend of when Saunders was two years old (1951); an informative piece explaining different parts of the brain; a diary entry of Saunders concerning her neighbor, who is living with dementia (2013), a portrayal of her parents in the period Saunders was in high school and university (1960s); a journal entry about a friend who had eye surgery (2013); an informative piece about neuroscience; the story about her mother moving to another village in 1983; an informative piece about the brain’s lobes; the story of her mother being robbed and hurt in her home (1984); a memory of Saunders being

confusing to read at times. Nonetheless, many autobiographical events are shared. After finishing the work, it is likely that the reader will feel that they have seen the whole – or at least a large part – picture of her life.

One interpretation for the confusing non-linear arrangement of events, is that it reflects the effect of dementia, in the sense that living with dementia is often experienced as episodic and associative existence (Kruger, 2015). A second interpretation is that Saunders is reshaping her life story. In times of crises and change we adjust our life story to our new sense of self (Hänninen & Jännes, 2010), and I would argue that Saunders' life story is an example of this narrative reorientation. It is very evident throughout the work that with the (unexpected) entrance of dementia in her life, the subject appears in a transitory phase between her former intellectual self and her self living with dementia: Saunders' is in a place of reorientation. The non-linear incoherence of the text reflects both her inner turmoil as well her attempt to break and deconstruct her old story of herself in order to make space and rebuild a new story. Perhaps the narrator avoids creating a complete coherent new story, since she is still figuring out her new story. Its incoherence accurately mirrors her state of inner turmoil in the midst between two senses of selves. The non-linearity of the text is perhaps what makes it possible to even formulate a story in a situation in which a profound reorientation is necessary. In light of living with dementia, randomly shuffling through her memories might appear as a step in creating a new interpretation of her past.

3.3. Ending life stories: (anti)closure and (in)coherence

3.3.1. Closure after the last essay: Li as the author

Although many points are made in the essays of *Dear Friend*, each singular essay does not build up to a definitive or especially powerful conclusion or statement located towards the ending of each essay. Also, after reading the very last chapter of the autobiography, which would typically provide a sense of closure for the overall work, the reader will not experience a satisfying sense of an ending; the last essay is just another exploration and does not provide an extra significant type of closure. Her life story simply seems to 'stop' after the very last essay comes to an end. Both of these points illustrate a sense of incoherence regarding the

new immigrants in the United States (1984); parts of her mother's biography (including one story about 1934); an informative piece about the brain's frontal lobe; a journal entry about a salad bowl that looked oval rather than round (2013); and lastly, the incidents that led to the immigration of Saunders and her husband to the United States (1977-1984).

ending of *Dear Friend*. This closure underlines the work as a collection of separate essays, rather than a whole, completed life story.

Only the ‘Afterword’, located after the autobiographical essays, does portray two forms of closure, but these are not powerful examples of closure.

First, in the form of new personal insight concerning happiness and health, which Li, the author, has gathered from this period of “darkest despair” during which she wrote her life story (2017, p.200). Two examples include: “a small misstep can lead to an unraveling” and “the difficult moment is not when one gives up [...] but afterward, when the same pattern repeats itself” (Li, 2017, p.200). Nonetheless, these insights do not come with a newly inspired Li: Li has neither transformed herself into a ‘renewed’ self nor a ‘better’ self and perhaps not even a ‘different’ self. Thus, I do not agree with the label “a journey of recovery”²⁴ as the back cover of the Penguin Books edition says, since I would not go so far as to say that the subject has ‘recovered’. It appears as an open ending, since her mental state does not appear to be fully resolved. It remains unclear whether the subject has found a way to cope with her depression or restored her mental health in some way after finishing the book, which might be slightly disturbing to readers who are left wondering how the subject – and therefore the real person – is doing. The subject merely gives hints that her most difficult period has surpassed and belongs to the past. She refers to “the bleakness” she experienced as something that “was”, suggesting this state had passed (Li, 2017, p.200).

Second, just like the author felt addressing the story’s incoherence in the Afterword, Li furthermore feels the need to make a ‘final statement’ on the idea of suicide and depression, by asking herself the question: “What made you think suicide was an appropriate, even the only, option?” (Li, 2017, p.195) It is clear that the author feels the need to address the reader on this topic, perhaps out of concern for the reader, or in order to not spread the wrong idea. Reflecting on how she started writing these essays, she mentions her contradictory motives: “I wanted to argue against suicide as much as for it, which is to say I wanted to keep the option of suicide and I wanted it to be forever taken away from me” (Li, 2017, p.195) True to this statement, Li does not explicitly argue in favor or against suicide, although she certainly hints at the latter, as can already be interpreted in the way she asks herself the question of why she thought it *was* appropriate. Speaking of ‘the bleakness’ of depression, the author concludes: “a sensible goal is to avoid it” with the main, but rather

²⁴ It is likely that this fragment of the paratext is chosen for advertisement purposes, since it stands in line with the preferred restitution narrative in our society.

vague argument that it “sheds little light on things” (Li, 2017, p.200). Thus, there appears a form of closure and therefore a type of coherence, in the sense that throughout the life story, a recurring theme was the subject’s struggle with depression and in the end the author arrives as the message that it is sensible to avoid depression. However, whereas the author might have reached the conclusion that depression must be avoided, the subject appears certainly not recovered from her poor mental state in the end of the work. As a result, this sense of closure in the form of a message appears less powerful. This ‘conflicting’ type of closure, in which the author and subject appear highly distant rather than closely intertwined, is what Stanzel (1992) refers to as ‘dissonance closure’.

3.3.2. Grandin’s ‘minor’ forms of closure

Similar to Li’s work, Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures* does not provide a type of closed ‘definitive’ closure in the last part of the overall story, since the autobiography consists of multiple singular reports published as one book; the last essay is nothing more than another exploration. Nonetheless, many of Grandin’s singular reports do follow a trajectory filled with moments of ‘new insight’ either from reading or experiences, which eventually lead to a ‘further developed’ individual in the end. The subject is highly focused on becoming better at functioning in the world; a project she herself calls: “becoming more normal” (Grandin, 1996, p.31). After reading most of the reports, it is shown how the subject’s capabilities of have further developed through time, such as being more empathetic, or having developed from being a bored, unhappy high-school student toward becoming a successful PhD animal scientist. Although these ‘transformations’ including clearly portrayed results, do lead to satisfying endings on the story-level, simultaneously they could be considered to be minor forms of closure rather than one significant sense of an ending of her overall life story.

It might seem that the subject has successfully transformed in all personal fields, but it must be said that in some other areas the subject does not appear to gain a similar form of closure through new insight or renewed strength. Most prominently personal relationships remain difficult and problematic for her and she has decided to be sexually celibate in order to avoid potential intimate, complicated social situations.

3.3.3. Saunders’ powerful conclusion

The end of Saunders’ life story as organized in her autobiography does portray a powerful conclusion: she ponders over life and death, tackling and answering the big questions human beings face. She shares the most important “cornerstones of my poly-angular personal

manifesto about ‘The Meaning of Life’” (Saunders, 2017, p.252) and elaborates on the main purpose of her life: “being connected” (Saunders, 2017, p.255). Also, she describes the difficult process of constructing her own “death-plan” with lawyers, doctors and family members, since she favors a compassionate ending of her life, rather than years of living in misery (Saunders, 2017, p.238). She concludes with her comfort in the idea that “Those who love me breathe me” (Saunders, 2017, p.256), even after she would pass away.

All this leaves the audience with the satisfying feeling that Saunders is not only thankful for the way her life turned out to be, but also that she seems at peace with both her life as it is, as well as the prospect and arrangement concerning her future death. It is likely that the reader will experience a convincing sense of closure. Given these philosophical and poetic ways of writing and contents in which the narrator concludes her story, Saunders’ autobiography shows significant closure on the discourse-level, concerned with narration. The story is not a closed ending on the story-level, concerned with a sequence of events, as part of a coherent restitution plot in which a disability is ‘conquered’ and fully restored at the end and she lives happily ever after, since the subject is still living with dementia. Saunders’ life story interestingly shows how being at peace with a potential assisted suicide can still bring a powerful, satisfying sense of closure, although this solution certainly does not stand in line with modernist values of remedy underlying the more traditional coherent life story.

3.4. Comparative analysis and conclusion

Broadly, this chapter showed how all three discussed stories are not typical ‘stories’ and adequately portray postmodernist works of literature: they concern two collections of autobiographical essays (Li and Grandin) and a form I might refer to as a creative collage of different types of fragments (Saunders). In general, these three life stories highly defy typical expectations regarding a linearity of events and full closure, with the result that the audience must make an extra effort in order to ‘make sense’ of the story; to produce a more clear coherent unity, that can be better understood.

The choice for a certain arrangement of events seems to cohere with the narrator’s *intent*. These stories show how events are not arranged regarding to linear time, but regarding their relation to an autobiographical theme (in the case of Grandin) or an abstract concept (Li); in the case of Saunders it is highly difficult to see the logic behind her choice of portrayal of events. Li’s story revolves around an inner exploration towards a better self-understanding: she does not want to portray autobiographical events, since she aims to leave

the past behind. Grandin intends to portray her development, but – crucially – concerning separate facets of autism. Thus, within most of her singular reports, she *does* portray linearity, in order to closely follow her growth, step by step, on a specific facet of autism. Saunders strongly holds on to her memories. The narrator passionately and elaborately describes not only her own, but her entire family history. She appears to want to tell as much as possible, since her memories will increasingly vanish.

There appear no ‘plots’ to be resolved, which is likely to constitute full closure. Disabilities play a prominent, even a central role throughout these stories, but these disabilities are neither ‘conquered’ nor are the subjects striving to ‘resolve’ them. Instead, the autobiographical subjects portray how they are learning to increasingly live ‘better’ with their disabilities over time: it is primarily a matter of successfully *adjusting* to the giving circumstances. The overall stories revolve around a – mostly – difficult integration of thoughts, feelings and actions connected to disabilities into their own lives. This appears as an ongoing, never-ending process, rather than as an obstacle that can be overcome permanently. As a result, no full closure in the form of a resolved plot is portrayed. No traditional closed ‘tidy’ strict endings as forms of ‘well-rounded’ closure can be found in all three works: there are no traditional happy endings.

However, particularly Grandin successfully integrates her autism in her life – and even highlights its advantages – which might bring a sense of satisfying closure to the audience. Throughout her entire story, Saunders on the other hand, is evidently struggling and coming to terms with the integration of the ‘unwelcome’ dementia in her life. But in the end, the story does culminate into a thankful and peaceful reflection on her life with dementia. Li is constantly contemplating her personal situation, characterized by her troubles. It could even be considered that Li *does* treat her mental health as something to be resolved, since she is hospitalized twice for her condition. Nevertheless, her state does not appear ‘resolved’ towards the end; despite the author’s ‘final’ moral message to avoid depression, the subject in the story had been ‘left behind’ in a state of poor mental health. *Dear Friend’s* ending is not only significantly ‘open’, but might cause uneasiness to its worried audience.

3.5. Discussion of theory

Generally, these life stories show that the classical Aristotelian coherent narrative ideas of strict chronological linearity of events and closure in the form of a fully resolved plot, do not reflect the narrators’ experiences in life and the way they organize these in their life stories.

Arguably no experience can be perfectly mirrored by narrative, but based on these stories it appears that lived experiences with disabilities do not mirror the traditional idea and frame of a coherent story. In line with this point, it is important to remember and emphasize that stories – including life stories – might have a fixation on the imagery of beginning, middle and end, but the worldly reality has not (Barnes, 2000).

Based on these three life stories, I want to underline that life stories are likely to appear non-linear, as Smith & Watson (2001) have pointed out. These stories seem to suggest that our memory functions more associative, and more focused around themes and concepts, rather than as a strict linear timeline of autobiographical events.

Also, I would urge to think more broadly about the idea of closure in the life story. Based on these three life stories, the master narrative of the coherent model in which in the end a disability is conquered does not appear as an accurate frame for people living with disabilities. We need to broaden our view past the ‘fairy-tale’-like endings concluding with clear *events* that tend to give the audience much satisfaction, such as marriages and winning the jackpot. None of these life stories concluded with events, nor with any other forms of closed endings providing resolved plots. I might call these ‘fairy-tale’-like endings, but paradoxically these *are* the endings society still envisions if we look at the examples of coherent life stories as our master narratives²⁵. However, the idea of the resolution of the plot bringing full ‘closed’ closure is not accurate – not relatable – to the actual complexity of life; life is perhaps never fully ‘done’ in one’s experience and we cannot narrate beyond the end of it. Thus, the closure of a life story appears complicated, and in order to better understand endings of life stories, literary scholars and narrative psychologists, need to examine the notion of open endings, as well as to endings that involve the interaction between author-narrator-subject. More research on literary closure is needed, since to my knowledge, no adequate articles concerning closure in life stories are published.

It seems too easy to say that these types of non-linearity of events and anti-closure as contributing elements for narrative incoherence point to the storyteller as an ‘incoherent’ and therefore troubled self (Linde, 1993; Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Strict linearity and full closure seem like debatable indications for one’s self as ‘coherent’ and thus healthy, since it appears that there are multiple ways to organize and constitute a narrative self. Saunders and Grandin show a tremendous insight in their lives, but using unconventional life stories-

²⁵ See my discussion of the examples McAdams (2006) gives concerning cases of ‘the good life’ in American society in chapter 1.2.

models. Rather than seeing this described ‘incoherence’ as a problem, it can be seen as a profound and accurate representation of a person that fundamentally *is* complex.

An unconventional life story, playing with the traditional linear chronology and full closure, may be called incoherent and be criticized for, but at the same time can be praised for its creativity, richness and depth in its portrayal of experienced life. I would urge for this latter, more open attitude of looking at incoherent life stories. An incoherent life story could be embraced for its attempt to mirror experience in how it is profoundly perceived and organized, since it might provide a more accurate representation of lived experience and therefore more insight. When experience is forced to put into the coherent frame – without neglecting its advantages in providing a clear mental organization – there is the danger that experience will be simplified. Nonetheless, the form of a life story will always convey a sense of complexity-reduction of experiences to some extent.

CHAPTER 4: THE RELATION BETWEEN INCOHERENT LIFE STORIES AND SUBJECT FORMATION

“When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams – this may be madness. Too much sanity may be madness.”
(Saunders, 2017, p.10)

4.1. Introduction

Following Bruner’s (1986) idea of the ‘narrative identity thesis’, this chapter aims to analyse the relation between incoherent life stories and subject formation. Whereas the previous chapter discussed elements of incoherence on the dimension of the story-form, this chapter discusses elements of incoherence specifically related to subject formation, referring to the ways in which subjects are constructed through indicators in the autobiographical life story²⁶. I choose to analyse three specific elements that transgress the idea of coherence and are related to the construction of the narrative subject. In theory by McAdams (2006) and Smith & Watson (2001) these elements come to the fore as the most important indicators for a type of incoherent subject. They are: defying expectations regarding how people typically behave and think, conflicting self-identities, and, lastly, defying expectations regarding typical coherent master narratives in society.

Since particularly the actions and thoughts of the subjects in incoherent life stories tend to cause reactions to its audience, I will also briefly reflect on this dynamic in analysing the first element of incoherence. The second element will exclusively be discussed in relation to Grandin and Saunders, since Li’s life story fails to portray clear types of identity; Li does not speak of conflicting self-identities, because she is not sure of who she *is* in the first place. The third element has been covered in the previous chapter by looking at types of ‘anti-closure’ in life stories, that defy expectations regarding the master narrative of the restitution plot in which a complication is conquered. However, this element shall here furthermore be discussed in relation to exclusively the subject of Li’s story, since Li’s life vividly portrays other ways of defying expectations regarding master narratives. All elements shall be analysed separately and successively. My findings from these life stories will subsequently lead to a comparative analysis and concluding remarks. This chapter concludes with a brief

²⁶ See chapter 2.5.3. for the theory behind the idea of autobiographical subject formation.

critical discussion of the academic theory concerning the relation between subject formation and life stories.

4.2. Defying expectations regarding how humans ‘typically’ act and think

4.2.1. Li’s bleak thoughts

Since Li’s work primarily consists of her interior explorations, the ways in which she defies the audience’s expectations are mainly derived from her original perspectives regarding concepts and (their relation to) her own life. Now and then, the narrator explicitly mentions that she believes she sees things differently than others. A significant part of these unconventional thoughts reflect the depressive state – what the narrator refers to as a state of “bleakness” (Li, 2017, p.200) – the subject is in, which is likely to be uncommon if not unheard of for a majority of the audience. Illustrative examples of these include: “There is this emptiness in me. All the things in the world are not enough to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing” (Li, 2017, p.18). And: “I fear taking you – you, my life, and all that makes it worth living – seriously” (Li, 2017, p.25) is another illustration, which might be confusing and difficult to comprehend for a large part of its readers.

In the following passage, the subject pictures herself in a severely troubled state which brings her a soothing feeling: “On the layover in the Amsterdam airport, I had caught a glimpse of myself unconscious on the floor of a freight elevator, the door of which had been left open. The thought was a comfort. One could die on a trip” (Li, 2017, p.24). On the one hand, this passage in which dying is considered a pleasant idea, might cause an unsettling if not a disturbing effect to its audience. On the other hand, this highly profound and vulnerable scene could create empathy. Something that might have been unimaginable and therefore incomprehensible for the majority of its readers is made vividly imaginable and perhaps better understandable, while others might identify with the narrator’s described thoughts. Either way, these passages are likely to augment an understanding of living with depression.

4.2.2. Grandin’s process of ‘becoming more normal’

The narrator of Grandin’s life story not only elaborately discusses her behavior and thinking, but she interestingly describes this as a-typical: the world is explicitly categorized in terms of ‘normal people’ and herself as being ‘different’. The narrator even uses harsh terms for this. The subject’s behavior is regularly negatively compared to that of a wild animal. She calls herself the “weird sister” (Grandin, 1996, p.111) and through the eyes of her mother she

describes herself as “somebody from another planet” (Grandin, 1996, p.93). In the paragraph under the subtitle ‘Becoming more normal’ the narrator says: “the more I learn, the more I realize more and more that how I think and feel is different” (Grandin, 1996, p.32). It appears to be the subject’s aim to get ‘more normal’, in the sense of better functioning in the world while living with autism.

Detailed below are four most prominent recurring aspects that are likely to rupture the familiar frame of reference for a major part of the audience. Due to either their unconventional or extreme nature they could augment the reader’s understanding of people living with autism.

First, the subject’s mind works differently compared to most people, since she is a visual thinker. Amongst other things, this means that the subject needs to develop a concrete visual symbol in order to understand an abstraction. “At that time I still struggled in the social arena, largely because I didn’t have a concrete visual corollary for the abstraction known as ‘getting along with people’” (Grandin, 1996, p.20). A concept like ‘personal relationships’, started making more sense after she developed a visualization, a symbolic key, that is usually a window or a door.

Second, she claims to not have any social intuition and thus personal relationships are something that she doesn’t understand. Her behavior is exclusively guided by pure logic, whereas, she realized, for most people their motivation in daily life is guided by (complex) emotions, in particular during most social interactions. Her problem with reading emotional cues has caused friction with her family members. She needs help in the form of long discussions from friends who can function as translators, when she has to deal with family relationships to understand social behavior driven by emotions. Also, as said earlier, in order to avoid complicated social situations, she has made the decision to remain celibate.

Third, the subject lives with overly sensitive senses: loud noises cause pain: “When I was in college my roommate’s hair dryer sounded like a jet plane taking off” (Grandin, 1996, p.63). Shampooing hurt her scalp: “It was as if the fingers rubbing my head had sewing thimbles on them” (Grandin, 1996, p.62) and It takes her at least two weeks to tolerate changes in clothing: “New underwear is a scratchy horror” (Grandin, 1996, p.62).

Fourth, it is normal for the subject to feel constant anxiety, although this is reduced in later years. “I am one of those people who are born with a nervous system that operates in a perpetual state of fear and anxiety [...]. I used to think it was normal to feel nervous all the time, and it was a revelation to find out that most people do not have constant anxiety

attacks” (Grandin, 1996, p.130). In puberty she describes herself as living in a constant state of stage fright.

4.2.3. Saunders’ ‘daily failure’

Saunders’ autobiography is strongly characterized by the subject’s daily tasks that are done differently since typically something is forgotten. The subject accidentally shoplifts by walking out of a store with a pair of pants over her shoulder or she leaves the car unlocked with the keys still in the ignition. Other recurring troubles are taking the right medicine on time and Saunders’ struggles with putting on clothes in the right manner, without forgetting a component of the outfit. The subject also specifically elaborates on the “typical progression of a Gerda phone call”:

(1) Find the phone number (I no longer remember any phone numbers, except now and then my own); is it in my electronic or paper address book? (2) If electronic, open email to search contacts. (3) Forget why email is open, start catching up with unanswered messages. (4) Eventually remember original intention (sometimes). (5) Retrieve number, go to the phone, hear the message beep. (6) Retrieve messages, return urgent calls. (7) Start cleaning the counter where the phone is plugged in. (8) Damn! Who was I going to call again? (Saunders, 2017, p.81)

Saunders’ demonstration of her struggles provides a new perspective and therefore a sense of renewed awareness for a large part of the audience who will normally execute these daily tasks without any or too much thought or reflection. This is an accurate example of what Felski (2008) means by recognition as a function of literature, in which something vague becomes clear. Readers will recognize that what are ‘normal’ small tasks for them, are of more difficulty for others.

Since the subject used to be able to execute these tasks without trouble before the effects of dementia, she regularly addresses that she finds her behavior embarrassing, especially in an intellectual, academic context. This is emphasized by the ways in which the narrator herself refers to these acts as “my daily misadventures” (Saunders, 2017, p.ix) or “my daily failure” (Saunders, 2017, p.81). These sayings not only reflect that she defies her own expectations of how she is supposed to behave normally, but also illustrate that she criticizes her own behavior.

4.3. Conflicting self-identities

4.3.1. Grandin's pure logic versus animal-like emotions

It is vividly portrayed in the life story that the narrator sees her sense of self consisting of two opposing self-identities: a purely intellectual self versus an extreme 'animal-like' emotional self. Again, every person contains both a rational versus an emotional side, and that is not noteworthy in itself. However, in Grandin's life story these not only appear to unconventional extreme extents, but the conflicts that are caused between these two contradictory selves appear as an ongoing struggle for the subject throughout her life story. As a result of her highly contradictory behaviour, the subject actions and life as a whole appears less coherent, as I shall further illustrate below.

The narrator considers herself to be a "totally logical and scientific person" (Grandin, 1996, p.222) whose actions are guided by intellect, which is put forward as the most prominent and stable characterization of who she is. Grandin identifies with Mr. Spock (a *Star Trek* character) because she completely related to his purely logical way of thinking, free from any emotions. But also, the narrator identifies with animals in many ways, particularly concerning her emotions. The narrator describes how, similar to animals, her emotions are simple to the point of childlike, rather than 'more complex' which is generally attributed to mature people. Grandin's most prominent emotion is fear. When minor changes or unexpected actions in her daily life occur, the narrator describes how she has hyperacute senses and intense fear responses that may be more like those of a prey-species animal than of most humans²⁷. Her intellect is striving and challenging herself constantly, whereas emotionally she appears extremely nervous and wants to flee from all danger: "My intellect was trying to make sense of the world, but it was being driven by an engine of animal fears. [...] Emotionally I was like an animal surveying the plains for lions, but symbolically the high place signified striving to find the meaning of life." (Grandin, 1996, pp.96-97).

Grandin devotes one chapter to her belief in medicine for people living with autism. By taking medication the subject can better control her overactive nervous system, which is what she strives for. This underlines how she sees her logical side as (the preferred version of) herself, and her animal-like emotions as unwelcome deviations.

²⁷ Apart from this similarities concerning emotions, the subject identifies with animals through other ways: the subject can think without language, has a great survival instinct, embraces her habits, has extreme bodily reactions, possesses savant-type skills, thinks in details, and has an extreme sensitivity to tone.

4.3.2. Saunders: rationality and dementia

Saunders' life story heavily revolves around how the diagnosis of dementia at age sixty and the experiences of living with dementia, caused a self-described "monumental change" (2017, p.13) for the subject's identity. I discussed earlier that individuals convey multiple self-identities or subject positionings in life²⁸. However, what is interesting in Saunders' case, is that the narrator very vividly portrays how two types of identities that she portrays as two extremes truly clash:

In the days after my neurologist gave a name to what was wrong with me, the separate circles in which I had kept the images of myself as *a woman who lives and dies by her rationality* and that of my mother after her illness as *a Dickensian madwoman* gradually began to overlap like the intersection of a Venn diagram. (Saunders, 2017, p.13)

Although in the passage above the narrator speaks mildly of 'overlapping', it is evident in the life story how 'rational' Saunders as opposed to 'dementing' Saunders appear not so much as overlapping, but appear foremost *in conflict*. The entrance of dementia and its effects in her life appears portrayed as an unwelcome intruder, she tries to stop to the best of her abilities. The appearance of the label and image of the 'Dickensian madwoman' illustrates the negativity in the subject's ideas concerning an individual living with dementia, which I will further detail.

Dementia is relentlessly portrayed as nothing but a threat to the narrator's self-perception as a rational highly-functioning intellectual. Dementia is generally foremost described as a form of danger, that "threatened" (Saunders, 2017, p.1) her intellectual identity. Its effects make the subject feel like "an alien of sorts, a stranger even to myself" (Saunders, 2017). Apart from daily tasks becoming increasingly difficult to do, Saunders is also being forced to quit her job at university, which formed perhaps the most prominent part of the subject's identity²⁹. The narrator also talks of dementia as a "disease" that can

²⁸ See chapter 2.4.3.

²⁹ After her move to America the subject is struggling to find her new 'American self'. Only when she enters a more intellectual environment through the PhD program – representing the self-described "major identity-forging experience" (Saunders, 2017, p.173) of her adult life – she passionately describes how she felt like herself again: "I was again finding my own voice" (Saunders, 2017, p.173). Being enrolled in the program created an "identity overlay" that "swelled her being into something fuller" (Saunders, 2017, p.173) to use her own words. The narrator visually adds to this, by saying that the subject now cloaked her 'self' in a "Gogolian overcoat" (Saunders, 2017, p.173) of philosopher/intellectual. Here, the image of her sense of self as characterized by rationality is again underlined.

“progressively destroy the very self that used to be capable of love and its expression” (Saunders, 2017, p.66). Although the narrator critiques metaphors concerning an individual living with dementia as a “neither-dead-nor-alive identity” and a “non-person” (Saunders, 2017, pp. 230-231) for their stigmatizing effects, she certainly does not consider them as false representations of dementia and even acknowledges that she won’t be able to “opt out of zombie existence by myself and my own terms” (Saunders, 2017, p.234). The enduring conflict between ‘the former’ intellectual self the subject tries to hold on to and the self that is living with dementia, results into the formation of an unstable subject, struggling and failing to be at peace with who she is (becoming).

4.4. Defying expectations regarding typical coherent master narratives in society

Li refuses to obey to the ‘typical’ and preferred life narratives of ‘the good life’ in a given society. “I have spent much of my life turning away from the scripts given to me, in China and in America,” (Li, 2017, p.65) Li comments, suggesting the ‘scripts’ to refer to the dominant and ‘normal’ walks of life. Since the narrator only shares very few autobiographical events, it is difficult to say how she refused to follow the typical Chinese life. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, the tone in which the narrator describes for instance her time in the army seems to hint at her disapproval of China’s political regime. However, the fact that she moves away from China, is arguably perhaps the strongest way to refuse to obey the Chinese narrative of the good life. The narrator describes how not leaving was never an option; the subject furthermore moves away in order to pursue a career in science as an aspiring immunologist.

However, by the time the subject is in a science program in America, she is uncertain if she should continue:

My doubt was that I could easily see my life unfurl in front of me: a degree in a year, a few years of post-doctorate training, a secure job in academia or the biomedical industry, a house and children, a dog because a dog rollicking in a neatly maintained yard had always appeared to me to be the pinnacle of an American life. (Li, 2017, p.176)

This pictured potential life story illustrates the ‘typical’ and coherent narrative that is preferred in – at least – American society. This shows what one is ‘supposed to do’ according to the master narratives in American society, but it appears that the subject does not care for this predictable and typical life narrative.

The subject decides to turn away from this logical career- and life path: she quits science to start a writing career. It is illustrated how people reacted negatively to this career-choice, moving away from a generally preferred life path. It is a “grave mistake” according to a friend’s husband, who asked her: “Why do you want to make your life difficult?” (Li, 2017, p.5). Her own husband cautioned her that writing would require more than a scientific career. “No real madness, no real art,” (Li, 2017, p.114) he quoted an old Chinese saying. Their negative reactions further underline how the typical American life path – as the narrator painted an example of in the passage above – is celebrated. It appears that a refusal of the typical narrative is even condemned.

Paradoxically, when the subject turned out to be a successful writer³⁰, this (first) rather suddenly made her fit into the coherent American life narrative, and (second) – perhaps as a result of the former – made her ‘properly American’, in the eyes of others. Someone described the life of Li when she was onstage – likely during a reading – as an example of the American Dream. And in reaction to Li being an author, a Chinese friend emailed her saying: “You’ve always been a dreamer, but America has made your dream come true” (Li, 2017, p.12). Thus, by moving from abroad to America and then turning away from the typical career-path to become a successful writer, as an expression of ‘following and realizing your dreams’, she seemed to have portrayed an example of the American Dream, which is perhaps the ultimate if not most celebrated life narrative in America.

4.5. Comparative analysis and conclusion

My analysis in this chapter aimed to discuss the relation between subject formation and incoherent life stories, based on a set of incoherent elements on the narrative dimension of subject formation. Generally, it seems that the ways in which the subject comes to the fore in a life story does seem to significantly affect to whether a life story could be characterized as an incoherent life story.

I would suggest that, based on these three stories, this influence appears most powerfully by defying audience’s expectations regarding how humans ‘typically’ both behave and think. Since the subjects truly will defy the audience’s expectations, this incoherent element concerning subject formation seems both the most convincing indication

³⁰ The books written by Li have been published into more than twenty different languages, and have received numerous awards, among the most prestigious: the Guardian First Book Awards, Frank O’Connor International Short Story Awards, and the PEN/Hemingway Awards. Her work *A thousand years of good prayers* (2006) was translated into a movie.

for and prominent part of an incoherent life story. The stories will initially confuse the majority of the audience and subsequently augment an understanding of this behaviour and thinking. It constitutes a renewed awareness.

Similar to this ‘defying’-element, the subjects’ struggle that is linked to conflicting self-identities is highly notable when reading Grandin’s and Saunders’ life stories. This element interestingly appears as an ongoing theme throughout these life stories and they talk openly about their conflicting self-identities since these conflicts closely relate to their experiences of dementia and autism. Grandin and Saunders both approach one part of themselves as something that is considered an unwelcome threat, or a deviation from who they believe they are (Saunders) or from their preferred version of themselves (Grandin). Because these self-identities are put forward as in conflict with each other, with one self-identity described as a deviation from the preferred norm of one’s character, it could be seen as contributing to an incoherent subject. Furthermore, conflicting self-identities could relate to the aspect of incoherence in the life story, since they are likely to complicate if not confuse an understanding (‘making-sense’) of the subject for its audience.

Lastly, because the stories do not follow the restitution plot, all subjects defy expectations regarding master narratives. The subject of Li’s life story defies the master narratives in both China and America, which makes her story certainly more incoherent. However, by refusing the typical career-paths, Li also, interestingly, fits into the master narrative of the American Dream in the end. The narrator however, does not agree with this label, which shows how ‘fitting in’ into a master narratives is decided upon by society, rather than based on one’s personal perception.

4.6. Discussion of theory

Based on my findings in this chapter, I want to stress the difficulty in both defining and interpreting what precisely makes the formation of a subject ‘incoherent’. Does a *changing* subject – perhaps as a result of an emerging disability – point to an incoherent subject? Not necessarily, since – as Smith and Watson (2001), McAdams (1993), and Moretti (1987) point out – it is not only likely, but even considered a characteristic of life narratives that its subjects portray changes and undergo development: it is considered normal if not natural³¹.

³¹ In Moretti’s seminal work on specifically the Bildungsroman – *The Way of the World* (1987) – the literary critic argues why the Bildungsroman is a symbolic form of modernity. In Moretti’s description, the defining characteristic of specifically the Bildungsroman is however not in the personal development or the growth of the hero, as is usually considered to be the central idea behind this form of literary fiction, but rather in its youth.

Subsequently, I wonder about the subject's multiple self-identities and when this multiplicity starts forming an *incoherent* subject. Grandin and Saunders portrayed widely different self-identities. Saunders is for instance at times a daughter, a mother, a wife, an intellectual teacher, and a fragile patient. But then *when exactly*, at what point, can such a portrayed subject be considered an incoherent, and perhaps 'troublesome' construction of self-identities? This chapter highlighted and proposed how particularly *conflicting* self-identities serve as an indicator for an incoherent subject, but can multiple self-identities also point to a sense of incoherence within the subject? Perhaps incoherence related to one's self-identities is to be seen as an intrinsic part of individuals and therefore their narrative subjects.

Paradoxically, the life story – no matter how (in)coherent it may appear – can in itself be seen as the (attempted) integration of many different self-identities into a *coherent* whole, as in the embodiment of multiple self-identities the subject takes in daily life (McAdams, 1993).

Lastly, an autobiographical life story is typically explained as 'the story of one's personality', and therefore the narrator is assumed to have something to say about the autobiographical subject (Lejeune, 2016). In many articles concerning life stories it is taken for granted that the narrator *can* define her- or himself. However, the narrator of Li's life story is unable to construct the subject in 'direct definition', claiming she is without "a solid and explicable self" (Li, 2017, p.26). The narrator never makes any precise claims concerning what characterizes her and appears unable to understand and define herself. Perhaps scholars must be more careful in assuming that the narrator of an autobiographical life story can understand and define one's self. Since, to my knowledge, no theory has been formulated about the inability to define a subject in – paradoxically – an elaborate autobiographical life story, more research is needed to examine this phenomenon and its implications.

Youth allows the narrative to symbolically represent the 'revolutionary vertigo' and the 'formlessness' that attend the experience of modernity.

CHAPTER 5: MEANING IN LIFE IN INCOHERENT LIFE STORIES

“Like all grand narratives about the meaning of one’s life, mine is a bricolage of found tales, some of which I have kept as is because of their vintage, poetic charm, and others that I have refurbished for my own particular tastes.”
(Saunders, 2017, p.252)

5.1. Introduction

Where the previous two chapters showed why the life stories of Li, Grandin, and Saunders could be considered to be incoherent life stories, it is the purpose of this chapter to analyze how meaning in life comes to the fore in these incoherent life stories. This analysis derives from an understanding of meaning in life as given by Derkx³² (2011). First, I shall analyze how each narrator appears to define or see meaning in life. Second, I will analyze how Derkx’ seven ‘needs for meaning’ come to the fore in these life stories and to which extent. I conclude this chapter with a comparative analysis and conclusion. This chapter will exclusively portray these outcomes. Most of the points I address in my comparative analysis and conclusion will be further explored in the next chapter. Chapter six further builds upon this chapter by discussing what these findings appear to reveal about the concepts of meaning in life and (in)coherent life stories, as well as the potential relation between the two.

5.2. Li trying to survive when ‘nothing matters’

The narrator of Li’s life story does not define meaning in life and does not speak of her life in terms of meaningfulness. Instead, the story strongly focuses on the struggle of living life: its difficulties and troubles. Rather than exploring what makes her life worth living, the narrator looks at life more practically. How do I keep going? How do I survive? This focus on surviving is illustrated by a call she made to a friend. She asked him how he lives without killing himself (Li, 2017, p.80). Moreover, “Nothing matters,” (Li, 2017, p.109) appears as the narrator’s overarching look on life, which suggests a great sense of meaninglessness in how she experiences life. She describes her struggle to take her life seriously. But despite her conviction that her life conveys (close to) no meaning at all, in the struggle of surviving and staying healthy, Li is paradoxically exploring ways to find a sense of meaning in life.

The narrator talks of how books can offer “a haven” (Li, 2017, p.186) and she also mentions that: “It is the moments spent alone that are the preferred narrative: I was happy

³² See chapter 1.2. for a description regarding Derkx’ concept of meaning in life.

walking by myself” (Li, 2017, p.36). However, what gives one comfort and makes one happy does not necessarily mirror what makes one’s life meaningful (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). When reading and interpreting her life story it does seem likely that the practice of writing and reading books seems to make her life at least more meaningful.

By applying Derkx’ seven needs for meaning to Li’s life story, it seems that Derkx’ understanding of a meaningful life also points to a low sense of meaning in life in the case of Li: the extent to which she experiences her life to contain these needs for meaning appears rather low, as will be detailed below.

It appears that Li most prominently lacks a sense of purpose. Li clearly fails to see her actions or her life as a whole in light of an overarching purpose: she seems disorientated. Whereas her roommate in the hospital calls her ill, Li considers herself to be “stranded” (Li, 2017, p.30). She does not elaborate on what this precisely entails, but the use of this word seems to suggest that she stands still, with no inspiration or motivation to go further. Being a writer appears to show a purpose in her life, but it seems that Li would reject this suggestion as a prominent purpose, because in one passage she says that writing – just as reading and living – is merely a “futile effort” (Li, 2017, p.111). Writing does not seem to truly matter.

Li also sees herself as both replaceable and invisible, and therefore her sense of self-worth appears extremely low. The narrator regularly describes how she fails ‘to find’ a solid and strong self. “All the things in the world are not enough to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing” (Li, 2017, p.18) the narrator describes. Her sense of ‘I’ – a word she despises – means very little to herself. Her belief that nothing matters, including her own life and her own actions, is extremely evident throughout her life story and appears as a source for much of the subject’s personal confusions and aimlessness. Li fails to understand her troubles and feelings and more general: who she *is* as a person. Thus, her sense of (intelligible) coherence also appears significantly low.

The subject resists forming attachments to people, places and objects, because she believes that attachments would only cause more complications in her life. However, the subject does describe regularly and elaborately how ever since she was a child she powerfully connects with “dead people and imaginative characters” (Li, 2017, p.132) in the books she reads; more than real people. Thus, her sense of connectedness with real people appears very weak, but with people made out of words rather strong. Also, reading books appear to truly bring moments of transcendence to the subject. Books allow her to see the world differently and raise her above the everyday life. She seems to care so much about reading that she has difficulties living in the real world.

Li also appear to experience efficacy and especially transcendence. The subject seems to have functioned efficiently as a mother in combination with the profession of being either a scientist or a teacher and author: she describes how she would write from midnight till four AM on her novels. Her books have been published to critically acclaimed success. It remains unclear whether her efficacy when it comes to being a mother and being an author declined in the period she lived with severe depression, although her hospitalizations and the general impressions of her mental state suggest it did. Nevertheless, even while living with depression, she managed to construct the literary work *Dear Friend*.

5.3. Grandin's 'great urge' to be meaningful

What is generally visible in Grandin's life story is that she strongly feels the need to lead a meaningful life and it appears specifically when it comes to a sense of purpose. In particular her involvement with both constructing and working on a new type of construction that slaughters cattle – named 'The Stairway to Heaven' – makes her awareness of how precious life is grow, and causes her to ponder over her own existence: "When your time comes and you are walking up the proverbial stairway, will you be able to look back and be proud of what you did with your life? Did you contribute something worthwhile to society? Did your life have meaning?" (Grandin, 1996, p.230) Thus it is in light of death, of which she is very aware due to her profession, that she feels the need to live a meaningful life. For Grandin, there clearly appears to be a task, in the form of a contribution to society, to be done while she's alive.

Following Derkx' understanding of meaning in life, the life Grandin portrays in her life story appears extraordinary meaningful. All seven needs for meaning come to the fore to a significant extent, as shall be further detailed below.

Grandin's sense of purpose, efficacy, and self-worth come to the fore most prominently in her life story. "I've devoted my life to reforming and improving the livestock industry," (1996, p.234) says Grandin. What makes her life "significant" is "being a great scientist" (1996, p.227) she describes in another passage. Apart from this purpose of being an animal scientist, the narrator also addresses – perhaps even more prominently – how she feels the need to inform the public about people living with autism. Grandin finds comfort and inspiration in the idea that the effect that one's thoughts have on other people can be immortal: it can live on for generations, unlike she herself. Thus, she feels a "great urge" to spread her ideas (Grandin, 1996, p.232). Both her academic publication and informative

(popular) books, as well as the slaughtering machine she invented, illustrate her efficacy. Grandin believes that only through her unconventional, creative ways, she could have become this successful. She is explicitly proud of how she has developed as a person and what she has achieved throughout her life. She praises her skills, qualities, and thinking by embracing their uniqueness, claiming genius is an abnormality.

Grandin also has a clear moral justification for her actions. Generally, it is through logic reasoning that she is convinced of the morality of her acts in many different spheres. This morality is especially interesting when it comes to her profession of slaughtering cattle. Grandin is convinced that the slaughter plant is not wrong. Instead, she sees it as a much gentler way to die for animals, than through starvation, predators, or exposure in nature. For one living thing to survive another one must die, she believes, claiming this is the natural cycle of birth and death.

It is primarily this strong relationship with animals that furthermore leads to connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning. The narrator describes regularly how she feels a deep connection to animals, while relationships with fellow humans appear much more complicated. Although Grandin (2017) is a person guided by logic, exclusively animals cause her to experience moments of transcendence which make her feel closer to God:

When the animal remained completely calm I felt an overwhelming feeling of peacefulness, as if God had touched me. [...] A good restraint chute operator has to not just like the cattle, but love them. The more gently I was able to hold the animal with the apparatus, the more peaceful I felt. As the life force left the animal, I had deep religious feelings. For the first time in my life logic had been completely overwhelmed with feeling I did not know I had. (p.238)

In other passages she describes how she felt “totally at one with the universe” (Grandin, 2017, p.237) when, again, the animals appeared perfectly calm in the chute.

Lastly, Grandin shows a tremendous sense of (intelligible) coherence. Through experience, through a high sense of self-examination, and through reading, she increasingly learns about herself. She convincingly understands her behavior as a person living with autism and portrays clear and in-depth self-insight. Not only does she understand her own ‘autistic world’, but also the world of what she calls ‘normal people’. She has figured out for what specific reasons she has troubles ‘fitting in’ socially, but also why she has become a successful scientist. Through understanding who she is and how she is different than most others – as well as *similar* to others living with autism – she broadly understands how

different people in the world behave, think and feel. Nevertheless, social and emotional knowledge during interactions with people remain difficult to understand for her.

5.4. Saunders formulating and following explicit frameworks

Free from any doubts, Saunders knows what makes her life meaningful and manages to explicitly share and organize these well-thought-out beliefs convincingly towards the very end of her life story. In doing so, the narrator constructs a type of framework of coherent meaning. Generally, the narrator's idea of a meaningful life that comes to the front conveys: being in connection with family and friends and being accepted by them; being mentally aware; having a good-functioning mind; being able to feel the qualities of joy and excitement; and avoiding physical and mental suffering. The narrator not merely rationally knows and formulates what makes her life meaningful, the subject also actively acts upon these convictions in the autobiographical episodes earlier in the story, which makes her life appear meaningful.

The narrator describes how her purpose in life is “being connected, with honesty and integrity” to all facets of the world, particularly to “my fellow humans” (Saunders, 2017, p.255). Throughout the book, the narrator paints a picture of herself as being an empathetic and social person. Her life is embedded in the midst of neighbors, colleagues, friends and family. Saunders appears in particular as a concerned and caring person towards her relatives. Thus, the subject's behavior in service of both ‘purpose’ and ‘connectedness’ – as two needs for meaning that appear intertwined for her – strongly come to the front in her life story.

Furthermore, coherence in Derkx' understanding is prominently featured in Saunders' life story. It appears that Saunders is convinced about what to do with her life in order to lead a meaningful existence, because she has the human condition within its context fully figured out. The narrator shares her “poly-angular personal manifesto about ‘The Meaning of Life’” in her life story (Saunders, 2011, p.252). This is Saunders' alternative version of the Bible, inspired by science, African philosophy, and French existentialism, which includes her own personally constructed versions of Genesis, Exodus, Song of Solomon, as well as her own Psalms, Acts and Revelations. Here, the narrator explains what characterizes human beings: “existence precedes essence”, and what one must do: “We ourselves have to endow our lives with meaning” (Saunders, 2011, p.253). The narrator also recurrently reflects on her own time and place in the midst of multiple contexts: planet earth, the galaxy, and as a part of the history of mankind. By embedding herself in the universe she strongly sees the coherence

between her own life and what is surrounding her: her temporary existence as a minor part of the grand narrative of the universe. The narrator not exclusively rationally put her life into perspective, but she also *feels* connected to her surroundings; here, the notion of transcendence comes to the front. “We are all connected: to each other biologically, to the earth chemically, and to the rest of the universe atomically”, (2017, p.255) Saunders describes. The thought that all people before her are a part of her, and the idea that those who love her will continue to ‘breathe’ her after she passes away, brings her tremendous comfort.

However, what is interesting in Saunders’ life story, is that from the moment her short-term memory starts to fail, the subject increasingly loses the ability to place both her activities as well as her life as a whole into a larger framework of meaning: “In the present [...] I frequently am bewildered about why, where, and who I am: What was the goal that had bounced me out of bed and sent me outside to stare at the garage door?” (Saunders, 2017, p.14) In this example, She generally fails to understand a sense of coherence in who she is and what she is doing. More specifically, she fails to see her actions in light of a purpose, and in forgetting what she is doing for what reason, she is also losing her efficacy. As a result, her actions lack meaning and cause bewilderment. She does not realize why she is doing what she does. This sense of confusion and disorientation stands in sharp contrast with the certainty and efficacy with which she used to live as a subsequent result of her clear framework regarding what her meaningful life entails. Her self-worth, purpose, and efficacy, are largely related to being a hard-working ‘intellectual’ self, forming the core characteristics of the person she believes she is. Because she fails (or seems to refuse) to come to terms with her self living with dementia, the story portrays how the subject’s self-worth is declining.

The narrator acknowledges that living a meaningful life according to her own terms is threatened as a result of dementia. As a result, Saunders constructs criteria for ‘An Acceptable Quality of Life in the Context of Dementia’, consisting of fourteen hypothetical circumstances in her future-life. When friends and family see the quality of her life dwindling below acceptability based on these indications, Saunders wants them to arrange her assisted suicide so that she can die in a dignified, painless, and humane manner. These instructions portray a (last) form of efficacy, given the prospect of losing this efficacy. To move from a manifesto regarding the *meaning* in life, to an overview concerning the *quality* of life seems to suggest a shift in focus. Apparently, as a result of a growing involvement of dementia, life is less focused on meaning in life but more about securing a minimal quality of life. Thus, meaning in life becomes less important.

A recurring theme in these fourteen circumstances concerns her main purpose: being connected to others, with honesty and integrity. Thus, connectedness as a need for meaning is still most prominently evident in her quality in life. Saunders' main worry is that she cannot properly engage with other people: "Is it still a pleasure for me to cuddle with a friend or child or grandchild? [...] Do I give comfort to my friends, children, and grandchildren, or am I disturbed by their presence and suspicious of their intentions?" (Saunders, 2017, p.250). This fragment shows that when Saunders can no longer adequately participate in these actions connected to her purpose in life, she experience less meaning and less quality in life, and even prefers to have an assisted suicide. This illustrates how much she believes in, and holds on to her constructed framework concerning her quality of life, and then in particular to her self-described main purpose.

5.5. Comparative analysis and conclusion

In these incoherent life stories, different needs for meaning come to the fore to different extents. In Li's life story, most needs for meaning fail to appear, although some needs for meaning – particularly connectedness and transcendence – are present to some extent. Grandin convincingly fulfills all of Derkx' seven needs for meaning to a truly great extent in her life story. In Saunders' case, her 'former' life appeared meaningful, but due to the effects of her disability, her: coherence, purpose, efficacy, and self-worth are significantly declining. Interestingly, all three subjects of these incoherent life stories experience connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning.

Li's life story portrays a very low sense of meaning in life, Grandin's incoherent life story appears highly meaningful, and in Saunders' case, the extent of meaning in life appears to be declining as a result of the effects of dementia. Both Saunders' and Grandin's incoherent life stories construct explicitly and elaborately their type of framework of coherent (needs for) meaning in their life stories: Saunders' life revolves around being connected to others, whereas Grandin aims to share her ideas and inform the public. Their stories portray how they truly live their lives in service of these convictions, and see their lives in light of these beliefs.

In light of the topic of my thesis focused on incoherent life stories, it is specifically relevant to look at (intelligible) coherence as a need for meaning in Derkx' understanding. Whereas Li does not portray this type of coherence, since she cannot understand who she is, both Saunders and particularly Grandin do fulfill this need for meaning. Grandin understand

her behavior as an autistic person in light of the world of ‘normal people’ and her life story significantly addresses her process of trying to further understand and strengthen her place in this context. Saunders portrays an incredible high sense of this type of coherence, given her manifesto regarding meaning in life. She precisely understands who she is as a human and what she personally must do as part of the broadest context one might see oneself to be a part of. However, due to her dementia she appears to lose this ability to situate her life and her actions into perspective. Nonetheless, (intelligible) coherence as a need for meaning based on Derkx’ understanding, *can* paradoxically be found in incoherent life stories. Especially Grandin’s life story illustrates this point, since she does not lose this ability to see coherence, unlike Saunders.

Disabilities appear to cause varying effects to one’s meaning in life. In Li’s case, it seems likely that her depression (further) complicates experiencing meaning in life. It remains however difficult to analyze the precise effects of this disability. Since Grandin has always lived with autism, this disability does not cause a similar type of change when it comes to meaning in life. Living with autism has always been her reality, which might make it easier for her to integrate this disability into her life. In the case of Saunders, the meaningfulness in her life is, without a doubt, affected and under pressure due to the effects of dementia.

Lastly, through analyzing meaning in life, death comes to the fore in all three stories. Whereas Li sees death as a place of comfort and for Grandin death appears as a motivator to make the most out of life, for Saunders death is an escape: an exit from a life that is not meaningful in her perception anymore.

CHAPTER 6: ENHANCING AN UNDERSTANDING OF MEANING IN LIFE THROUGH INCOHERENT LIFE STORIES

“As I walked through the vast corridors of knowledge, I realized that life is like the library and the books can be read only one at a time, and each one will reveal something new.”

(Grandin, 1996, p.228)

6.1. Introduction

Based on my findings of the previous chapter, this chapter serves as a critical reflection regarding the concepts of ‘incoherent life stories’ and ‘meaning in life’, as well as how they relate to each other. Hereby, in line with the previous chapter, I will debate an understanding of meaning in life as formulated by Derkx (2011). First, I shall debate the accuracy of Derkx’ model of meaning in life in relation to these three life stories. Second, this chapter proposes three possible explanations for meaning in life in incoherent life stories. Third, I will discuss connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning, since they appear in all three life stories. My main points will be summarized in a concluding paragraph.

6.2. Derkx’ model of meaning in life

Now, I aim to look critically at Derkx’ theoretical model of meaning in life. I will discuss whether my findings through applying Derkx’ needs for meaning accurately mirror subjects’ experiences regarding meaning in life in these incoherent life stories. Li only fulfills two needs for meaning, and she very significantly, without a doubt, struggles in experiencing meaning in life, precisely as Derkx’ model would suggest. Thus, Li’s incoherent life story serves as a concrete example that adequately stands in line with Derkx’ model of meaning in life. Furthermore, Li’s life story convincingly illustrates the general assumption in narrative psychology that a life story transgressing coherence, points to an incoherent and thus ‘troubled’ self, whom experiences meaning in life to a low extent (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Grandin’s life story portrays how she fulfills all of Derkx’ needs for meaning to a high extent, and the narrator herself certainly sees her life as highly meaningful, which is also something she explicitly strives for. This furthermore proposes that an incoherent life story does not exclude the possibility for a significant extent of meaning in life for its subject. Saunders’ life story portrays that when Derkx’ needs for meaning appear less fulfilled in her life as a result of dementia, this comes with a decline in both her experiences concerning a meaningful life. Thus, in sum, it seems that experiences of these subjects regarding meaning

in life stand in line with findings through applying Derkx' model of meaning in life, which underlines the accuracy of this model.

Although the narrators of Saunders' and Grandin's life stories do not literally refer to it as their 'framework of coherent meaning' or 'needs for meaning' as Derkx puts it, the stories do 'cover' all seven needs for meaning. It is very evident in both life stories that the subjects have created these convincing, fully formed ideas regarding 'what to do' (purpose), 'what is good' (moral justification) and regarding their place in the world (coherence) which guide their actions in daily life. Also, efficacy, self-worth, connectedness and transcendence can be further traced in their narrated events. This seems to show that life stories can offer a 'place' or a type of 'form' which allows for an explicit wording of Derkx' model; incoherent life stories included, which is interesting since Derkx sees coherence as one need for meaning. This suggests that constructing life stories not only can function as an important role in order to *realize*, or to *help developing*, or to *further clarify* one's framework of meaning, but subsequently also appear to shape and affect how we actually live our lives meaningfully based on these frameworks of meaning. Since both Grandin and Saunders appear to experience meaning in life to a large extent – Saunders especially before living with dementia – it suggests that explicitly formulating a framework of meaning positively influences the subject experiencing meaning in life. This point is emphasized by Li's life story, where the narrator fails to compose a convincing framework of what makes life meaningful: she questions and problematizes everything and seems convinced that one's life is meaningless. As a result of this lack of a framework, the subject herself struggles with experiencing meaning in life.

6.3. Three explanations for meaning in life in incoherent life stories

As these stories have shown, incoherent life stories do not exclude the possibility for meaning in life for its subject. Incoherent life stories do not even exclude a significantly high extent of meaning in life for its subject, like in the case of Grandin. This is contrary to the general assumption in narrative psychology, underlining that a coherent life story will contribute to a high extent of meaning in life (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Three possible explanations for my findings concerning meaning in life and incoherent life stories will be further detailed below.

6.3.1. The problematic concept of (in)coherent life stories

One explanation concerns the difficulty in defining either a ‘fully’ coherent or a ‘fully’ incoherent life story, which subsequently problematizes drawing conclusions related to meaning in life, as I shall explain. Apart from being incoherent – most vividly due to her ‘untypical’ behavior and way of thinking – Grandin’s story constitutes a great sense of (intelligible) coherence since the narrator convincingly understands her actions and life as a whole into a broader framework of meaning. For example, she sees her devotion to her animal-work focused on the construction of cattle chute in light of her purpose of improving the life stock industry. More generally, as debated earlier, all three life stories do not completely lack any elements of *coherent* life stories. For instance, Grandin portrays a developing character and her singular chapters show linearity; Saunders’ life story reaches a powerful sense of closure, and even Li’s life story does portray minor forms of closure, although these are not necessarily satisfying types of closure. This raises the question whether it might be impossible to live with a complete lack of coherence related to one’s actions. To take this assumption one step further, following the general assumption in narrative psychology highlighting the correlation between narrative coherence and meaning in life: if there is *always* even the slightest sense of coherence in one’s life, despite its ‘incoherent nature’, perhaps there might always be *some* sense of meaning in life in the experience of the subject.

Since the theory behind the concepts of (narrative) coherence and incoherence not only consists of many different elements – defined by many different authors – but is also quite complex and layered rather than strict and clear, life stories can be looked at in different ways. Because of this ambiguity, it is problematic to define a life story as either fully coherent or incoherent: there is no fine line, which is important to emphasize. A coherent story could convey elements of incoherence and vice versa. Perhaps the definition of ‘a coherent life story’ or ‘an incoherent life story’ is not likely to mirror adequately the complexity and ambiguity of rich autobiographical work.

It is important to realize that this complexity in labeling a life story as either fully coherent or incoherent, makes it problematic to convincingly draw direct and precise conclusions based on these labels, for instance for the sense of ‘meaning in life’. Since a life story can perhaps never be fully coherent or incoherent, this problematizes to state that an ‘incoherent life story’ *thus* directly mirrors an ‘incoherent self’ and shows a low sense of meaning in life. In light of the life story’s ambiguity, it seems more adequate and safer to state that a life story either portrays a high sense of incoherence or many elements of

incoherence, rather than stating it as ‘an incoherent life story’. As a result, the correlation between ‘a coherent life story’ and a high sense of meaning in life seems more debatable.

It is furthermore noteworthy, that even though Saunders’ life story appears as an incoherent life story, its subject values and expresses wanting coherence in her life, in terms of seeing her actions in line with her ideas concerning a meaningful life. Thus, the characterization of a life story as either coherent or incoherent, does not necessarily mirror what its subject *wants* if not *strives for*, when it comes to experiencing or seeing his or her life in terms of (in)coherence.

6.3.2. Embracing disabilities

A *second explanation* for a high sense of meaning in life is that the subject in Grandin’s life story seems to truly embrace her disability of living with autism. Earlier, I analyzed how all three life stories show how disabilities profoundly affect experiences of meaning in life, since their disabilities play such a central role in their day-to-day lives. Grandin would not want to live without her disability, but praises it. She sees its qualities and advantages of living with autism and makes use of it; it could be seen that Grandin considers living with autism as an ability, instead of a disability. The entrance of dementia in Saunders’ life results in (at least) a declining sense of efficacy, self-worth, and coherence and therefore her experience of meaning in life decreases. Saunders truly despises rather than embraces her dementia, and this attitude seems to further complicate her struggle of living with dementia. For Li, her efficacy (as a scientist and author) declines as a result of her worsening mental health. These incoherent life stories show that it appears that not only the direct effects of living with disabilities, but also *our attitude* towards them have consequences for experiencing meaning in life.

Disabilities appear to affect in particular one’s self-worth and efficacy as needs for meaning negatively (with the exception of Grandin), but also, in a way, affect one’s purpose: Saunders, Li, and Grandin, all choose to write and publish their life stories centered around the discussion of their disabilities. It is noteworthy that elaborately constructing one’s life story could be seen to create ‘a new’ purpose in one’s life, and thus, more broadly to contribute to one’s meaning in life. Especially Grandin and Saunders seem eager to share their life stories: Grandin to inform the public and Saunders in order to cherish her memory while she still can remember.

6.3.3. Theoretical models of meaning in life

A *third explanation* for Grandin's high sense of meaning in life, in spite of her incoherent life story, refers to the differences in the theoretical models concerning meaning in life by Derkx' and offered by scholars of narrative psychology. It is the general assumption for the latter that a higher extent of narrative coherence in life stories equals a more meaningful life for the subject of the life story (Medved & Brockmeier, 2010). Derkx presents a different model regarding meaning in life focused on needs for meaning, in which coherence is understood as only one part of meaning in life, and is furthermore understood as what I refer to as 'intelligible' coherence, which is a very specific type of coherence. Therefore, there is a potential difference between Derkx' understanding of coherence, as well as that of narrative psychology, which seems to be a broader understanding of coherence.

Also, another significant difference is that Derkx discusses meaning in life only in reference to one's life, rather than to one's life story. As a result, certain elements of incoherence that serve as indicators for a lower sense of meaning in life according to scholars in narrative psychology, do not have direct consequences to meaning in life in Derkx' understanding. No matter how incoherent a story might be on the level of the story-form, and no matter how incoherent a story might appear related to the element of 'defying expectations regarding how humans typically behave and think' this does not – at least directly – relate to, and have consequences for 'meaning in life' in Derkx' understanding since his model does not cover these elements. What makes Grandin's life story incoherent – the incoherent elements – and therefore less meaningful in the interpretation of narrative psychologists, does not necessarily or directly make them less meaningful for Derkx.

First, this interestingly raises the question whether certain (in)coherent elements are perhaps irrelevant to what constitutes meaning in life for the subject of the life story, such as elements on the level of the story-form. *Second*, this difference in theoretical models highlighting meaning in life, further add to and underline the difficulty in analyzing the relation between a coherent life story and a meaningful life. It emphasizes the importance of the theoretical model through which meaning in life is located and interpreted in one's life (story). This furthermore shows how 'meaning in life' comes to the front as emerging from theory-building, rather than a construct rooted in practical life experiences in one's life (story). Given this ambiguity concerning what constitutes meaning in life, narrative psychologists should be careful with directly relating elements of (in)coherence as indicators for meaning in life.

6.4. Debating connectedness and transcendence in incoherent life stories

Now, I shall debate connectedness and transcendence as found in these incoherent life stories. *First*, it is noteworthy that exclusively connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning can be found in each of these three incoherent life stories. *Second*, connectedness and transcendence also appear completely intertwined: exclusively the same things – books, people, animals – that give the subjects experiences of connectedness, give them experiences of transcendence. *Third*, incoherent life stories appear significantly characterized by portraying ‘unconventional’ experiences of connectedness, in the sense that it is not connectedness with living people one is close with.

Li describes her connection to “dead people” and “imagined characters” in books. Through reading, Li powerfully connects with her construction of subjects derived from texts, rather than ‘real people’. As Felski (2008) points out, the other person, either real or fictive, is a condition for selfhood. We are embedded beings for whom language is a primary means to attain selfhood (Felski, 2008), and Li portrays this embeddedness. The narrator of Li’s life story even contemplates how her real context might be in books. Similar to Li, Grandin also describes how she has problems to properly connect with real people. In Grandin’s case, because she fails to read emotions and to pick up social clues. However, throughout her life story, Grandin does elaborately and passionately describes her deep connection with animals. Saunders’ life story not only shows how she intimately connects with her family, but she interestingly also powerfully feels connected to her ancestors. She feels how she has sucked into her lungs molecules from their exhalations at any of the moments she chooses from their biographies, for instance: “the sorrowful complaints of my Kalahari grandfather when he came upon his fiancée and her parents dead of the flu during the pandemic of 1918” and even: “the awed cries of my Dutch ancestors when they spotted Table Mountain from their sailing vessel in the bay” (Saunders, 2017, p.255). This connection she feels with the ‘living dead’ who are characterized by being still ‘alive’ in our minds, gives Saunders a tremendous feeling of connectedness.

For all three subjects, especially connectedness appears as a prominent, even *fundamental* need for meaning within the broader framework of meaning: in her fragile life, Li holds on to (the characters in) her books; it is Saunders’ main purpose to be connected with in particular other people, and Grandin has felt deeply connected to animals from a young age. Transcendence appears characterized in that it only comes to the fore in rare moments and in that it suddenly befalls the subjects. However, these few moments of

transcendence are portrayed as having caused a great impact for what gives meaning in the subjects' lives, which underlines their relevance.

Thus, even though their life stories contain incoherent elements, it appears that subjects can experience transcendence and in particular connectedness to a large extent as parts of meaning in life. This raises the question if specifically these two types of needs for meaning remain unaffected and unconstrained by 'incoherence' in life stories. If we would take this another step further, it possibly could implicate that 'incoherent', 'troubled' subjects, may never be obstructed to experience either connectedness or transcendence as needs for meaning in their lives; although this is a large conclusion based on three life stories. Based on Li's story, the importance of connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning for a subject could be questioned. Despite experiencing connectedness and transcendence to a significantly large extent, Li wants to commit suicide because nothing seems to matter. Does this mean that experiencing transcendence or connectedness is more a type of luxury, rather than a fundamental need for meaning? Or do they perhaps provide less meaning than other needs for meaning?³³

In Derkx' (2011) discussion behind his understanding of connectedness as a need for meaning, he speaks of experiencing a type of contact focused on an orientation towards 'the other' or something other³⁴, characterized by union, surrender, and caring, as opposed to control and self-interest. His attitude appears open and tolerant, and he would include experiences of connectedness with fictive 'textual' people in material books, with dead ancestors, and, presumably, with animals. However, I do want to point out that despite Derkx' inclusive attitude, in describing his idea behind this concept, he is mainly speaking of connectedness as a frequent and caring interaction with a few intimates one is close with. I want to emphasize that if scholars would give more attention and elaborately discuss the concept of connectedness beyond the more conventional form of 'intimate contact with real people', it would allow for better insight into how this need for meaning provides meaning to people.

³³ In line with this thought, it is interesting that 'connectedness' and 'transcendence' are *added* by humanistic scholars (Alma & Smaling, 2010, Derkx, 2011), but are not part of psychologist Baumeister's (1991) original four needs for meaning, that are: purpose, moral justification, self-worth, and efficacy.

³⁴ In Dutch, Derkx talks of 'de ander' and 'het andere' which I choose to translate into English as 'the other' and 'something other'.

6.5. Conclusion

This chapter highlighted how incoherent life stories enhance our understanding of meaning in life in several ways.

Experiences of these subjects regarding meaning in life, appear to stand in line with the results of Derkx' (2011) model of meaning in life when applying this to these life stories, which underlines the accuracy of Derkx' model. Derkx' idea behind meaning in life is about placing one's life and one's events into a coherent framework, and therefore is about creating a type of coherent mental picture. However, he does not mean constructing the events into a (coherent) life *story*. Nonetheless, I showed how the form of life stories appear to offer a frame that gives space and allows for a personal portrayal of the contents of Derkx' needs for meaning. In formulating one's own personal type of framework of meaning, this seems to positively affect experiencing meaning in life for the subjects.

However, this chapter also problematizes the relation between meaning in life in Derkx' understanding and its relation to an incoherent life story. Since Derkx' understanding of meaning in life is unrelated (at least not directly) to – for instance – story-form aspects of the life stories we tell, this means that an *incoherent* life story can still be highly meaningful and perhaps even highly coherent in his understanding. This illustrates how meaning in life appears as a result of a certain theoretical model. Meaning in life is something we interpret based on a selected definition, rather than as a clear 'given' that is easy to locate in one's life story.

In addition to that, narrative (in)coherence not only consist of different and complex elements, but it also appears that life stories can story include both elements of coherence and incoherence. This ambiguity makes it further problematic to define a fully (in)coherent life story. The problem with defining either a coherent or incoherent life story makes it subsequently problematic to draw direct conclusions based on that label, for instance when it comes to meaning in life. This chapter shows that the relation between an incoherent life story and the experienced meaning in life for the subject is highly complex, and it appears more complex than the field of narrative psychology portrays this relation. I would urge scholars to be careful in, first, characterizing stories as (in)coherent. And second, they must embrace a cautious attitude when drawing conclusions based on these labels.

Also, incoherent life stories show how disabilities in general – and specifically their effect and one's attitude towards them – significantly affect how subjects experience meaning in life. Disabilities generally seem to make life more complicated, causing negative effects for experiencing meaning in life. However, embracing disabilities and telling one's life story

about living with disabilities – providing a sense of purpose – appear as positive influences for a greater sense of meaning in life.

Lastly, since connectedness as well as transcendence appear in all three life stories, these needs for meaning may seem unaffected by elements of incoherence, and might stand apart from incoherence. It raises the assumption that (incoherent) subjects of incoherent life stories may never be obstructed to experience connectedness and transcendence as parts of a meaningful life. Interestingly, all life stories portray connectedness in ways that go beyond ‘conventional’ connectedness as in contact with real people one is close with.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

*“What one carries from one point to another, geographically or temporally, is one’s self.
Even the most inconsistent person is consistently himself.”*
(Li, 2017, p.4)

7.1. Main findings

This thesis offered a comparative literary analysis concerning subjects in incoherent life stories, by analyzing Li’s *Dear Friend*, Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures*, and Saunders’ *Memory’s Last Breath*. After introducing, problematizing and theorizing the topic of incoherent life stories in chapters one and two, I illustrated in chapter three that these three life stories appear incoherent in that they defy expectations regarding linearity and ‘full’ closure. As an effect, the audience must make an extra effort to ‘make sense’ of the life story. Subsequently, I showed in chapter four that the ways in which the subjects come to the fore seem to affect whether a life story can be seen as incoherent, particularly through the element of defying expectations regarding how humans ‘typically’ behave and think. Nonetheless, I highlighted how the relation between subject formation and incoherent life stories is highly complex and how other potential indications for an incoherent subject remain to be debated.

After arguing why these life stories could be considered incoherent, I interpreted how meaning in life comes to the fore in these stories and how these findings enhance our understanding of the concept of meaning in life (chapters five and six). It appeared that subjects of depression-, autism-, and dementia-narratives in incoherent life stories negotiate meaning in life in a variety of ways.

First, what makes life meaningful, or, why life fails to be meaningful, is *addressed* by the narrators. The topic of meaning in the subject’s life, or its lack of it (in the case of Li), is explicitly discussed and elaborated on in all three life stories. In a concentrated and organized manner, Grandin’s and Saunders’ life stories each devote one concrete chapter³⁵ to a discussion of meaning in life, although brief suggestions and remarks concerning meaning in life can also be traced throughout their autobiographies. On the other hand, Li’s *entire* life story, in its core, revolves around one exploration on how to keep living in light of her addressed belief that ‘nothing really matters’ and living is a ‘futile effort’. Despite her conviction that her life conveys (close to) no meaning at all, in the struggle of trying to stay

³⁵ In Grandin’s *Thinking in Pictures* Chapter 11: ‘Stairway to Heaven. Religion and Belief’. In Saunders’ *Memory’s Last Breath* Chapter 8: ‘The Exit That Dare Not Say Its Name’.

alive and staying mentally healthy, Li is paradoxically both addressing and exploring ways to find a sense of meaning in life throughout her life story.

Since all three life stories address meaning in life, I carefully suggest five conclusions. *First*, subjects of incoherent life stories living with disabilities *are concerned* with meaning in life. *Second*, these subjects *convey the ability* – they are able to find words – to speak about meaning in life. *Third*, subjects furthermore *feel the need* to address meaning in life in incoherent life stories. *Fourth*, incoherent life stories appear to offer an adequate (perhaps even ‘welcoming’) medium, or frame, or space to discuss meaning in one’s life. And *fifth*, meaning in life appears as a relatively prominent topic in incoherent life stories. Nonetheless, it must be taken into account that these conclusions are derived from an analysis of three incoherent life stories. More research is needed to further validate these proposed points.

Second, meaning in life is seen to be *lived* by the subjects in incoherent life stories; meaning in life is lived, in the sense that ‘needs for meanings’ appear fulfilled in the subjects’ experience. Meaning in life is experienced to varying extents, since different needs for meaning come to the fore to different extents.

In the case of Grandin, truly all seven needs for meaning appear to be fulfilled in her life story, making her life seem highly meaningful. Therefore, her life story serves as an example of a subject of an incoherent life story that can convincingly experience meaning in life. It is the main purpose of the subject’s actions to inform the public with her insights concerning animals and autism. This can be traced in the enthusiasm and persuasion with which Grandin shares her insight to her audience and in how she lives her life, constantly exploring for more experience and therefore more knowledge.

In the case of Saunders, the narrator portrays two versions of herself: one before dementia – the intellectual Saunders – and one who is living with dementia. The former appears to fulfill all seven needs for meaning successively, pointing to a high sense of meaning in life. The latter portrays a life in which several needs for meaning are fulfilled to a lower extent, that are at least: coherence, self-worth, purpose, connectedness and efficacy. Thus, dementia makes it more difficult to experience meaning in life in her life story. This can primarily be noticed in the subject’s main purpose, that is to *connect* with honesty and integrity to others. Saunders increasingly fail to do this, and she fears for an increasingly declining ability to connect in the future. This is part of the reason why she is planning an assisted suicide, which underlines her importance attached to connectedness.

Li neither constructs a framework of coherent meaning in life, nor are many autobiographical events shared, which complicates an interpretation of meaning in life. However, I showed how two needs for meaning appear fulfilled in her life story, and thus it seems evident that she experiences meaning in life to a significantly low extent. I interpreted that Li does experience connectedness and transcendence through living a life in service of books, pointing to at least some extent of *lived* meaning in life. However, overall, Li illustrates a case of a subject of an incoherent life story that fails to properly experience meaning in life. Instead of *living* meaning in life, Li primarily theoretically explores what possibly could keep her going, and thus what could provide her life with meaning while she believes that nothing matters. Yet, she does not reach any clear claims or beliefs on this topic, except for avoiding the bleakness of depression, which emphasizes this sense of ongoing, ambiguous exploration that characterizes her life story.

Several interesting points came to the fore when looking at needs for meaning. My findings through applying Derkx' (2011) model of needs for meaning seemed to adequately mirror the experiences of the three subjects with meaningfulness, which underlines the accuracy of Derkx' model. Simultaneously, I emphasized the importance of the theoretical model through which meaning in life is interpreted in one's life. I suggested that narrative psychology may find a life story to be incoherent and therefore less meaningful, whereas in applying Derkx' model – which is not specifically focused on life *stories* – this would not necessarily be the case due to a different focus.

Also, coherence as a need for meaning in Derkx' (2011) understanding – 'intelligible' coherence – appeared prominently in both Grandin's as well as in Saunders' *incoherent* life story. As I argued in chapter six, it is important to realize that incoherent life stories can both convey elements of incoherence but also elements of coherence. This is because narrative coherence appears as a complex, layered concept with multiple 'elements' that can be approached, interpreted and applied in different ways. I proposed that speaking of a fully 'incoherent life story' or a fully 'coherent life story' might not be accurate. Therefore, we must be careful in drawing conclusions and implications – for instance concerning meaning in one's life – based on the label of an 'incoherent' or 'coherent' life story.

Furthermore, connectedness and transcendence as needs for meaning come to the fore in all three stories. They appear completely intertwined as well as 'unconventional' in the sense that they do not refer to a connection to a few living people that one is close with. I pointed out that this could implicate that 'incoherent', 'troubled' subjects of incoherent life

stories may never be obstructed to experience either connectedness or transcendence as needs for meaning in their lives.

Third, in negotiating meaning in life in life stories, the subjects' disabilities appear to play a prominent role. Particularly *the integration* of (effects of) disabilities in one's life, appears crucial for its consequences in experiencing meaning in life. Grandin has lived with autism since she was a child and has found a way to successfully integrate its difficulties and qualities in her life over the years. Her developments as an autistic person gives her life meaning: she has written multiple books on the topic and is internationally a prominent spokesperson for autism. This complete acceptance, this embrative attitude, is not so much about eliminating disabilities – in the sense of 'defeating' and 'conquering' as in the restitution story – but is instead about welcoming it. Her life story seems to propose that particularly when the subject can see its disability as an ability, this comes with a significant sense of meaning in life. On the other hand, Saunders' life story vividly portrays the (rather sudden) emergence of dementia and its effects as nothing other than a destructive threat to Saunders' meaningful life as a highly connected, caring and intellectual person. Saunders is fighting dementia, rejecting it, mad at it, and embarrassed about it. She aims to hold on to her rational self, and therefore struggles to integrate dementia.

In Li's case – again – it is different. In Li's story, it remains difficult to specifically 'locate' and specify the precise effects of her depression, and therefore to analyze its relation to meaning in life. It is likely to state that depression is not promoting meaning in Li's life since her life story appears overall meaningless, but precise findings for this argument remain difficult to establish. Since, what is the result of her depression or when is it 'just' Li speaking? Or is the influence of depression always involved in everything? Is it overarching all of her thoughts in her life story? However, it is evident that Li does not successfully integrate depression into her life, which would indicate a way of properly learning to live with depression – perhaps by controlling it – for as far as that is possible.

Nonetheless, it must be underlined that for Li, Saunders and Grandin, writing their life stories about disabilities could very well be seen as ways of (further) integrating these disabilities into their lives. Constructing life stories, even when these could be considered incoherent, is furthermore likely to add a sense of purpose and therefore meaning in their lives. Interestingly, this sense of integration could be considered as an 'attempt for' or 'struggle' towards reaching coherence. Integration is *the act* of combining or blending into an integral whole: it is (still) a process. Coherence is *a state* in which separate parts go together very well, forming a unified whole. This could implicate that through the process of

successfully blending and ‘normalizing’ acts and effects of disabilities into one’s set of day-to-day actions, this not only positively adds to a sense of meaning in life, but might also contribute to one’s perceived coherence.

7.2. Further remarks

Two potential literary-analysis perspectives were not chosen during this research due to a maximum space for words and due to limited time, but they shall be briefly addressed here. Since I found that all of these three works elaborately reflected on being female, it would have been interesting to explore incoherent life stories from a critical feminist perspective³⁶. Also, when analyzing these stories, I stumbled upon this tremendous sense of intertextuality in these life stories: Li heavily integrated works from a large variety of literary authors; Grandin included findings from many academic publications, and Saunders both referred to academic and literary texts, as well as diary fragments from family members. It would have been interesting to explore what this prominent role of intertextuality in one’s life story implicates for the constitution of a narrative self.

Shortcomings of this thesis concern the amount of analyzed life stories. It is difficult to draw convincing conclusions regarding the concepts of meaning in life, narrative (in)coherence and disabilities as well as their potential relation, based on three life stories. Also, since these stories concern published books, this calls into question whether these life stories are exclusively constructed by its authors. If editors have been involved with their construction, then these life stories do not directly mirror the life story as profoundly formulated by its author. Lastly, it must also be noted that these three authors might be considered as extraordinarily intelligent individuals: all of them have worked for universities and they are able to construct elaborate life stories. This, arguably, does not make these stories ‘typical’ representations of disability narratives but rather more ‘exceptional’ cases.

Now, I will reflect on my role as a humanistic and therefore normative academic. Humanism, as a worldview, tends to speak up for the more vulnerable in society, since it presupposes how every individual conveys equally intrinsic value. In line with this belief, this thesis can be considered a humanistic academic project of empowerment for people living with ‘incoherent’ life stories, which tend to be marginalized groups in society. Beginning my

³⁶ Critical feminist interventions in literary studies have studied and embraced ways of narrating the female self that are “always embedded and embodied and often experimental, transgressing the limitations of coherence and closure” (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010, p.7). It is suggested that women’s writing is more rule-transcending, rather than carefully balanced and patterned rhetorical sequences that tend to be attributed to the male dominated language system.

specific research, I was aware how this normativity comes with the possibility that my attitude as a researcher may be influenced by a certain preference for incoherent life stories and its ‘incoherent’ subjects, which would make my analysis less critical. Looking back, I found that in the chapters answering my subquestions, I had to critically reshape and rephrase my use of language in order to secure a convincing non-biased, objective, academic tone and to constitute convincing arguments. Specifically in my ‘discussions of theory’ as well as in chapter six, I did some rewriting to make sure I was criticizing specific theory based on my findings, rather than making my own propositions. Nonetheless, it must be noted that any humanistic academic project is likely to be normative to some extent.

Also, now that I realize that an incoherent life story is also likely to convey elements of coherence, a weak feature of this research, arguably, lies in the exclusive focus on narrative incoherence. In order to secure a broad perspective, I certainly aimed to show elements of both incoherence as well as coherence throughout my research. But looking back now, I believe it would have constituted a more objective research if I would have devoted a chapter to specifically discuss elements of narrative coherence in these life stories, since it would allow me more space to discuss this element. In the way this research is set up now, this space to discuss coherence was limited.

This thesis furthermore addresses a paradox within humanism’s values. Whereas humanism claims how everyone should be honored for who they are, simultaneously, this worldview heavily concentrates on the ideal of *Bildung*: a striving to reach one’s potential. This focus on personal progress and perfectibility does portray a type of preferred and certainly *coherent* walk of life or life story. Subjects of incoherent life stories tend to defy this ideal regarding human development and are more likely to portray shortcomings and limitations in human life. Incoherent life stories are likely to portray deviations from life as derived from the *Bildung*-ideal, whereas humanism simultaneously values any individual. This paradox calls into question humanism’s proclaimed open attitude for, and value attached to every individual, particularly those who live with incoherent life stories.

Lastly, new questions arose while doing research and could deserve further attention in academic research, such as: What does concretely ‘the ending’ of one’s autobiographical life story implicate about one’s perceived self?³⁷ What are differences between representations of autobiographical female and male subjects in life stories (regarding uses of

³⁷ I propose this question, because based on this research I assume that especially the ending of one’s life story is highly relevant in revealing one’s state in the present, as well as one’s attitude towards one’s past life.

language, story-form, and prominent topics)? How do other (life) stories play a part in our own life story and for what reasons? What are characteristics of a healthy/happy/meaningful life story? What are (psychological) effects of elaborately constructing one's life story? Also, I find it interesting what exactly makes an autobiographical subject of a life story an incoherent subject. What type of personality or behavior makes one incoherent? I furthermore specifically consider society's master narratives as a highly interesting theme. Questions regarding this topic might include: What are current, dominant master narratives in (Dutch) society? In what ways and to what extent do they affect people (in influencing how we must live our lives)? And how are society's master narratives formed?

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