The article reveals the role of biographical research in a process of empowerment of individuals, a group and an organization. Biography as an empowerment strategy is discussed from socio-biographical approach, point of view of theory of structuration, critical, feminist, poststructural theories. Opportunities to combine research on narration of life history and social work practice of empowerment are delineated in the article.

The potential of biographical research in the process of empowerment could be revealed by viewing biography from two different perspectives: ontological and epistemological. Ontological perspective implies that narration of biography is intrinsically an important means of construction of a personal identity and may become an important strategy and means of social work and social education. This perspective implies understanding that social worker can use the narrative of life history as a tool to help a client, a means of

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empowerment. Meanwhile, epistemological perspective views biographical method in the process of cognition as a research strategy focusing on the relation between an interviewer and an interviewee. These two perspectives can be used together in a research by combining narration of life history, biography, as empowerment and reconstruction of identity with research using biographical method.

Besides ontological (reality of social work or social education) and epistemological (process of cognition and research) perspectives, it might be reasonable to mention traditions of understanding biography. Objectivist concept of biographical research views a person’s life as interplay of objective structures and consciousness. Therefore, when employing biographical method as an empowering measure of social assistance and as a method of research it is important to identify reasons for and explain the position of the person’s agency in the context of social structures. Biographical narrative reflects connections between life journeys and larger social contexts, which, according to the advocates of biographical method (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2002), reveals public dimensions of private problems.

According to another – subjectivist – perspective, biographical research emphasizes an idea that consciousness of an individual is not only a reflection of the objective social reality and discourses, but is itself a reality and must be studied as such. With this view, sociology and other social sciences have been complemented by psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. The object of biographical research has been shifting from external social structures to subjective, intrapsychic reality, intentionality of consciousness, structures of meaning with their own logic and dynamics. As A.B. Botía (2002) notes when speaking about distinctive ontology behind epistemology of biographical research, narrative is the structured quality of experience understood and seen as a story. It is a particular reconstruction of the experience, by which, through a reflective process, meaning is given to what happened or was lived. Plot, time sequence, characters, situation, are ingredients of the narrative configuration the story captures the richness and detail of the meanings in human affairs (motivations, feelings, desires or purposes).
One of the approaches seeking to combine objectivist and subjectivist approaches, stressing subjectivity and at the same time revealing social transformations and social structures is sociobiographical approach (Giddens, 1991, Chamberlayne, et al., 2008). In this respect it becomes important to catch dimensions of consciousness and subjectivity in narratives on life journeys and, at the same time, to understand the objective constraints that shape individual lives. Biographical histories show the ways in which people respond to tensions and opportunities in their lives. Sociobiographical analysis captures the distinctive micro-structures and micro-cultures by which individual lives are shaped by larger social forces. Researchers raise question how participants of the research interpret their life situations, what choices they made in society which is understood not as external force; it is understood as constantly interpreted. Told stories reveal areas of difficulties, conflicts, silence in people’s experience. According to the authors supporting this position (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2002), society is a shared subjective reality, complexity of beliefs, norms and ways of thinking and set of material facts (who owns what, who have power over whom).

Biography is created from self-observation and interpretation of own life, structurization of own life experience before and after certain event. It is a narrative that gathers together separate pieces of moments, experiences and emotions into a single, yet complex and sometimes random mosaic. At a certain point in life, critical incidents such as external circumstances (social transformations, changes, illness, acquired disabilities, loss of close people, job etc.), an individual’s behaviour and decisions appear as shifts and turning-points that shape the individual’s life trajectory.

Turning-points, incidents, loss in an individual’s life may be related to rapid social transformations and changes in social structures, which are reflected on the level of consciousness and subjective reasoning by an individual through conflicts, dilemmas, controversial judgements and arguments experienced and expressed in the biographical narrative. Thus, the position that biographical narrative is a certain type of subjectivity requires answering the question about
the nature of relation between the person’s subjectivity and inten-
tionality and external social structures and dominant discourses, and how these external circumstances turn into internal reality of consciousness. Researchers admit that external social transforma-
tions (economic crisis, changes in economic and social structure, social cataclysms) as inner subjective reality fairly oftenemerge as feeling of loss, guilt about inability to overcome hardships and control own life, uncertainty, anxiety, fear and pity, etc. (Doray & Belanger, 2002). Biographical method captures consciousness and subjectivity, at the same time objective constrains that shape indi-
vidual lives. Narrative reveals how external circumstances manifest themselves in internal world as the person reacts to the impact of social structures on him/her.

Narrative as a subjective reality may reveal hardship and conflict experienced internally and with other people, unexpressed and con-
cealed feelings, inarticulacy (Rustin and Chamberlayne, 2002). A lot of researchers have noticed that individuals tend to perceive social transformations and crises, dramatic changes in social structures as their own fault, failure and worthlessness. Thus, social transforma-
tions cause certain psychodynamics in a person that may be identi-
ified through his/her narrative. Social norms, dominant discourses form normative requests (e.g. to provide for one’s family, to find stable work, to comply with appropriate roles). And these are the normative requests that cause response of one’s consciousness in the form of internal subjective state. For example, certain researchers (Murard, 2002) note that the feeling of guilt may manifest itself as a constant trial of their own lives, in which narrators act as their own advocates and their own accusers, in which they acknowledge that they are the authors of their lives and define themselves as being acted on by circumstances. It is a feeling of not having succeeded in life. To succeed in life is perceived as fulfilling normative requests that originate in the family, the environment and society as a whole. In this case biographical research discovers a strong feeling of guilt associated with situations in which people experience difficulties in managing their lives on their own.
Such sociobiographical approach allows performing empowerment because, according to M. Rustin and P. Chamberlayne (2002), it allows understanding how life journeys are interconnected with their larger social contexts and how biographies and histories are intertwined. Personal troubles could be understood in terms of public issues. In life journeys something individual and particular could be found, at the same time these stories represent a more common experience that could be generalised. Biographical research allows understanding the situation of socially excluded people and, based on the results of the research, establishing guidelines of transformations in social policy. In this case, empowerment is seen not as direct influence on an individual, but application of research results for cognition, transformation and improvement of social structures (e.g. transformation of social policy).

Another explanation of empowerment through biographical narrative can be found in the works by Anthony Giddens. He is one of the authors who made significant contribution to seeing biography as a specific type of subjectivity, a reflexive project (Giddens, 1991). At the same time, his theory of structuration helps understand the links between social structures and people’s way of thinking, subjectivity. Giddens’ name could be associated with attempts to ground the importance of ontology (not epistemology) of biographical narrative, to reveal the necessity for biographical work, when narration of life journey and outlining of future project becomes a means for an individual to make new choices, to change life for the better, change his/her position in social structures. Giddens’ theory of reflexivity is significant as it helps understand relations between an individual and social structures, human action and social systems. His theory of structuration is an attempt to explain capability of individuals to act and reflect their actions. Structuration theory implies equal power and relations between structures and actors. According to Giddens, social structures influence, control and constrain human actions, and, at the same time, they are made by human actions. According to this theory, by reflecting their lives (e.g. through biographical narrative) people may change their lives and position in social structures. The reflexive project of development of the self as capability to choose,
plan one’s life, make decisions and act is possible under conditions of modernization and growing influence of market, where traditional social communities and value systems (family, social class, local community etc.) become notably weaker, while processes of individualization grow stronger. In modern times individuals face a wide horizon of opportunities and choices and may have significant freedom in choosing roles and determining their identities. Reflexivity is more possible and becomes more influential force for individual as structures and boundaries become weaker. While in case of absence of strict social predeterminations and presence of options of individual choice, variations exist and result in a number of life journeys, programmes and trajectories. Changes are based on an individual’s reflexive project and allow introducing more democratic features into different structures. Despite all dramatic social transformations, biographical subjects are perceived as self-reflective, active agents in their lives. It is necessary to create greater space for greater reflexivity, rational reflection and informed participation. Biographical narrative in ontological sense (as the means of social work and social education) empowers, provides opportunity and capacity to change and control a person’s life by increasing his/her reflective ability. Empowerment in this case is specific interplay of agency and structure of opportunity where the person needs to understand his/her life and the way how structures function, to understand his/her active role and actively construct own identity.

By referring to works by other researchers (J.Rainwater) on therapeutic influence of self-reflexivity, A.Giddens (1991) stresses the importance of biographical narrative and biographical work in the process of self-therapy. Autobiography becomes an exercise of corrective emotional experience. Giddens mentions that biographical story is rewritten or told in the form individual would liked it to happen, with new dialog, feeling and resolution of the episode. “Dialog with the time”, process of self-questioning, thinking about time in positive way, allowing for life to be lived, allows to avoid a “helpless-hopeless” attitude. According to Giddens, holding dialog with the time means identifying stressful events in the past (e.g. death of a spouse, divorce, losing one’s job, being in financial difficulties, etc.). After Giddens,
the ontological approach towards biography and narrative about life (as the means of construction of social reality) is emphasized fairly widely. Life-long learning and social integration processes require that a person is capable of reconsidering his/her life, start designing his/her own future project by doing biographical work. One of the researchers of biographical method T. Wengraf (2002) states that individuals are constantly under pressure to do biographical work... It can involve changing oneself, one’s practice, one’s understanding and relationships, one’s understanding of our life world...

Ontological and epistemological perspectives, person’s empowerment and process of cognition and research can be combined. T.Wengraf (2002) described the experience of combining biographical research with biographical work both to empower people and help organizations. In this case, empowerment is interpreted as action directed at certain persons, as well as certain groups and organization. During an international project SOSTRIS, researchers identified agencies that provided social services, material help and supportive care to clients. In the research agencies were committed to developing the “strategies” and the personal resources and resourcefulness of their clients, to help them to do biographical work. Researchers studied 13 organizations by applying biographical-narrative research strategy. National teams of researchers studied leading members, and/or member of front-line staff, and/or clients of companies who were asked to tell history, how they came to the organization and what happen after that. Revelation of clients’ biographical histories and introduction of biographical method as a method of work with clients have allowed representatives, managers of the organizations strengthen interpersonal relations with their clients, learn about their clients as about individuals with their unique histories and biographies, their intrapsychic realities, rather than just in behaviouristic way as an object for action. This, in turn, has helped organizations provide services of higher quality, ensure their durability and sustainability. Organizations were trained to work biographically to set themselves for applying more individualist approach towards a client, understand his/her history and how he/she became socially excluded in what his/her needs are. At the same time, by narrating
their biographies clients have the chance to reconstruct their past and construct their new identities. Establishment of biographical approach, narration of life stories and the practice of contemplation allows learning from the told lives – our own, those of other people, those of institutions. Biographical narration in organization is also important in stimulating development of organization and organizational learning. Stories told by organizations, their founders, managers, staff, clients and heard by others help better understand the situation and help empower internal relations. According to T. Wengraf, “biographic interviews with individuals in respect of their whole lives and in respect of relevant organisations can combine with ethnographic and other research to produce better understanding of the often hidden dynamics of such situations and the complex relations of internal and external processes” (p. 263). Equally, biographical reflexive approach by an organization to its own biography allows organisation to learn from its own history and invent innovations.

One of the studies in the area of social work in Lithuania that has combined ontological perspective of biographical work and epistemological perspective of biographical research is Master’s thesis and its research related to women who have become the victims of trafficking and forced prostitution performed by Neringa Ramonaitė (2011). I had an honour to be the supervisor of the thesis. The method of biographical research was applied in the research by analyzing written life stories of women of different ages who had been forced into prostitution. The biographical histories were written for workers of the organization Lithuanian Caritas in the major cities of Lithuanians within the framework of project on social work “Help for victims of prostitution and women trafficking”. This organization helps women to do biographical work, biographical narrative as the means of therapy, social rehabilitation and formation of new social identity. The women had been offered to write down their histories in a comfortable and cosy place at the time most convenient for them during several days. Starting with the beginning of the project in 2001, Lithuanian Caritas collected over 300 life histories of women of different ages. N. Ramonaitė who
works at this organization performed the analysis of 15 stories. The chosen strategy of narrative allowed taking deeper insight into what the women experienced and how they verbalized their experiences; how they viewed their lives and how they expressed their view by interpretations. Results of the research revealed the factors of women’s involvement into prostitution. Life histories uncovered individual experiences and helped understand that becoming a victim of prostitution and trafficking is a collective experience with certain social pattern. Violence, poverty from the very childhood made them feel excluded. Underdeveloped social skills, experienced sexual violence, low self-esteem, wrong friends, partners, financial problems had forced them into prostitution. Their biographies not only revealed their roads into prostitution, made them remember unpleasant events, but also allowed them to verbalize the painful experience, “harness” the past by presenting it in the most convenient way, showed the way out of prostitution, described the beginning of new life and future plans. By referring to T.Wengraf’s idea about the role of biographical narrative in social work organizations described above, we can make a premise and hope that in the activity of Lithuanian Caritas, biographical narratives of its clients not only helped empower victims of trafficking and prostitution directly through narrative by reconstructing one’s identity, but also allowed workers of the organization better understand their clients, see how their clients became excluded, what emotions they experienced, establish closer interpersonal relations, represent them better in communication with other organizations. A study of social rehabilitation services for victims of trafficking and prostitution performed by my colleagues and me (Rūškus, Mažeikienė, Blinstrubas, Balčiūnas, 2005) revealed that workers at Lithuanian Caritas learnt a lot about life histories of the women during their several years’ project “Help for victims of prostitution and women trafficking” by applying biographical approach, which helped better understand the situation and experiences of the women’s lives and stand of mind. During our interviews with social workers at Lithuanian Caritas, we, the researchers, had the possibility to hear a lot of biographical circumstances in clients’ lives from the workers,
which helped us understand the phenomenon of trafficking and prostitution in a broader sense, as a result of women’s socialization and social policy.

Giddens emphasized active construction of identity through biographical narrative. Biography started to be treated not only as mere description of life facts, but also as construction and understanding of one’s self and identity. Each individual creates his/her identity by narrating about oneself and about how he/she has become what he/she is now. An individual reconsiders and interprets his/her past through the prism of the future that he/she projects and constructs in the present. According to this concept, ontology of biographical narrative covers not only recollections and reproduction of facts and events of the past, but also two-fold horizon of future and of past. By narrating their life histories, subjects create themselves, construct and see themselves in the process of development. By treating life trajectory as a sequence of turning, breaking points, loss and new opportunities rather than a straight line of events and facts, Giddens stresses the importance of reflexivity and consciousness on this journey. Breaking and turning points are accompanied and mediated by choices and decisions. Life as a sequence of breaking points and losses causes individuals turn to dialogue, start new occupation and use new opportunities. Self-realization is the balance between opportunity and risks that helps escape from the past (p. 78). This is the process of self-development by overcoming emotional obstacles and pressure. According to Giddens, identity implies a narrative and autobiography as both the core of an individual’s self and an individual’s interpretation of his personal history.

Rapid changes in economy and labour market require that an individual is capable of changing and adapting and imply the individual’s capability to understand functions of social and economic structures and directions of their change and, based on this capability and understanding, to choose, form and create own living conditions, model life trajectory by oneself. That is why social workers have to help people with their life politics, life planning, to make decisions and undertake actions. Biographical work and research help to enable
people to understand their lives and to change it, to gain control of their lives, to change the self and emotional life.

Giddens believes in individual’s capacity to be moral agents, critically reflect and change their lives and society in democratic way. We all have new choices, to choose and gain control of our lives. The theory establishes an idea of biography as methodology of life planning and empowerment provided by social workers to clients, change of one’s self, one’s emotionality and competences. It is worth noting that this concept draws criticism (i.e. Ferguson, 2008) for rather simplified explanation of the nature of power and social regulation and too liberal choice attributed to an individual in choosing his/her life. Giddens neglects structure as constraint. He states that there is enabling, creating feature of human beings and systems, he underplays the significance of constrains. As Harry Ferguson (2008) states, Giddens is too optimistic about individuals’ capacity to understand their lives and reasons of their behaviour. Giddens undermines impact of unconsciousness and capacity of sabotaging themselves and others.

Another important position in social work that may be useful in explaining empowerment through biographical method is critical perspective. In his discussion of social work paradigms, David Howe (2008) distinguishes radical humanism of the raisers of consciousness. I believe his position may offer an original approach towards biographical method. Following the ideas about unfair and unequal distribution of resources in society and that we live in conflict society, an individual is given an opportunity to radically criticize society by changing own consciousness and subjectivity, emancipating and liberating own and other people’s awareness. Neo-Marxist (Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramshi, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas) and feminist ideas about alienation, oppression, domination could be classified under critical paradigm. Paolo Freire’s theory of critical thinking and consciousness raising belongs to this trend too. “All social phenomena, whether religion or systems of justice, are the creation of human beings even though some come to dominate and oppress the human experience” (Howe, 2008, p. 113). Idea of radical psychologists
about personal and group liberation from social conditioning could be very helpful by applying biographical method. First of all, according to critical perspective, it is necessary to understand how society (capitalism, patriarchalism) influence and control our lives. Strategy of empowerment in critical paradigm is consciousness raising by seeking to create alternative forms of living and more humane social relations. This conception combines two aspects: political critique of society and intention to change social order and at the same time encouragement of personal change of individual’s subjectivity, consciousness and the state of mind. In the pursuit of political aims it is important to work with individuals collectively in groups. Individuals are encouraged to understand themselves, assess themselves in terms of society’s dominant expectations. Followers of this position invite to understand nature of our feelings of uneasiness and guilt. If we don’t behave and feel in the ways we think we should, we feel disturbed and dissatisfied, frustrated and confused, angry and depressed. Thus, according to critical theory, the above mentioned negative emotions manifesting in an individual’s biographical narratives – self-accusation, guilt, trial, self-defences should be viewed as expression of oppression, the impact of dominant normalizing discourses.

According to theory of consciousness raising (Paolo Freire) education (that would include social education too) should enable learners and clients to gain power for themselves. That is why it is important for oppressed groups to recognize how oppression is made, to reflect upon themselves and their condition in the world, to apply new method of relating to the world which implies transformative approach to the reality and becoming subjects of their own history:

“True dialog cannot exist unless it involves critical thinking – thinking which discerns an invisible solidarity between the world and [humans] admitting of no dichotomy between them – thinking which perceives reality as a process and transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which doesn’t separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of risks involved. Critical thinking contrasts with naïve thinking, which sees ‘historical time as a weight, a stratification of acquisitions and experiences of the past’, from which the present should
emerge as normalized and ‘well behaved’. For the naïve thinker, the important thing is accommodation to this normalized ‘today’. For the critic the most important thing is continuing humanization of people” (Freire, 1972, p.64).

According to critical theory, as people narrate and contemplate their life histories, they create conditions to talk about rules and norms formed by the ones on a higher step of social hierarchy. At this point, it is important to mention normative biography that expresses interests of dominant groups and comply with dominant discourses. Lives of socially excluded people and people who suffer hardships usually deviate from normative biographies; therefore, narration of life story will certainly invoke the feeling of guilt. Narration of life histories of excluded people will help hear their voices, critically evaluate official histories, normative biography. Thus, in this case, empowerment is viewed as making the heard biographical histories public and drawing attention towards this social group. Such “hearing” creates conditions to reconsider, rewrite official stories. Biographical method gives voice to unprivileged groups, people with low status. This gives unique sense to such well-known statements as “private is public” and “the one who speaks and the one who is listened to” in the context of biographical research.

Biographical method from the critical perspective is employed in feminist social work. As D. Howe (2008) points out, working together in a group is recognized as a key method in feminist social work. In critical social work women are helped to understand individual and collective female oppression. In the process of empowerment women are enabled to realize that they are not alone, to build friendship and networks, develop awareness of women’s oppression, to build self-confidence, self-esteem, to realize their power, to gain greater control over their lives.

The example of such empowerment strategies is the use of biographical method in women’s awareness raising groups (Comerford & Fambrough, 2002). By telling her life history to a group, a woman begins to understand not only the uniqueness of her life history and trajectory, but also the commonness and similarity of her experience
with the experience of others. Collective awareness raising in social work classrooms leads to common action, change of situation by uniting efforts both psychologically and politically. Here, biographical narrative turns into critical deconstruction and critique of woman’s identity formed by patriarchal society. Social workers organising classes of biographical narration seek to create space for new connections among women with different constellations of social identity, strengthening the capacity for social action. Both the researchers and the social workers create a milieu for solidarity and social transformation through structured process of collective narrative inquiry. The authors (Comerford & Fambrough, 2002) write: “Blending the process of gender autobiography, consciousness raising, and group development has birthed empowering new feminist constructions of learning and relationship in our classrooms. Through the intentional building of communities of inquiry, in which the contextual complexities of women’s social identities can be apprehended, footholds of potential solidarity have been co-constructed” (p. 414). The conscious building of human solidarity on the basis of personal and communal disclosure happens.

Critical paradigm theories (feminist, P. Freire’s etc.), raisers of consciousness, provide optimistic view towards awareness raising by influencing and transforming structures and, respectively, attribute the function of group, collective empowerment, liberation and emancipation to biographical narrative. Transformation of power structures is explained as collective mobilisation through activity of formally and informally organised groups. Marxist and feminist movements cover activity of formal groups, e.g. parties, organized movements, and informal unions, e.g. various clubs, book reading groups, friendship circles. In the case of feminist social work and research process described above, women’s mutual support and solidarity groups are more of an informal nature and do not resemble of an organized protest. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that narration of own life stories by revealing and demonstrating unfavourable situation of women as of an oppressed group became significant in political feminist grassroots movement.
Feminist social work ideas about social narrative as the means of empowerment, group encouragement of women are linked with Giddens’ ideas about structuration, relation between social structures and consciousness, reflectivity, construction of identity, link between the past, the present and the future. Biographical research is seen as individual or collective political action leading to change, liberation, empowerment, capability of solving own problems and overcoming sufferings.

In this case, not only breaking points or losses, but also the process of improvement of one’s life journey and empowerment, repair of biographies must be portrayed. As an example I would like to provide a research of life trajectories of people with AIDS in the work of Desiree A. Ciambrone (2003). The author stresses that it is important to understand not only how the illness itself have destroyed life plans and life projects. In order to minimize victimization and stigmatization, a researcher must understand how life trajectory straightens out and how new life and social environment, how further life project and new positive identity are created. In case of women with HIV, emancipation happens both in terms of struggle against the illness, and in terms of struggle against attempts to stigmatize, socially exclude a person that come from social environment. Biographical narration reveal how illness may become disruptive event and how crises and traumatic events rupture people’s lives, how reconstruction of identity passes after disease, how illness trajectory develops. Narration returns the narrator and the listener back into the past, into the phase of life before the illness as critical incident: narrators present their future life project they would have in the past (before the illness). Critical incident disrupts these projections. Initially women could not conceive of a place of HIV in their biographies. When reading biographies of people with AIDS we see that in the beginning the most typical reaction to disease was hopelessness, depression, shame, sadness, feelings of stigmatization, loss of control over their lives, fear. On the other side, by following the idea that biographical research can encourage biographical work of interviewees and may itself become the tool of empowerment, it may become an important practice of psychological help and social work to help people
overcome these problems. The mentioned research by D. Ciambrone reveals women’s ability to manage illness, to empower themselves. Biography becomes “a script for putting one’s life back together”. In this case, biographical research helps reveal how people interpret, experience, and cope with AIDS, change in one’s own self-concept, and how mobilization of helping networkshappens and how people would regain control of their lives through biographical work. According to the author, people who narrate their biographies make reconstruction work and try to repair their disrupted biographies “by establishing an acceptable and legitimating place for the condition within the person’s live...it is an attempt to maintain a sense of personal integrity”. So, such biographical narrative allows understanding and contemplating coping strategies, renegotiating relations with family and friends. Biographical narrative as research strategy reveals how AIDS survivors employ many of coping behaviours, renegotiate and reconstruct their identity. In this repairing process we reveal the role of use of humour, maintaining positive attitude, better self-care, stress reduction, establishing positive lifestyles. Such people join movements for rights of people with AIDS, help other people with the illness to overcome the first crisis, revive their relations with relatives, create networks etc.

According to critical gender theory, a person perceives his/her place in social structures by constructing his/her gender identity in biographical narrative. Gender, gender order, gender regimes, gender stereotypes, gender hierarchies, gender division of labour, as the researcher of masculinities studies R.W. Connel (1987) has noted, are objectives structures, structural models on one hand. On the other hand, each person participates in objective structures at subjective choice – by making own choices (for instance, choice of profession), choosing own way of life and life style, performance of roles, changing his/her life and violating normative regulation. At this point, Giddens’ theory could be mentioned as it suggests that social structures function and are implemented through subjective choices. Gender and other social identities are not fixed before interaction, they are rather constructed in interaction. It is not pre-existing norms which are passively internalized and enacted. Studies on masculine
subjectivity by applying biographical method reveal the influence of dominant and normalizing discourse and construction of hegemonic masculinity in our society on one hand, and formation of various unique types of masculinity in life trajectories of certain people on the other hand. Biographical differences of gender construction identified in the course of the studies reveal the diversity of gender-related experiences, which, in turn, questions and calls for reconsidering the notions of normative masculinity (hegemonic masculinity) and femininity. R.W. Conneland, J.W. Messerschmidt (2005) have also noted that biographical narrative reveals complex dynamics of masculinity, internal complexity and controversial aspects, tensions and multiplicity of identity.

Study on biographical narrative of male social workers performed by Agnė Dorelaitienė and me (Mažeikienė and Dorelaitienė, 2011) has revealed complex construction of gender and professional identity, certain dynamics of thoughts and emotions of males who chose social work, a profession that is not traditional in terms of gender and that opposes the notion of normative hegemonic masculinity. On one hand, the narrative has demonstrated self-positioning in terms of hegemonic masculinity, “weighing” of mundane practices and assessment of hegemonic masculinity in the context of an ideal and discourse. On the other hand, complexity and controversial nature of masculinity, as R.W. Conneland J.W. Messerschmidt (2005) have noted, manifest as tension and compromise between conflicting desires and emotions, as constant estimation of expenses and profit related to the choice of different gender strategies. Male participants of our research have revealed constant negotiations and certain tension between traditional hegemonic masculine features (strength, independence, active behaviour) and care and empathy usually ascribed to feminine features inside of them.

Similar studies on biographical narrative that reveal the impact of dominant discourse on an individual raise the essential question about likelihood of empowerment. As we have seen, Giddens’ theories on structuration and critical awareness raising provide ground for empowerment by emphasizing the higher importance of the role of
human subjectivity in terms of objective cultures. Another position that should be discussed in explanation of biographical narrative and its interrelation with dominant, normalizing discourses is post-structuralist critical theory. As researchers of the biographical method have noted (Merrill & West, 2009), according to poststructuralist approach, narrative is not only an existential concern about one’s self, but it may also be the result of influence of external factors (social structures) in our consciousness. According to Michel Foucault, narrative becomes the act of rule and domination of discourses and practices. This concept suggests that individual subjectivity is not only embedded into collective consciousness, but is also intertwined into the structures of power and knowledge. Power defines and controls our subjectivity, knowledge, and narrative. Thus, power relations and distribution determine the ways of narration and biographical description of life.

According to Judith Butler (1997), an advocate of critical theory who analyzed the ideas of Foucault, influence of power institutions is unavoidable as an individual’s becoming a subject, a subjection, is possible only with the help of power structures, by involving and subordinating the subject not from the outside, but from the inside. According to Foucault, power also forms a subject to a certain extent, providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire. As Butler has noted referring to Foucault, subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency; power proceeds the subject, „Subjection“ signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject“ (p. 2). Judith Butler elaborates Foucault’s idea about double role of power structures in subordinating a subject from the inside and, at the same time, producing the subject, and aims at explaining how power structures root in the psychic of the subject, what the psychic power structure inside an individual is. This establishes a certain link between psychoanalysis and critical theory in interpretation and further elaboration of the ideas of Z.Freud, J.Lakan, M.Foucault and L.Althusser. So, subject is incorporated norms. External norms become psychic phenomena. Narrative, narration about genesis is the
subject’s expression, where “the subject can refer to its own genesis only by taking a third-person perspective on itself, by dispossessing its own perspective in the act of narrating its genesis.” If, as Giddens has suggested, it is in biographical narrative that free and reflective self-construction happens, then in this theory influenced by the ideas of psychoanalysis and Foucault’s ideas “the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that constitution has already taken place, and thus arrives after the fact. The subject loses itself to tell story of itself.” (Butler, 1997, p. 11). Power/power structure cannot be eliminated from a person’s entirety, because the subject is itself the effect of subjection. Nevertheless, according to M. Foucault in his work “Power and Knowledge” (2001, p. 526), the rooting of power/power structure in a subject doesn’t restrain opportunity for alteration and resistance. Relations between power and necessity cause resistance, as Foucault has noted, each moment causes this resistance, opens new opportunities for it. There is an eternal and multiplex struggle during the shift from rebellious to power, from power to rebellion. He attempts to identify how power inflation, constant questioning of power takes place in mundane relations, relations between genders, in families, between mental patients and healthy people, patients and doctors, everywhere. There are thousands of confrontations and mini-struggles in multiple environments. He talks about “creeping”, invisible, gradual weakening and self-reconstruction of power. Foucault sees power as enacted in every interaction, in interpersonal relations and at the same time as subject to resistance in each of those interactions. It can be challenged at any moments. It is necessary to continuously renew and maintain power relations. It is at this point that the place for empowerment of groups, reconfiguration and change of existing power relation appears. Accordingly, it is important for a researcher of biographical narrative to reveal his/her own position in interpreting the narrative: whether he/she is able to criticize dominant discourses behind the biographical narrative and how, in Foucault’s words, to increase “creeping power inflation”. This is why the aim of the latest biographical research works on women and marginal groups has been not only to reveal the experience of being oppressed and suffering, but also to identify and criticize dominant discourses that
CONCLUSION

The above analysis reveals the role of biographical research in a multistep process of empowerment of individuals, a group and an organization. Can an individual’s narration of his/her life history change his/her situation, empower and provide powers and capacities to control own life? The answer to this question depends on how the interplay between an individual and social structures and the nature of power relations are understood. Certain roles are accordingly ascribed to researchers and social work specialists in their biographical research or organization of biographical work of clients and research participants.

If power has been acknowledged at the level of *economic and social macro-structures*, biographical research results, revelation of life trajectories of excluded groups, scientific and political dissemination have the potential to transform social policy. When interpreting power relations and their potential reconfiguration taking place at the level of interplay between the *institutional mezzo* and *social groups*, biographical research can be employed to change organizational cultures via biographical, client-focused and personalized approach. In their communication with organizations, researchers apply biographical research that allows empowering not only individuals (clients, workers, managing staff), but also the organization for it to be able to introduce innovations and improve its activity. Critical social work experience has demonstrated that biographical research can be applied both as a tool of collective mobilization of groups, and as a tool of encouragement for political action. The research employed the combination of means of biographical work and biographical research. In transformation of power configuration at the level of *interpersonal relations* and power contained in the subject as *intrapsychic reality*, biographical research combined with biographical work (as researchers communicate with social workers and psychologists) helps
the person understand his/her interaction with others, reconstruct his/her identity, design a new life, future project. When interpreting an individual’s subjectivity as a complex, multi-layered internal reality full of rational and irrational tensions and conflicts, a researcher’s role implies critical position towards dominant discourses and practices that form the subject’s consciousness and psychic.

RÉSUMÉ

EMPOWERMENT AU MOYEN DU TRAVAIL BIOGRAPHIQUE ET PAR LA RECHERCHE BIOGRAPHIQUE

L’article analyse le rôle de la recherche biographique au cours du processus à étapes multiples de l’empowerment – autonomisation ou pouvoir d’agir – d’un individu, d’un groupe et d’une organisation. Le récit de l’histoire de sa vie par un individu peut-il changer sa situation, l’autonomiser et lui donner le pouvoir et la capacité de contrôler sa propre vie ? La réponse à cette question dépend de la façon dont est envisagée la réciprocité entre les structures individuelles et sociales et la nature des relations de pouvoir. Des rôles particuliers sont donc attribués aux chercheurs et aux spécialistes du travail social en fonction de leurs recherches biographiques ou de l’organisation du travail biographique de leurs clients et participants de la recherche.

L’approche biographique est considérée dans cet article selon deux points de vue différents : ontologique et épistémologique. La perspective ontologique considère le récit biographique comme un moyen intrinsèquement essentiel de construction de l’identité de la personne qui peut par là-même devenir une stratégie significative du travail social. Le travailleur social utilise le récit de l’histoire de sa vie par le client comme un moyen de l’aider, comme un instrument d’autonomisation. La perspective épistémologique, quant à elle, voit la méthode biographique dans le processus cognitif comme une stratégie de recherche se focalisant sur la relation entre l’interviewer et l’interviewé. Ces deux perspectives peuvent être liées au cours d’une recherche combinant le récit du parcours de vie, la biographie comme empowerment et reconstruction de l’identité, et la recherche utilisant la méthode biographique. La biographie comme stratégie d’empowerment fait l’objet d’une approche socio-biographique, selon la théorie de la structuration (Anthony Giddens), et les théories critique, féministe, poststructurale (M.Foucault, J.Butler).

Si l’on reconnaît que le pouvoir se manifeste au niveau des macrostructures économiques et sociales, les résultats de la recherche biographique, la
révélation du parcours de vie de groupes exclus, la diffusion scientifique et politique ont le potentiel pour transformer la politique sociale. Le récit de l’histoire de leur vie par les exclus de la société va permettre de faire entendre leur voix, de juger les histoires officielles et les biographies normatives avec un œil critique. L’expérience critique en travail social a démontré que la recherche biographique peut être appliquée à la fois comme moyen de mobilisation collective des groupes et comme moyen d’encouragement de l’action politique. Quand on interprète les relations de pouvoir et leur reconfiguration potentielle se produisant au niveau de l’interaction entre groupes institutionnels et sociaux, la recherche biographique peut être appliquée au changement des organisations culturelles, par la biographie focalisée sur le client et l’approche personnalisée. Dans leurs communications avec les organisations, les chercheurs appliquent la recherche biographique qui permet d’autonomiser non seulement les individus (clients, travailleurs, équipe du personnel), mais également l’organisation afin qu’elle soit capable d’introduire des innovations et améliorer son activité.

REFERENCES:
