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(Un)Freedom of choice. Explanations for career choices in mid-20th century Austrian academic CVs

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Abstract

Does someone freely choose to become a scientist or do scientists rather feel chosen? Auto-biographic writing was a common, interdisciplinary scientific practice in the 20th century and thus provides a broad variety of explanations on the topic of career choices. When did someone make the choice to become a scientist or researcher? What factors influenced their decision? And how did they pursue their career path?

In qualitatively comparing six CVs of various lengths, collected at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, two recurring themes stand out and will be discussed in more detail: inclinations and genetics. Although different in some aspects, both concepts lean stronger towards deterministic philosophies rather than freedom of choice. The majority of the examined scientists, although from different social and epistemic backgrounds, seems to support the idea that they were chosen for their subject rather than making a conscious decision by themselves.

Keywords

history of science – (auto)biographic writing – career choices – Austrian Academy of Sciences – national socialism

Introduction

Interviews with successful scientists often include the must-ask question “When/How did you decide to become a scientist?”¹ Scientific research and academic teaching are widely believed to be passion jobs, where intrinsic motivation outweighs money or power. In popular media this belief is reinforced by the dichotomy of the horror movie scientist who transgresses morals to gain scientific insight or the morally upright, heroic scientist that risks their life and reputation to fight political corruption with scientific facts.² Either way, both depictions reinforce the idea that professions in science are not primarily motivated by money or power but by an intrinsic passion for knowledge or “truth”. In other words, scientists freely choose to dedicate their lives to their research quests and are not deterred by the prospect of more monetary gains in the free-market economy or more power in political positions.

Historically, this popular image of science as incorruptible is closely related to the notion of science as “pure”, an Austrian post-war rhetorical trope to downplay the voluntary involvement of scientists with National socialism.³ The austere distance created between motivations to become a researcher and any capitalist reasoning thus implies a difference to other academic jobs like doctors and lawyers.⁴

In this paper, I would like to ask how historic, mid-20th century self-descriptions of scientists played into or differed from this “pure science” narrative. My sources are self-written CVs by members of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. This institutional and geographical framework provides a pre-selection of individuals who are commonly regarded as successful researchers in their respective disciplines as well as the scientific community and public at large.⁵ It also ensures a sample of comparable testimonials as newly elected members to the Academy were all asked to submit an autobiographic account of their lives and careers in science.⁶ From the mid-20th century, approximately 50 CVs by members of the academy are kept at the Academy archives. Six of them are chosen for this paper to discuss in greater detail. They are chosen due to their level of detail and as representative of science (three CVs) and humanities (three CVs) alike. They are all writing at about the same time (1940s / early 1950s), yet display the full spectrum of diverse motivations, paths that led to their choice of subject matter and factors that influenced their choice. These are the autobiographies of

1. Orientalist Viktor Christian (1885–1963), CV written in 1942

1 Cf. for instance the ORF-interview with world famous Austrian physicist Anton Zeilinger in 2015 on the occasion of his 70th birthday: Anton Zeilinger: Welterkenntnis und Gestaltung (2015) / tvthek.orf.at, <https://tvthek.orf.at/history/Chemie-und-Physik/13557941/Anton-Zeilinger-Welterkenntnis-und-Gestaltung/13943702>.

2 Cf. Kirby, D. A.: *Lab Coats in Hollywood*; Perkowitz, S.: *Hollywood science*, pp. 167–195.

3 Cf. Beyler, R. H.: „Reine“ Wissenschaft; Heim, S.: „Die reine Luft“.

4 Cf. John, J.: „Not deutscher Wissenschaft“?, pp. 107–142; Ringer, F.: *Die Gelehrten*.

5 On the wider history and context of the Austrian Academy of Sciences cf. Feichtinger, J., Mazohl, B. (ed.): *Die Österreichische Akademie*.

6 They are located at the archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences under the section “Personalakten”.

2. Meteorologist Heinrich Ficker (1881–1957), CV written in 1941
3. Entomologist Wolfgang von Buddenbrock (1884–1964), CV written in 1949
4. Historian Leo Santifaller (1890–1974), CV undated
5. Pathological anatomist Hermann Chiari (1897–1969), CV written in 1949
6. Historian Wilhelm Bauer (1877–1953), CV written in 1952

It should be noted here that all subjects of my inquiry are male as women were not admitted to the Academy until 1948 (Lise Meitner, first female corresponding member abroad).⁷

A comparative deep reading of these six CVs will allow to better understand the following questions: When did they make the choice to pursue a career in science? What influences are credited for this choice? Do they invoke a notion of freedom of choice or a more deterministic model of them being chosen by some notion of destiny? Are the motivations for a career in the humanities different from those for the natural sciences? What role do parents, teachers, and peers play?

Narrative patterns will be analyzed through historical discourse analysis after Achim Landwehr, Hayden White, and Michel Foucault. The sequence of events recounted, repetitions, as well as the diction used to describe events and situations is examined as they are indicative of how meaning is attributed.

Autobiographic writing as scientific practice

While autobiographies have usually been a genre of sources mainly theorized by literary studies such as the classic ones by Philipp Lejeune and Volker Depkat, the genre is here explored as a source for the history of science. Already Wilhelm Dilthey has identified autobiographies as one of the “roots of historical understanding”.⁸ His student Georg Misch defined autobiographies as the description of the life of an individual person by himself/herself.⁹ Therefore, these CVs can be read as autobiographies. Depkat has added the aspect of the autobiography being “an act of social communication through which the writer relates himself to his specific environment.”¹⁰ In this paper, I would like to propose the thesis that it is also a scientific practice; one that is often overlooked due to its ordinariness but nevertheless, significant as a means for scientists to perform their scientific persona. This specific identity between the public and the personal has been popularized and theorized by Lorraine Daston and Otto Sibum in 2003.¹¹ It will prove useful in the subsequent analysis of different strategies of self-presentation.

First, however, another word about the context of the sources. The archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences provides a unique opportunity. One that has not been fully

7 Cf. Corradini, D. A., Geiger, K., Mazohl, B.: *Lise Meitner*, pp. 173–189.

8 Dilthey, W.: *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt*, p. 247.

9 Misch, G.: *Geschichte der Autobiographie*.

10 Depkat, V.: *Autobiographie*, p. 442.

11 Daston, L., Sibum, O.: *Introduction*, pp. 1–8.

explored yet. It hosts hundreds of autobiographic texts from Austria's most decorated scientists of the last 175 years. The reason this vault has not been systematically studied yet is that it does not exist as one corpus but is spread out over thousands of individual member files. Most files contain a self-written CV by the member, but it takes months or even years to collect them all (an opportunity which I had as an employee at the Academy). The reason why members were submitting their CVs – and often more than one – was simple: Soon after its foundation in 1847, the Academy's administration recognized that it was useful to have some biographical information about their members at hand in case one of them died suddenly.¹² In this case, it was customary for the general secretary (or later another member) to give a toast to the deceased at the next meeting and publish an obituary in the almanac. This custom was widespread among European academies of sciences and was probably developed from the eulogies practiced at the Académie des sciences in France in the 17th century.¹³ It was for this reason that the Academy asked newly elected members to submit a resumé of their life's journey and accomplishments in science. It is possible that other academies of sciences would do the same, but more research in the local archives needs to be done to test this hypothesis.¹⁴ These autobiographic texts were not standardized yet and could differ significantly in length and tone. The format of today's common, highly standardized tabular academic CV was beginning to take form in the first half of the 20th century. It slowly replaced the more elaborate and literary life writings of the late 19th century. On the book market, autobiographies were booming, and publication houses were eager to exploit this need.¹⁵ In Leipzig, Germany, the publication house Felix Meiner started a highly popular series in the 1920s on autobiographies by scientists of different fields of study.¹⁶ US-American historian Jeremy D. Popkin recently called this series "the origin of the modern academic autobiography".¹⁷ While I agree that the publishing sector had a significant impact on the genesis of this genre, I would argue that the origins begin much earlier and can be found in the unpublished CVs in the personal files of academies and universities. A misconception which might have contributed to their dismissal is that CVs for academic institutions were always produced in an application context. However, at least for the CVs in the archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, this is far from true. Authors were already elected members; they had nothing to prove about their worth and status anymore. They had made it to the highest academic ranks and were merely looking back, describing how they believed or wanted others to believe, they got there. It was an occasion to acknowledge positive influences, thank teachers and mentors and create their own narrative of how they became accomplished scientists.

12 No research has been published on this process yet but the general proceedings of the election and membership activities can be found in Meister, R.: *Geschichte der Akademie*.

13 On the origin of academic obituaries cf. Echtermöller, A.: *Schattengefichte*.

14 First inquiries at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina have indicated that they may also have holdings of personal biographical information on members.

15 Cf. Depkat, V.: *Autobiographie*, pp. 441–476.

16 Cf. Meiner, F. (ed.): *Die Wissenschaft der Gegenwart*.

17 Cf. Popkin, J. D.: *The origins*, pp. 27–42.

Unfreedom of choice – inclinations and genetics

The main result of my analysis of these autobiographic texts with regard to career choice explanations is that the notion of freedom of choice seems almost absent in the first half of the 20th century. Instead, two key concepts stand out as recurring themes that seem to indicate a more deterministic model of explanation: inclinations (“Neigungen”) and genetics (“Veranlagungen”). Both concepts imply forces within the personal development of a scientist that seem to leave little room for choosing otherwise. Economic factors are not excluded as guiding factors, yet more as challenges these scientists overcame to follow their destiny. Mostly, however, the notion is refuted that children are born as blank canvases and then develop a passion for something according to freedom of choice. Instead, the prevalent discourse seemed to indicate that children are born with hereditary traits that predetermine what job they are most suited for in life.¹⁸ Even autobiographers that state that this was not the case for them, reinforce the same discourse by positioning themselves against it.

In the following, I will discuss six different explanations for career choices presented in CVs submitted to the Academy in the 1940s and early 1950s. Not biographical accurateness but narrative freedom (A), wider social constructs and cultural beliefs of the hereditary versus the learned (B), the wisdom of hindsight (C), story telling elements (D), and tropes such as the self-made man (E) and the autodidact (F) are discussed, further examining and defining the concept of “inclinations”.

A) Narrative Freedom

The example of Viennese orientalist Viktor Christian illustrates well how someone described himself as following his inherited inclinations and talents. In 1942, he submits 15 typewritten pages to the Academy. Christian begins his account with a detailed description about his ancestry. He then explains: “*I gave this short description of my parents and ancestors first because their genetics and inclinations are mirrored in my own personal development.*”¹⁹ It must be noted here that Christian was a fervent National socialist and it is therefore not unsurprising that he would place a lot of significance on ancestry.²⁰ Christian believes that there must be some similarity between his own characteristics and talents and those of his lineage (especially but not exclusively on the male side). As Christian describes, his father had an inkling for mathematics and the natural sciences and wanted to study forestry. He was hindered by financial reasons and instead became a state accountant. How is this similar to the orientalist Christian? He explains: “*Besides his mathematical inclination, my father was also interested in historical research since his library*

18 Cf. Fitzpatrick, S.: *Tear Off the Masks*.

19 Archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (AÖAW), Personalakt Viktor Christian, Lebenslauf.

20 Cf. Gingrich, A.: *Viktor Christian*, pp. 373–424.

*contained larger historical depictions that he had also read in full.*²¹ Christian's beliefs were so strongly rooted in social Darwinism that he had to find a plausible explanation for why he thinks there were sufficient similarities in the hereditary talents of his father and his own. He then credits two of his high school teachers for "awakening" ("erwecken") his interest in linguistics. His choice of words here indicate that his talent and interest were always inside of him but dormant and had to be awoken. Furthermore, one of his peers who had many historical books further contributed to his awakening interest. "When I then inscribed to the University of Vienna in 1904, this inclination was decisive for my choice of subject."²² This model of explanation is very typical for Christian's time: interests are dormant hereditary traits and awakened by teachers and peers. If all goes well, they are then pursued and lead to a successful career.

B) Hereditary versus learned

Only one year prior to Christian's CV, meteorologist Heinrich Ficker submits his account which alludes to a similar notion while seemingly contradicting it:

*"Through the father, who often was with us during the time in Munich, the early interest for history was awoken in me, though this inclination, which was most suited for my genetic markup, would not prevail. Without having a prior significant inclination for the natural sciences, it was planted inside of me from the outside and reinforced by my early preference for mountains and mountaineering."*²³

Notably, Ficker states that his inherited inclination for the humanities did not prevail over an externally inserted interest for the natural sciences. Though his life experience seems to contradict the notion that predetermining genetics are stronger forces than freedom of choice, he only further proves that this was in fact the hegemonic discourse of the time. Again, his vocabulary is notable: "*planted inside of me from the outside*" ("von aussen her in mich verpflanzt") is a botanical metaphor that further strengthens the idea of natural forces at work. According to this metaphor, genetics are like seeds but they do not always "prevail" ("sich durchsetzen") over externally added seeds. The terminology used here is derived from (social) Darwinism, especially in the Lamarckian interpretation prevalent in Vienna at the time.²⁴ It places significant emphasis on the interplay between inherited traits and learned adaptations. It therefore strongly resembles Christian's narrative of his own path in life. Dormant talents in him were not able to come to blossom in his father but in himself, while Ficker's remained dormant and were outcompeted by other external factors.

21 AÖAW, Personalakt Viktor Christian, Lebenslauf.

22 Ibid.

23 AÖAW, Personalakt Heinrich Ficker, Lebenslauf.

24 Cf. Matis, H., Reiter, W. L. (ed.): *Darwin in Zentraleuropa*.

C) The wisdom of hindsight

In 1949, entomologist Wolfgang von Buddenbrock explains in his CV to the Academy how he was almost led down a wrong path by economical constraints and his parents wishes but how he overcame those adversaries to pursue his early on awaked inclination for biology:

“My inclination for biology awoke very early on, already in the earliest teenage years, I vividly practiced entomology. [...] For economic reasons, I decided to become an engineer and inscribed in fall of 1902 in the Technical University of Charlottenburg. After several years of studying, I recognized, however, in increasing clarity that this was the wrong path. [...] Despite adamant resistance from my family, I convinced them to let me study zoology.”²⁵

He states this with the privilege of hindsight almost half a century later. He knows it all worked out well for him and so it is easy for him to overstate how early his “true” talents became showing and how justified it was for him to take such a risk. It is also notable how he states that at only ten years old he already practiced entomology instead of saying he was playfully collecting and curiously observing insects. He thus stresses how destined he was for his later scientific career. His narrative resembles a classical coming of age story or Bildungsroman where the hero is temporarily led astray from his path in life but ends up in the right place after all. While a modern academic CV would rather focus on how his background in engineering taught him valuable skills later to be applied to his entomological practice or sets him apart among competitors in his field of research, Buddenbrock is more interested in telling a good life story, one that is inspired by autobiographical literature. This is typical for these early 20th century, pre-standardized CVs that treat detours as anecdotal plot devices rather than trying to fit everything into one coherent narrative of accumulating scientific experience.²⁶ The focus lies on character development. His ability to recognize his technical training as a “*wrong path*” and to overcome adverse factors is meant to impress the audience and highlight his insight and dedication. It is not necessary for him in this non-application context to build a narrative around his acquired skillset – which is not being doubted as an elected member. Instead, he can focus more on the story telling aspects of his journey.

D) Story telling elements

Around the same time, though undated, historian Leo Santifaller submitted his 21-pages long account of his life and career in science to the Academy. What makes his case interesting is that he says he knew that he wanted to become a scientific researcher even

25 AÖAW, Personalakt Wolfgang von Buddenbrock-Hettersdorf, Lebenslauf.

26 This will be explored in more detail by the author in the forthcoming dissertation thesis on a wider range of academic CVs.

before he settled for a subject: “After having completed my high school graduation exams, my career choice did not seem difficult for me. It was clear to me for years that I wanted to become a scientific researcher; unclear, however, whether as a historian or an astronomer.”²⁷ Instead of telling a story of a single-minded, lifelong passion for history, Santifaller, a distinguished tenured professor with many honorable titles and responsible positions, tells a story about how he almost became an astronomer. He makes it clear in the following that it was more luck and fate rather than a conscious choice that led him to history. His father did not want to let him go to far away Göttingen and the teachers in Vienna were much more encouraging and inspiring in history than in astronomy. Both disciplines are part of very different epistemic cultures and to reveal that he had an equal passion for both, makes Santifaller’s story interesting and compelling to read. This is of course what makes him a good historian that he knows how to write an intriguing story but it is an unexpected style of writing for a modern academic CV. That is why these texts while often disregarded as mere documentation should be understood to be much closer related to autobiographic literature, therefore themselves historical fictions “based on a true story”. Especially – but not only – when researchers from the humanities compose their CV, it cannot be underestimated that they are professional writers and speak from the highest point of authority about their own life story. “Fiction” does not necessarily mean invented, manipulated or fabricated in a negative connotation. The term rather invites us to think of autobiographic texts as more than factual documentation in prose but as narratives, following rhetoric rules, composed and structured in an argumentative manner. It is therefore apt to apply metahistorical analysis as per Hayden White to CVs / autobiographical texts.²⁸

E) The self-made man

Decidedly easier it was for Hermann Chiari (CV written in 1949) to make his choice. He became a pathological anatomist like his father. His way of describing his career path was much less literary and more straight forward: “Only after the end of the war, I could begin my studies in medicine for which I had felt a special inclination since middle school. This inclination was well supported by the life in my family home in which doctors from all over the world often stayed.”²⁹ One could argue that he simply followed his father’s footsteps but, in his words, he described feeling “a special inclination since middle school”³⁰ and only mentions his father indirectly as a supporting factor through the depersonalized “family home” which hosted many famous doctors. This minor detail in the way Chiari described being introduced to the field of medicine is remarkable since it shows a slight distancing towards earlier forms of autobiographic story telling in which a son much more proudly

27 AÖAW, Personalakt Leo Santifaller, Lebenslauf.

28 Cf. White, H.: *Metahistory*.

29 AÖAW, Personalakt Hermann Chiari, Lebenslauf.

30 Ibid.

and openly inherits his father's profession. Especially, since he not only became a doctor but an academic professor in the same medical field as his father, yet hardly mentions this fact at all. This shows a slight shift towards a different value system than earlier generations and the idealization of the self-made man following an early inclination or inner calling in life.³¹ This is a remarkable aspect of the "inclination" concept which strongly supports the idea of inherited general interests or talents but differs from the idea that a son is destined to learn the exact same profession as his father. As seen previously, they can be abstract, indirect and even dormant and/or overruled but usually they are already present at an early age and then are awoken or supported by mentor figures. Sometimes characteristic traits, talents, interests or passion projects of mothers are mentioned but authors are much more likely to stress patrilinear heritage.³² Chiari, for instance, mentions women only twice, his mother in the first sentence and his wife in the last, and even then, only their names without further detail. As if not part of the main story he wants to tell, he very briefly and factually mentions his family life at the end of his CV: "*Married since 1924 to Elisabeth, born Spohn, a son came from the marriage.*"³³ Such a last sentence can be found very often in the examined CVs. It speaks to a discourse in which one's "private" life is to be seen as separate and hierarchically less important to a CV than for instance one's parents, ancestry, class or geographical-cultural origin – yet important enough to be mentioned almost universally. By contrast, contemporary CVs would most likely not mention one's marital status, children, confession, ancestry etc. at all. As such, mid-20th century CVs are an exceptional source with valuable insights into contemporary discourses on identity-building, pedagogy and freedom of choice.

F) The autodidact

Finally, we look towards another historian, Wilhelm Bauer, who embodies the "self-made man" in his 1952-CV to the fullest extent. He dismisses his teacher's influence on him and claims to be a fully self-educated person. About his teachers he said: "*They followed their duty no different than a civil servant at a ticket office, who do not think much about the people they are serving.*"³⁴ With pride, it seems, Bauer boasts about not having done his homework and bringing home bad grades while reading books from his father's library "*without any guidance*".³⁵ Since middle school, he claims, he was pursuing an academic career. Like Santifaller before him, however, he was not set on the path of a historian yet. He originally preferred German literature. Yet it was his father who introduced him to history professor Engelbert Mühlbacher, who then became Bauer's mentor. Through

31 Indicative of this shift is the 1859 lecture by Frederick Douglass on the self-made man, cf. Cawelti, J. G.: *Apostles*.

32 This will be explored in more detail by the author in the forthcoming dissertation thesis on a wider range of academic CVs.

33 Ibid.

34 AÖAW, Personalakt Wilhelm Bauer, Lebenslauf.

35 Ibid.

Bauer's narrative, the reader is guided through the life story of a confident, ambitious autodidact with a deeper understanding of science than his teachers, a young genius just waiting to be mentored by the right person. A different biographer might think he was a troublesome teen who rebelled against authority until his father had enough and put him under the wings of someone he trusted could discipline him. This would be a very different perspective but the reader is of course meant to believe the first version of events. To further illustrate how an autobiographic narrative is used as a tool to shape the public image of someone, Bauer's relationship to politics comes to mind. In 1952, when he submits his account to the Academy, his National socialist past was all too known.³⁶ Unlike many of his colleagues he permanently lost his tenure and directorship at the University of Vienna and was never reinstated.³⁷ By contrast, at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, he was only temporarily inactive but was fully rehabilitated by 1948.³⁸ Although under no further pressure to proclaim his innocence in front of the academy, he made sure he would be remembered as apolitical. Early on he describes himself as a university student "*who was not interested in politics but in his studies*" and who was distraught by the interrupting student protests at the time.³⁹ Later he then edited a journal which he makes sure to describe as "*truly Austrian since it kept clear from any false patriotism*" and although it was financed by the ministry of foreign affairs the journal's content was not influenced by it in any way.⁴⁰ Bauer further enlists his political-journalistic activities but adds: "*Despite some activities in politics and journalism, I always felt first and foremost as an intellectual and professor.*"⁴¹

Conclusion

This brings us back to our point of departure: the notion of "pure science". Bauer exemplifies this trope in his CV very clearly. Science is clearly contrasted with politics. A position in politics means power and influence, whereas a position in science and research is motivated by the mystified tropes "inclination" and heritage. Pure science is not corruptible since it is fueled not by wealth or power but by an intrinsic motivation that pre-exists in a scientist. The idea is that Bauer was drawn to his books more than to what he was expected to learn at school and it turned out to be to his advantage. Sometimes it takes a mentor to "awaken" a dormant talent, to guide a young student in the right direction or facilitate his training. These dormant predispositions remain somewhat mysterious as they are believed to have a strong genetic component though this is not always obvious at the beginning. Only the advantage of hindsight reveals the

36 Cf. Scheutz, M.: „*Deutschland ist kein ganzes Deutschland*, pp. 247–281.

37 Cf. Pfefferle, R., Pfefferle, H.: *Glimpflich entnazifiziert*, p. 283.

38 Cf. Klos, S., Feichtinger, J.: *Die Praxis der Entnazifizierung*, pp. 163–200.

39 AÖAW, Personalakt Wilhelm Bauer, Lebenslauf.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

similarities to one's ancestry more clearly. As mentioned before, the ideas of science as "pure" or "uncorruptible" is closely linked to the aftermath of the National socialist era while explanations given for career choices are still closely related to social Darwinism and similar ideologies. Patrilinear ancestry is usually strongly highlighted. However, the idea of the "self-made man" is even more important and can – in the case of Chiari, who chose the same profession as his father – result in downplaying inherited traits.

In brief, successful mid-20th century scientists in Austria would find the question that we ask so often today "When/how did you choose to become a scientist?" rather strange. Judging by their own accounts of their paths in life and in science, beliefs seem to prevail that defy the notion of freedom of choice. It seems that most scientists described themselves as being born with certain predispositions and being further influenced and guided by their upbringing. While some say they were not born with a passion for a specific subject, they often argued that they were born or meant to be scientific researchers in general. Today's autobiographic stories often refer to a pivotal moment in their life when their passion or curiosity was sparked. In the early to mid-20th century it is more often believed that already their fathers or grandfathers showed traits of scientific curiosity while – unlike themselves – not having had the same means to fully develop that potential. The apple falling on Newton's head is still a popular "origin story" for scientific inventions and breakthroughs but a scientist's career was the hard, incremental work of fulfilling a potential that was placed like a seed inside of them. This aspect brings up a more differentiated perspective on the dichotomy of freedom and unfreedom.

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(Un)Freedom of choice. Explanations for career choices in mid-20th century Austrian academic CVs

The paper asks how free we are to decide which careers we pursue and in how far even our autobiographical narratives are pre-structured by contemporary discourse. On the example of six autobiographies by members of the Academy of Sciences in Vienna, I analyse narrative freedom, wider social constructs and cultural beliefs of the hereditary versus the learned, the wisdom of hindsight, story telling elements, and tropes such as the self-made man and the autodidact. Two recurring themes stand out and will be discussed in more detail: inclinations and genetics. Although different in some aspects, both concepts lean stronger towards deterministic philosophies rather than freedom of choice. The majority of the examined scientists, although from different social and epistemic backgrounds, seems to support the idea that they were chosen for their subject rather than making a conscious decision by themselves. Autobiographies, I argue, are excellent sources to analyse the concept of freedom of choice as they reveal subjective opinions and contributing factors.



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