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Breuer, Franz

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Predecessor-Successor Transitions in Institutional and Interpersonal Contexts: On the Development of a Theory of the Transfer of Personal Objects

Franz Breuer*

Abstract: »Vorgänger-Nachfolger-Übergänge in institutionellen und interpersonalen Bezügen. Die Entwicklung einer Theorie des Transfers persönlicher Objekte«. This article outlines the development of a theory of predecessor-successor transitions in social contexts using a grounded theory approach. The theory can be applied to such diverse phenomena as the transfer of family businesses to the next generation, university chair succession, the passing on of parental roles (for example in the case of adoption or remarriage), and organ transplantation. The core conceptual category that emerged was "the transfer of personal objects". This concept refers to the transfer of the power of disposal over objects that are fundamental to the identity and the identification of the owner. A number of theoretical dimensions of the category were identified. Methodologically speaking, the theory generated can be classified as a formal grounded theory. In other words, the comparison of different empirical fields and cases using hermeneutical analysis yielded a transdisciplinary social science category that can be employed to conceptualise the dynamics of the development of interpersonal, social, or institutional structures, especially with regard to the links and the interplay between material and symbolic components, between the individual and the social, and the past and the present.

Keywords: heirs, family roles, family businesses, freedom of action/constraints on action, generations, grounded theory, identification, identity, interpersonal negotiation of meaning, university chair succession, object transfer, organ transplantation, personal objects, perspectives, transgenerational transfer, transcendence, bequest, predecessor-successor transitions.

* Franz Breuer, University of Münster, Institute of Psychology, Fliednerstr. 21, 48149 Münster, Germany; breuerf@uni-muenster.de.

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1. Transgenerational Transfer

For some years now, I have been working on a theory of the transfer of personally significant objects from predecessors to successors (Breuer 2009). My conceptual starting point was transgenerational transfer. This term is theoretically ambivalent: depending on the theoretical or discursive context, it can mean or imply different things (I cannot elaborate further on this point here, but see, for example, Lüscher and Liegle 2003, 33ff.).

- In biology and genetics, “transfer” refers basically to genetic transmission, which takes place via certain cellular carriers (especially chromosomes) within the framework of sexual reproduction. The generational distinction and sequence (parents → offspring) is clear and unequivocal. The phenotypic expression of the transmitted genetic predispositions does not require any initiative on the part of the offspring; rather, it is a matter of fate.
- Transfer processes can also be identified in the context of interpersonal interaction and communication. These processes comprise, on the one hand, bringing up, educating, training, or negotiating with children and young people: A certain body of knowledge, certain ways of thinking and looking at the world, values, patterns of action etc. are passed on in socialisation and education contexts. A particular generational constellation (old → young) typically plays a role here (cf., for example, Ecarius 2008). On the other hand, possessions (material objects, economic assets, typically in the form of an “inheritance”) are also transferred in such constellations (cf., for example, Leittke 2003). Here, the generational distinction becomes less clear and unequivocal. It is no longer inevitably linked to a father/mother-to-son/daughter relationship. Rather, it can be relativised in the context of differences in knowledge, skills, and (life) experience (in various social constellations, for example teacher-pupil relationships). Moreover, the role of the recipient is distinctly characterised by albeit varying degrees of personal initiative and appropriational activity.
- And finally, the transfer concept can be located in an institutional and cultural context. Here, the focus is on the maintenance of the status quo in, or the historical continuity of, social institutions, cultural constructs, practices and memories, which is brought about by procedures (statutes, rules, rituals, traditions etc.) of varying degrees of formality (cf., for example, Berger and Luckmann 1966; Assmann 1997). However, the preservation of tradition is relativised by change and upheavals, which can come into play due to a variety of factors. To a large extent, the generation concept gets detached from the parent-child constellation; it becomes increasingly diffuse and acquires more of a mentality-related character – for example, the “Sceptical Generation” in post-war Germany (Schelsky 1957), the “1968 Generation”, or the hedonistic, brand-conscious “(Volkswagen) Golf Generation” in Germany in the 1980s (Illies 2000).

The theoretical approach presented in this paper focuses mainly on level 2 above. However, level 3 represents a socio-cultural framework without which socio-interactive transfer- and succession-related actions cannot be adequately identified and described. Level 1 – biology and genetics – does not play a constitutive role in the present theory, and is not therefore focused upon. However, it comes into play as a mentality- and discourse phenomenon when biologically deterministic notions, norms and ideals of the participant actors are salient (for example, when assumptions about genealogical-familial relationships serve as principles to explain or justify actions).

2. Origins and Characteristics of the Proposed Theory

The development of the theory presented here began in studies of the transfer of small businesses to the next generation. These – mainly family – businesses included farms in the Münsterland region in north-west Germany and small enterprises in the hotel and gastronomy sector (restaurants, hotels, and pubs). We¹ conducted interviews with various participants in order to obtain narrative accounts of transfer and succession from the perspective of members of the predecessor- and successor generation – from mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and persons who had married into the family. I then endeavoured to reconstruct these accounts and perspectives in a systematic way (see Breuer 2009, 273ff.).

Over the course of time, I extended the scope of my research to other empirical fields, for example to:

- transfers in other types of organisations, for example university chair succession or succession to the post of director of an educational or cultural institution – in other words in state bodies in the broader sense of the word;
- the transfer of and succession to partnership- and family roles, for example new (marriage) partners or new fathers/mothers as a result of the (re)configuration of families in the case of divorce, adoption etc.;
- the donation and receipt of bodily organs within the framework of organ transplantations.

This list of examples gives an indication of the range of areas or domains to which the present theory can be applied. The transfer/succession theme has numerous anthropological, cultural, macro- and microsocial, and psychological dimensions. If one looks at everyday life through a predecessor-successor lens, one soon discovers structural parallels, similarities and relationships between a large number of substantive areas and examples.

¹ The studies were carried out partly within the framework of research seminars at the university; some interviews were conducted by the students.

Methodologically speaking, the focus of this project was on theory development and elaboration. The research approach was characterised by the grounded theory method (cf. Strauss 1991) and a corresponding attitude of self-reflexivity (Breuer 1996, 2010). Adopting a self-reflexive, inductive (or abductive) orientation, theoretical models were developed from the observed everyday social phenomena and their subjective representations (for example in the form of narrations). The methodological principle of comparing or contrasting empirical cases and domains, as a heuristic device, played an essential role in this regard. Inspired by this maxim, a meandering search ensued across various transfer/succession cases and empirical areas of object transfer. From a theory developed for one specific area of enquiry, in this case successions in family businesses, the development proceeded in the direction of what is known in grounded-theory terminology as formal grounded theory. The latter refers to a theoretical model which is no longer limited to the area of enquiry initially focused on, but which can be applied to heterogeneous – and at first glance often disparate – empirical domains in which such transfers or changes of ownership play a role. Methodologically speaking, the development of the present theory was similar to the genesis of the “theory of awareness contexts” described by Strauss (1991, 303ff.), in that it was a creative process in which the scope of the research was extended over the course of time – even into areas of enquiry that would never have been thought of at the beginning. The use of a “predecessor-successor lens” to observe everyday themes and domains opened the present researcher’s eyes to the universality and diversity of such process patterns.

As the theory was increasingly applied to different areas of everyday life, a categorical system with a certain level of abstraction emerged. When studying farms and craft enterprises, for example, I initially used the term transgenerational transfer to characterise my focus. Then, taking into account the roles and divergent perspectives of both predecessors and successors, I referred to it as “transgenerational transfer and succession”. And finally, considering the “generation” concept to be vague and constricting, I discarded it, opting instead for the more extensive term predecessor-successor transition.

In essence, predecessor-successor transition involves “objects” whose ownership is “transferred” from “protagonist A” to “protagonist B”. I also refer to this transfer type as a protagonist change, thereby distinguishing it from a change of object where the protagonist remains constant but the object is exchanged or replaced (as is the case, for example, when a bereaved dog owner replaces his deceased pet). However, I shall not elaborate further on that here (cf. Breuer 2009, 38ff.).

The “object” whose “ownership” is transferred from A to B may be a material thing, a position in an organisation, or a social role. The terms “ownership” and “owner” are used in a very general sense. Occasionally I refer to a “person-

object-linkage”, which is more abstract and less burdened with associations but more ponderous.

For its owner – and this is an essential prerequisite of my theoretical deliberations – the object is not something trivial or indifferent. Rather it is subjectively meaningful and significant, something of personal importance. Following the terminology of Tilmann Habermas (1996), I refer to it as a personal object. This term implies that we are dealing with forms of idiosyncratic-transactional linkage between objects and the protagonists who own them. Object and protagonist are so closely intertwined that each is an expression and an identificatory point of reference of the other. Because they bear the hallmark of the owner, the objects can be characterised using terms such as personally shaped or personalised. The attachment of a person to his or her lifework, or the creation of a specific tradition or school are typical examples. In such cases, the person is reflected in the object – and, in a sense, the object is animated by its creator or “designer”. I also refer to the object as being fundamental to the identity, and the identification, of the person, and to the fact that the relationship between the two sides is a significant one and hence emotionally charged.

A theory capable of adequately capturing these characteristics must be sensitive to processes of subjective interpretation; to processes in which people endow things with meaning and create identity. It must also be sensitive to the importance of the perspectives of the individual participants and to interactional negotiations of meaning. And finally, it must feature concepts for social patterns, traditions, and culture. What is needed here, in my opinion, is a hermeneutically oriented, social scientific theory with a transdisciplinary reach.

I will now outline the basic concepts and theoretical dimensions that sketch out the path to such a theory.

3. Basic Components of the Interpersonal Transfer of Objects

Over the years spent dealing with transfer examples from different empirical contexts, I developed an elementary basic vocabulary for the description of such phenomena, which comprises the following conceptual components (cf. Breuer 2009, 43ff.):

- the protagonists of the transfer/succession: predecessor and successor;
- the object of the transfer/succession: a configured personal structure and the underlying relationships;
- the context and its actors: historical, political, and institutional circumstances of the transfer, and the members of these fields;
- behavioural patterns and regulations: social schemas for the transfer, applicable laws, rights and obligations of the predecessor and the successor, traditions, formal and informal rules;

- attitudes and identifications of the protagonists and the other actors: attitudes, motivations, especially in relation to the relevant objects;
- the interests of the protagonists and the other actors by virtue of their respective positions or roles in the transfer/succession context;
- strategies of the protagonists and the other actors for the realisation of the goals related to these interests.

4. Analytical Dimensions of Predecessor-Successor Transitions

In addition to these basic concepts, the comparison of transfer cases and life-world domains yielded a number of dimensions that were common to predecessor-successor transitions. These dimensions, which represent the constitutive analysis levels of the transfer theory, can be used to characterize transfers across various contexts.

They comprise the following aspects:

- the schematic nature (i.e. the patternedness) of the object transfer;
- the openness to interpretation and perspective-dependent nature of the transition processes;
- the personal capacity to influence the transfer process and the structurally-determined or -constrained nature of that process;
- the transcendental nature of the object transfer;
- the temporal structure of transitions from predecessor to successor;
- the negotiable nature of the process between the participants.

I shall now outline the characteristics of these analysis levels.

4.1 Transfer Patterns

Certain social patterns² are of importance for the transfer process because, in their interactions, the participants use conventional schemas for orientation purposes. The scripts of these schemas contain regulations, roles, obligations, and the expectations of the participating parties (Breuer 2009, 61ff.). For example, the transfer pattern selling – buying is quite characteristic of the social practice of distributing objects which take the form of goods. In our lifeworld there are numerous similar schemas that have their own specific features, regulations, and role characteristics. Forms of object transfer from a previous owner

² The term "pattern" is used here in a general sense. It comprises both sociological and psychological levels, and both (socio-)cultural classification schemas and (inter-)actional scripts. The focus is on the way in which events in individual cases, individual interpretations, and actions are guided by general or superordinate structures.

to a subsequent owner – such as conventionally regulated, legal, and peaceful patterns like bequeathing things to or inheriting things from members of the other generations in a family or giving and receiving a gift – may be of interest, as can violent or illegal forms of transfer such as conquests (in the case of armed conflicts) or theft (of family heirlooms, for example).

Reciprocal and redistributive transfer and succession structures can be distinguished. The former basically come about through a direct exchange between two protagonists (prototypically the giver and the recipient of a gift, or the father who passes the family firm on to his son). The redistributive variant, on the other hand, structurally requires the involvement of a third party from a superordinate context. In the case of university chair succession, for example, this is prototypically the administrative structure, i.e. the university rector or president and the education ministry. In the case of organ transplants, the superordinate context comprises clinics, doctors, and the international coordinating body for the allocation of donor organs, Euro-Transplant.

4.2 Ambiguities: Interpretations and Perspectives

Predecessor-successor transition scenarios are ambiguous and extremely open to interpretation (Breuer 2009, 82ff.). Action orientation, and the interpretation of actions, depend on the location and perspective of the actor and occur at different levels. Formal and informal, manifest and hidden, front-stage and back-stage characteristics can be distinguished. For example, what appears at first glance to be a process of bequest and inheritance may be perceived as a form of swindling or fraud if one takes a closer look or adopts a different perspective. Moreover, participants may view “succession” synchronously or asynchronously. For the founder of a business, for example, the transfer question may become salient upon the birth of his first son; the son, on the other hand, will not find himself confronted with the problem of taking over the running of the firm until a much later stage in his familial socialization. Hence, one can say in general that “succession” is an interpretational construct.

When it comes to heart transplants, medical personnel frequently argue that the heart is a muscle, and that the old organ is a worn out or defective pump, which is replaced by an efficient replacement part. However, under certain circumstances, a different interpretation – namely one that has succession implications – may force itself upon recipients during the course of the subjective integration of the transplanted organ. They may perceive the transplanted heart as an animate object that once belonged to someone else, as something with its own personal history. And they may ask themselves whether certain changes in their own bodies have anything to do with personal characteristics of the organ donor, and whether these characteristics were transmitted to them along with the transplanted heart.

Because the technology is historically recent, an organ transplant is an object transfer for which there are no socio-culturally established interpretation patterns or role-related guidelines. This has consequences for the social relationship and the interaction between the previous and the subsequent owner. The intention behind the German transplant system's characterisation of the transfer as an act of donation in which the identity of both protagonists remains hidden is to depersonalise the transferred organ. This often gives rise to searching questions or enquiries and to identity-related uncertainty on the part of recipients. This is manifest in their efforts to interpret the dominant transfer pattern: Do they accept the anonymous donation perspective or do they favour an interpretation that fits the pattern of gift-making or sacrifice? If the organ is considered to be a gift then there is a conventional obligation and a personal wish to say "thank you". Some enquiries and deliberations on the part of heart recipients (for example with regard to the identity of the previous owner) in the course of coming to terms with their new situation can be regarded as an expression of interpretational uncertainty and effort (cf. Kalitzkus 2003; Modlich 2010).

4.3 Freedom and Constraints in the Transfer Process

The question of human free will also plays a role in object-transfer processes. Are the protagonists masters of the procedure? Or are they forced to act in such a way by object structures and transfer patterns (Breuer 2009, 120ff.)?

Heart recipients may believe that because the transplanted organ is a personalised object they inevitably also acquire certain characteristics of the previous owner. This can be a positive thing, for example if the donor was a sportsman and the recipient feels that his fitness was also transferred. But what happens when the heart is actually (or in the recipient's fantasy) that of a murderer? Constellations of this kind are the dramatic stuff that novels and films about organ transplantation are made of (cf. Krüger-Fürhoff 2005).

Another area that illustrates the constraints in the transfer process is the inheritance of family farms. Do rural traditions determine protagonists' actions? In traditional agricultural milieus, for example, it was, and still is, common to think wholly from the perspective of the farm. This is summed up neatly in the expression "the land that inherits the farmer". Here the farm is considered to be a protagonist who initiates and regulates relationships between people whose own needs and desires must take second place.

Transfer scenarios are characterised by constraints of varying degrees, which are constituted by attributes of the object and by normative traditions of varying scope and degrees of bindingness. The transfer domains and patterns determine the protagonists' room for manoeuvre to a greater or lesser extent. If protagonists deal reflexively with such conditions, they may be able to increase their leeway for action. In this sense, predecessor-successor handovers are also

gateways to social change. Predecessors are frequently representatives of “the old and established”, while successors often represent “the new and open to change”.

4.4 Identification and Transcendence

Objects sometimes outlive their owners. The latter’s term of office expires, or they pass away, but their legacy lives on. Because it points to something beyond their finite tenure or lifetime, the object they shaped may, under certain circumstances, be able to serve as a form of personal transcendence – as a means of transcending the boundaries of finiteness, of achieving a symbolic or substitute form of immortality. Protagonists live on in their works, as it were (Breuer 2009, 143ff.).

Whether, and how, this succeeds depends, of course, on the successors and the way they treat the object. Previous owners frequently attach great importance to making sure in advance that their successors handle their personal object in accordance with their wishes. Numerous strategies can be employed to this end.

I differentiate between structural and genealogical transcendence. Structural transcendence means that the legacy lives on as a personally shaped object, which remains recognisable as such. The term genealogical transcendence refers to the characteristics of the interpersonal relationship between the predecessor and the successor. Prototypical predecessors with an interest in preserving the object in the manner described above want a successor who is similar to them in relevant attitudes and identifications. If they succeed in realising this wish, they are, in a sense, able to live on in the person of the successor as well as living on in the object they have shaped.

Because of the strong genetic and/or socialising influence involved, parent-child constellations (for example in family businesses) or teacher/master-pupil relationships (for example in the case of university chair succession or in succession arrangements in Asian martial arts schools) appear to be particularly suitable in this regard. From a predecessor’s point of view, the prospects of preserving the legacy in the desired manner may appear to be optimal. However, things can go very wrong, as we know from various father-son or teacher-pupil conflicts. For example, predecessors may count on the loyalty, respect and deference of their successors, while the latter react by distancing themselves, having a mind of their own, and rebelling. The ambivalence of the relationship between the generations, and the resulting psychodynamics in the protagonists’ interactions, limit the degree to which the transfer can be planned in advance and influenced.

4.5 Temporal Structures

The problem of the temporal finiteness of people, things, and relationships both at a societal and an individual level is characteristic of the transfer of personal objects. Societies frequently have the task of ensuring the continuity of institutions and organizational structures after the retirement or resignation of the protagonists who formed the objects. The individual protagonist, on the other hand, must deal with the temporal restriction of his or her tenure or lifetime in the context of his or her identificatory linkage to the personal object.

Numerous temporal dimensions and their rhythms are of importance in this context (Breuer 2009, 172ff.). In my classification I differentiate between individual time (timing of personal life phases), systemic time (periodicities in domains: terms of office, electoral terms etc.), and contextual time (historical phases and transformations). A further category is descriptive time, which has to do with the temporal distance, perspective, and intention of interpretations of transfer processes.

A question of importance here is how perceptions, interpretations, and representations of transfer processes from different temporal distances and perspectives (of participants, observers, historians etc.) differ or change. The characteristics of the interpretational construct play an essential role in this regard. For example, we encounter different levels of awareness on the part of participating actors with regard to the transfer-succession aspect of a situation or a temporal phase. Hence individual protagonists and (supporting) actors have different chances of anticipating events and strategically planning their actions.

The temporal structure of object transfers can also be divided into three phases: planning/preparation, execution (with its rituals), and reworking. Life-course and time-management issues come into focus here, for example, the problem of predecessors who cannot let go of their object, who consider themselves indispensable, and who therefore miss the right time for the handover.

I would also like to draw attention to a further temporal pattern of the transfer of ownership from predecessors to successors. Three typical cases can be distinguished:

- The end of the predecessor's tenure and the beginning of the successor's tenure occur simultaneously, in other words, the structure is one of abrupt and direct succession (prototype: cash purchase of an object).
- A second type is characterized by an interval between the end of the predecessor's tenure and the beginning of the successor's tenure. I refer to this case as vacancy. Members of the academic milieu are familiar with many such instances in the context of university-chair succession negotiations, where turbulent processes of negotiation between interests and desires can occur. An ambivalent interim phase ensues. On the one hand this offers an opportunity to reflect on the necessity of preserving tradition; on the other

hand, the “orphaned object” may become the plaything of external interests.

- The third type is the temporal overlapping of the tenure of the predecessor and that of the successor. I refer to this as cohabitation (Breuer 2008a, 2009, 252ff.); another term one encounters is “dual leadership”. In the context of family businesses, this transition pattern is common. The senior boss remains active in the firm in a certain position and role although the junior boss has formally taken the reins. In the case of a familial-genealogical constellation, the authoritative parent-child relationship persists after the formal change of leadership (hence, for example, although “Junior” is now the boss, he remains the son). My data reveal that divergent and contrary interpretations of the actions of protagonists, and correspondingly conflict-laden relationship negotiations, are quite widespread.

4.6 Negotiation and Fitting Processes

Object transfers take place within the framework of negotiation processes between the protagonists (predecessor and successor), the objects (if animate, or perceived as such), and other contextual actors (family members, employees, members of an administrative or management structure etc.). Different attitudes, interests, and ambitions within the framework of social relationships and rules or conventions play a role. In some cases the predecessor and successor have a common history (for example as parent and child, teacher and pupil, or as peers from the same milieu) that influences the way in which the further handling of the transfer object is negotiated (Breuer 2009, 216ff.).

Prototypical predecessors have an interest in the preservation and continuity of the characteristics of the object they have shaped. The aim of their strategies is to assert their interests vis-à-vis their successor. Prototypical successors, on the other hand, pursue their ambition to independently appropriate and personalise the object; they may wish to emerge from their predecessor’s shadow. Depending on their own interests and the characteristics of their relationship with their predecessor, they may specifically preserve or change his or her work and may pay tribute to or tarnish their predecessor as an individual.

When dealing with the object, the relationship between the protagonists is also (re)negotiated and (re)calibrated. This can take place in the context of direct interpersonal interaction (in face-to-face contact between the predecessor and the successor). It occurs even when the previous owner withdraws completely and cedes the field to the successor. The predecessor’s legacy (i.e. the object and the remaining context actors) sometimes displays a certain degree of persistence, or a life of its own, with which the successor must deal when endeavouring to appropriate and personalise the object. The process of negotiation with regard to the transferred object also takes place when the predecessor has already passed away. It may take the form of measures to preserve his or

her memory, of reminiscence work on the part of those left behind; or it may manifest itself in the writing or rewriting of the history of the object and the role and merits of its previous owner.

5. Substance and Reception of the Theory

If I were asked what my efforts to develop the present theory had yielded, I would answer as follows:

- The theory offers a basic vocabulary with which a wide range of predecessor-successor transitions can be described and systematized.
- The core category, the transfer of personal objects from predecessor to successor, is capable of representing numerous processes in our social lifeworld under a common theoretical perspective and constitutes a promising basic social science category. The conceptualization of the object lies at the heuristically productive interface between the material and the ideal-symbolical, the individual and the social, the personal and the cultural, the present and the past. Moreover, it involves a large number of basic social science questions and access dimensions.
- The proposed differentiation of theoretical levels of analysis furnishes a tool for the analysis of predecessor-successor transitions in a wide range of lifeworld fields.
- The theory offers a blueprint for an empirical research programme, which can be used as a guide for the in-depth research and analysis of diverse predecessor-successor domains and for the conceptual densification of the theory through the comparison of these domains.
- Several studies (cf. Breuer 2009) have yielded empirical concretizations of the proposed model in everyday-life contexts. However, the theory opens up a vast field of further interesting research questions.

By now, I have had some experience with the presentation of the theory and its empirical illustrations in lecture and conference contexts. In a recent paper, (Breuer 2011), I described the reactions of field inhabitants who attended or actively participated in these conferences and who were directly affected by the topic of my presentation. Their reactions made it clear to me that, in the eyes of those who are personally involved, object transfers in these fields are intimate terrain, affectively laden and fundamental to the identity of those concerned. The identification and description of certain transfer-related phenomena quickly – and unintentionally – provokes sensitivities and correspondingly emotional-affective reactions.

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