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## **What makes autobiographical storytelling effective for women?**

Reflections on risks and opportunities in terms of authenticity and belonging

Presentation at the CNU Conference on Women and Gender 2025 “Telling Women’s Stories”

Session “Ways to Tell a Story”

Prof. Dr. Renate Kosuch

The CNU Conference on Women and Gender 2025  
"Telling Women's Stories"

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**What makes autobiographical  
storytelling effective for women?**

Reflections on risks and opportunities  
in terms of authenticity and belonging

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March 20, 2025    Session 1    09:30-10:45    1

## **1. Introduction**

## **2. Challenges concerning the storyteller**

## **3. Challenges concerning the audience**

## **4. Conclusions**

In the next 20 minutes, I will reflect on the risks and opportunities in storytelling. In particular, I am going to focus on how autobiographical storytelling doesn't always have the empowering effect it's often credited with. Let's start by examining the storyteller: What is she presenting? For this I will refer to different aspects of a person, which the concept of the inner team illustrates very well. I'll examine what makes a story authentic, stressing the importance of avoiding distortions through mental self-regulation. I will share an example that demonstrates presenting stories by facing and stating one's authentic beliefs and understandings of what is the case.

Following that, I'll turn our attention to the storyteller's audience. What kind of resonance does the audience aim to provide? The concepts of person-centered and of immersive listening and their profound impact on the storyteller will be explored.

Finally, I will wrap up with a discussion of these insights and their broader implications<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my dear friend and colleague E. Hope Utterback, a licensed social worker and therapist from Williamsburg, Virginia, USA, for helping me make my speech sound a little more like English was my first language. And almost casually, she asked me very smart questions! In doing so, she made the whole presentation better!

## 1. Introduction

Students' and Social workers' Experiences:

- Context influences storytelling (Habermas 2007)
- Storytelling can lead to shame (on shame see f.e. Brown 2010)
- Empowering feedback can fizzle

→ Reflecting on the interplay between storyteller and audience can help explore issues of authenticity and belonging in storytelling.

Telling one's story can be empowering—a way to reclaim voice, identity, and agency. But is this true in every context? In a seminar with social work students on shame, we explored this concept by engaging with an article on the cultural concept of biography, which illustrates how deeply context influences personal storytelling.

To investigate these insights further, we conducted an exercise. Students were invited to share their stories in two scenarios: a job interview and a counseling session. This approach allowed students to observe firsthand how different aspects of their narratives unfolded, influenced by the context and the perceived response of the listener.

After sharing their stories, some students reported feeling a kind of shame - either from feeling too exposed or from not being true to themselves because they adjusted their stories to meet others' expectations. This made them feel disconnected from their true selves and prevented them from fully benefiting from supportive feedback.

Some counselors at the Violence Against Women Hotline, where I gave courses on shame, noted similar issues. Shaming experiences – they reported – caused them to hide their true selves. This led to inauthentic storytelling, disconnected from genuine experiences. As a result, feedback became ineffective - the positive attention received from the listener did not have a reinforcing and relieving effect.

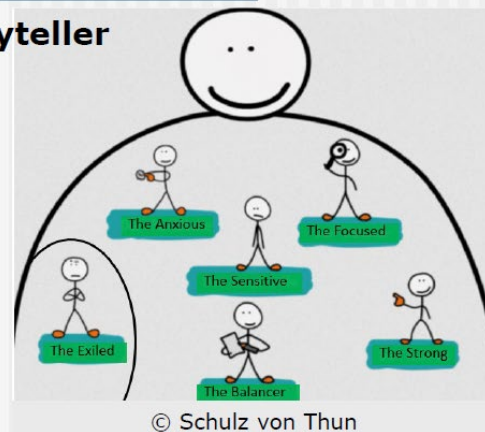
Storytelling is like a 'psycho-chemical reaction' between the narrator and the audience. Success depends on whether the audience is supportive. Or are they critical, maybe defensive against any exaggerated claims? This metaphor highlights the dynamic and sometimes unpredictable nature of communication between the storyteller and her listeners. I would like to explore this further and share and discuss my ideas with you.

## 2. Challenges concerning the storyteller

- Which aspects become apparent?  
(→ Inner Team)

### Inner plurality

= multitude of inner voices + emotional states



→ Awareness of Inner Team enables active influence.

Let's explore the challenges of the storyteller and consider what can be done to make a story 'authentic.' As stories are shared, different aspects become apparent, reflecting an inner plurality - the variety of inner voices and emotional states experienced. Awareness of this Inner Team allows for an active influence on self-presentation. But why do deviations from authenticity occur? Why are narratives sometimes exaggerated, minimized, or altered instead of staying true to oneself? Later we will explore listening and how it affects what is revealed about oneself (see slide 9).

## 2. Challenges concerning the storyteller

### ■ What makes my story genuine?

(→ Mental Self Regulation by Introvision)

**Introvision** = method for mental self-regulation and promoting serenity

### Difficulties Facing Issues or Experiencing Shame:

- Overwriting experiences ('I have overcome that completely!')
- Distorting the situation ('I protested openly!' ... even if I didn't)
- Exaggerating ('...the worst ever!')
- Suppressing ('...no problem!')

→ less mental capacity for effectively managing a situation

Let's explore what makes a story genuine. In Germany, the phrase 'telling yourself stories about yourself' refers to the ways in which these narratives can sometimes misrepresent or distort aspects of the story.

To explain this more, I will use the concept of mental self-regulation as emphasized in the Introvision method.

Introvision provides a pathway to mental self-regulation that focuses on resolving internal conflicts and fostering serenity, ultimately enabling individuals to face what is. I use Introvision to help people to resolve internal conflicts. But Introvision also offers insights into why the storyteller might want to avoid - and ultimately distort - what is happening when she encounters painful problems or experiences shame. For example, she might overwrite her authentic experiences by claiming, 'I've completely overcome that!' or distort the situation by saying, 'I protested openly!' even if she didn't. She might exaggerate, calling something 'the worst ever!' or suppress her true feelings with, 'no problem!'. These actions require a lot of energy because they don't eliminate the nature of our experiences, leaving us with less mental capacity to manage situations and emotions effectively.

## 2. Challenges concerning the storyteller

- **What makes my story genuine?**

(→ Mental Self Regulation by Introvision)

**Negative feelings:** tendencies to escape or ignore

- Escalation: feelings become affect with added tension + excitement
- Suppression: leads to emotional numbness

**Introvision goal:**

- Neutralize affective charge or suppression
- Serenity in feeling: serves as a compass

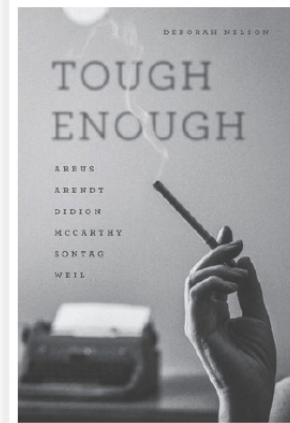
Insults, difficult decisions, or feelings of powerlessness can evoke very negative emotions. These feelings may cause an individual to want to escape or ignore them. However, simply pushing them away doesn't lessen their impact. At this point, it's helpful to distinguish between emotions, feelings, and affects. Emotions are grounded in feelings. A feeling can escalate with added excitement and tension, becoming an affect. Conversely, a feeling can be suppressed to the point of emotional numbness. The goal of Introvision is to neutralize this automatic affective charge or inhibition, transforming an affect or emotional numbness back into a basic feeling. Feeling with serenity means experiencing what is, whether it has a positive or negative connotation. Only then do feelings become like colors in your vision - a compass, an alarm system, a whistle. To stop intervening is to acknowledge them, and not to overwrite them is to perceive them as they really are.

## 2. Challenges concerning the storyteller

### ■ "How do I present?"

(→ Examples for bearing witness)

"Toughness means difficult, however, not insensate. It paradoxically demanded a heightened sensitivity to reality, just not to other people's emotions. The women I write about here insisted on the duty to face reality; they advocated for the necessity to contain emotions, both those that prevented one from confronting painful reality and those that arose in the process of doing so." (Nelson, 2017, p.10)



→ Introvision: Transforming affect-laden states to more genuine emotions

The example I have chosen shifts away from autobiographical storytelling in the strict sense and instead focuses on using storytelling to bear witness to painful experiences of others. This book I would recommend to read, it gives a very good insight in the clear tone of expression, the attitude or emotional quality I am referring to. It focuses on six women were considered tough-minded in their time – and that was a critical remark.

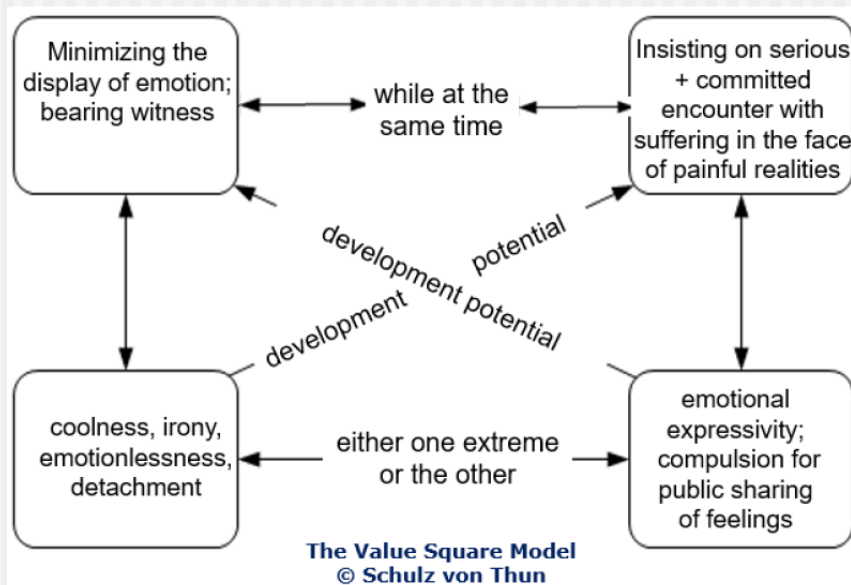
I quote:

"Toughness means difficult, however, not insensate. It paradoxically demanded a heightened sensitivity to reality, just not to other people's emotions. The women I write about here insisted on the duty to face reality; they advocated for the necessity to contain emotions, both those that prevented one from confronting painful reality and those that arose in the process of doing so." (p.10)

This means „facing suffering with clarity“ (ibid.) In the language of Introvision, it refers to transforming affect-laden states into more genuine emotions.

## 2. Challenges concerning the storyteller

### ■ "How do I present?"



In the "values and development square" model (by Schulz von Thun), each value is in a dynamic relationship with its complementary value. Balance is achieved by holding both values at the same time, ensuring that neither degenerates into its exaggerated form or negative counterpart.

Look at the box at the upper left: "Minimizing the display of emotion; bearing witness": This value (or aim/purpose) emphasizes restraint and the presence to observe without becoming overly emotionally involved. However, when this value exists in isolation, it can degenerate into an extreme form characterized by "coolness, irony, emotionslessness, detachment" (see box lower left).

Look at the box at the upper right: "Insisting on a serious + committed encounter with suffering in the face of painful realities": This value calls for active engagement with and recognition of suffering in order to promote change and healing. If pursued without balance, it can degenerate into "emotional expressivity; compulsion to share feelings publicly" (see box on the lower left).

In the square of values and development we should be in both upper boxes. The key is to maintain both values: the serenity of "bearing witness" and the commitment required to "engage in suffering in a serious and committed way".

Balancing them ensures that "minimizing the display of emotion" is enriched by genuine commitment, and prevents it from slipping into detachment or irony. Conversely, a "serious encounter with suffering" is tempered by emotional restraint, preventing it from becoming overwhelming emotional expressiveness or a compulsion to share feelings publicly.

So far, I have outlined what the storyteller needs to consider in order to benefit from storytelling and experience empowerment. Now I would like to shift the perspective to the side of the storyteller's audience.

### **3. Challenges concerning the audience**

- **What kind of resonance?**  
(→ person-centered approach)

#### **Listening in a person-centered attitude**

- 1. Empathy, or empathic understanding**
- 2. Unconditional positive regard**
- 3. Congruence or authenticity**

The focus in addressing audience challenges is now on the type of resonance needed, specifically through person-centered, immersive listening. The person-centered approach, as developed by Carl Rogers for clinical and educational contexts, has been well researched for its empowering effect, especially in empowering the storyteller. There are three key elements to this approach:

1. Empathy: Understanding another's perspective and emotions as if they were your own, while maintaining the "as if" condition.
2. Unconditional positive regard: Accepting the person completely, regardless of judgments about their behavior.

3. Congruence or Authenticity: Being true to one's own values and feelings and expressing them appropriately.

These elements are critical to creating a meaningful and supportive audience relationship.

### 3. Challenges concerning the audience

- What kind of resonance?

(→ person-centered approach, radical listening)

#### Listening in an immersive way

#### Impact of Person-centered and Radical Listening

- Promotes genuine listening and appreciation for storytellers
- Uncovers new insights and hidden emotions
- Encourages exiled or hidden parts of the Inner Team to come forward

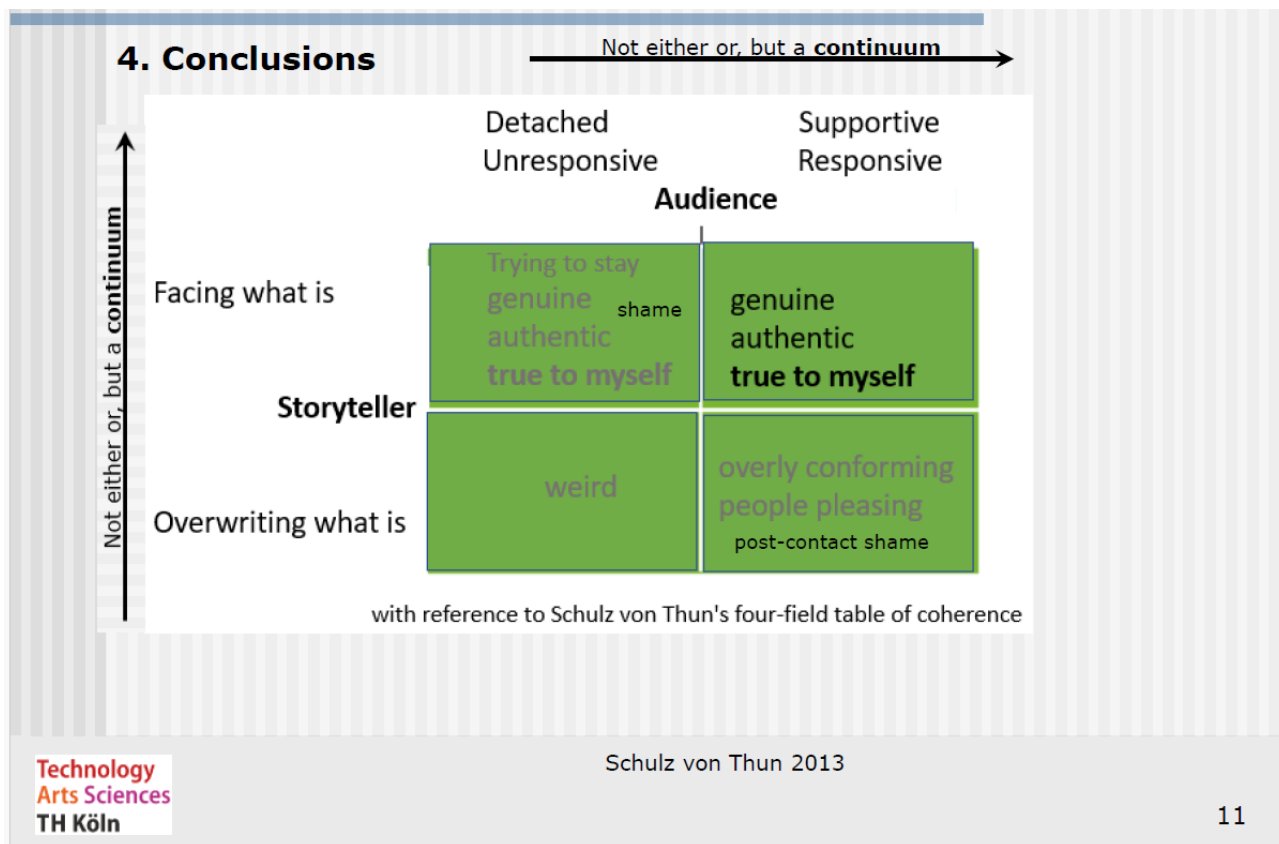
In storytelling, both Person-Centered Listening and Radical Listening have a profound impact on storytellers by creating a space where they feel truly heard and valued.

It is Radical Listening that encourages to express stories more freely and deeply, often revealing new insights and emotions that may not surface in typical exchanges. This concept was developed by Bronwyn Davies.

Such listening enriches the storytelling process, making it more meaningful and transformative for both the storyteller and the listener. It also empowers individuals to share stories that are more vulnerable and complex, encouraging hidden parts of the Inner Team to emerge.

When I introduced the Inner Team, I emphasized "self-presentation in context," where individuals show different parts of their inner experience depending on the situation. This involves storytellers actively adapting their self-presentation to the social context.

But my point here was to highlight that listening can act as a midwife for underestimated, empowering aspects of the storyteller herself that might otherwise remain hidden.



Schulz von Thun's four-field table of coherence explores how a story is conveyed and received along two key dimensions:

The vertical Axis represents the extent to which a storyteller presents her story as "real and authentic, true to my nature," that is, in alignment with her inner experience.

The horizontal Axis indicates how well the story is adapted to the external context, or how "situationally appropriate" it is.

Together, these axes form a four-field table that can be thought of as a continuum with different combinations of storytelling and audience engagement.

Here's a breakdown of the four areas:

Look at the box at the bottom left: Disconnected and unresponsive audience with a distorted story:

This often results in a "weird situation" where the narrative does not match the personal reality. It reflects a mental strategy known as "overwriting what is," a concept I discussed in the context of mental self-regulation through Introvision.

Look at the box at the top left: The audience is not involved and the narrator remains true to herself by presenting an authentic story. In Introvision this is called "facing what is" or "expressing what is":

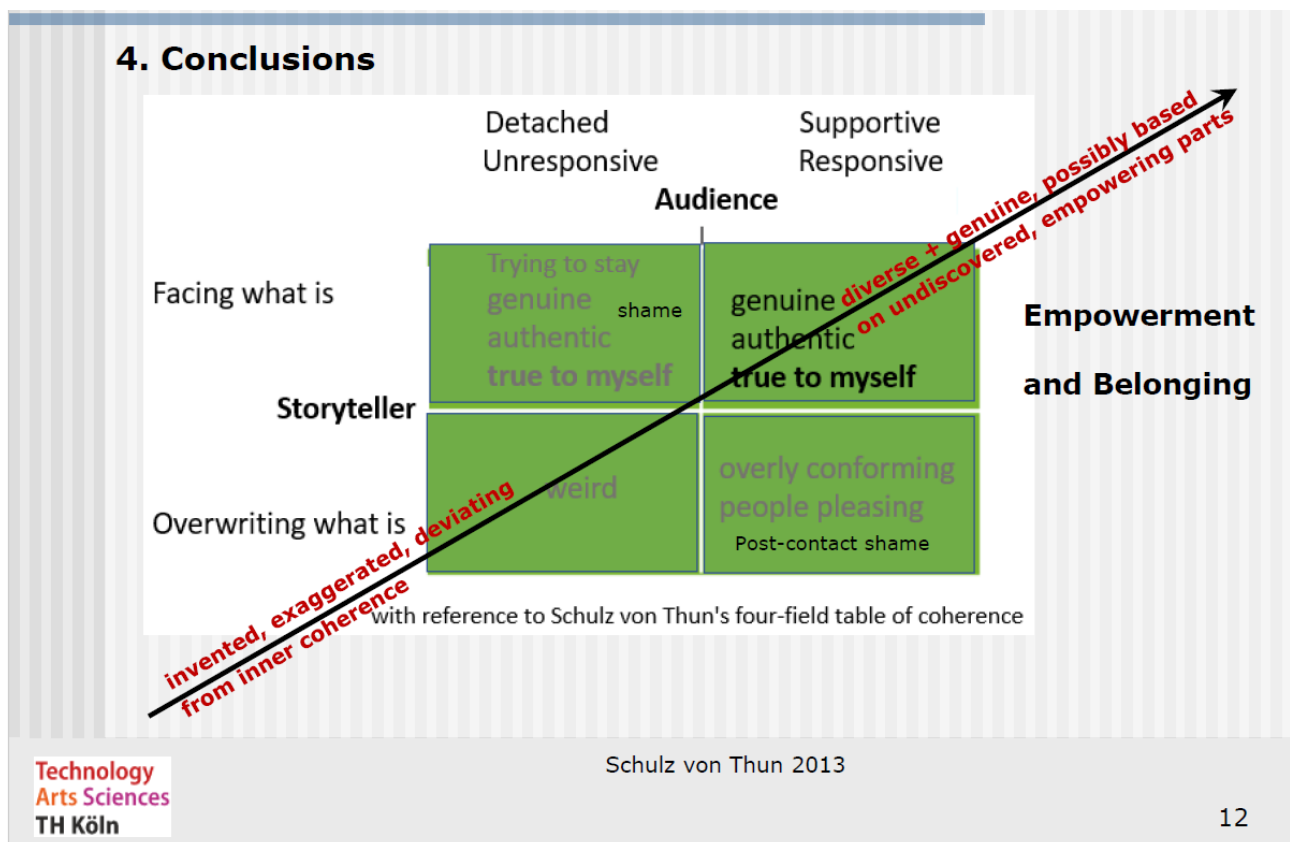
This can leave the storyteller vulnerable and struggling to maintain authenticity in the face of a detached audience. And it also can produce a lot of shame.

Look at the box at the bottom right: Supportive audience with a non-authentic story:

The storyteller is presenting a story, "overly conforming" in an effort to please the audience. This results in a lack of authenticity in the story and may lead to post-contact shame.

Look at the box at the top right: This is the ideal case in terms of effectiveness:

The storyteller is authentic and true to her inner experience, and the audience is supportive. This combination fosters a powerful storytelling experience with great benefits for the storyteller.



As I share my personal reflections and thoughts, I find it important to consider the steps toward successful, empowering storytelling as illustrated by the four-field table of coherence, which I have adapted slightly for the purpose of storytelling. This involves moving from the lower left box to the upper right - from stories that are "fabricated, exaggerated, and departing from inner coherence" to those that are "diverse and authentic, potentially revealing undiscovered empowering aspects to the storyteller herself.

This progression enhances the empowering effect of storytelling without leading to post-contact shame, as I've observed with some students and some counselors at the Violence Against Women Hotline.

Through the suggestions I've shared in this brief 20-minute presentation, a deeper understanding can be gained regarding the importance of authenticity in benefiting from empowering feedback. Without it, a supportive and responsive audience cannot empower and relieve the storyteller.

These insights reflect my thoughts on fostering effective and empowering storytelling experiences.

Thank you for your attention! Here are my references:

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