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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Verlag Barbara Budrich

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Salling Olesen, H., & Weber, K. (2002). Chasing potentials for adult learning: lifelong learning in a life history perspective. *Zeitschrift für qualitative Bildungs-, Beratungs- und Sozialforschung*, 3(2), 283-300. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-279690>

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Henning Salling Olesen and Kirsten Weber

## Chasing Potentials for Adult Learning

### Lifelong Learning in a Life History Perspective

#### **Abstract**

The current European agenda of “lifelong learning” challenges qualitative research of learning. Theory and methodology can expose human experiences that are more complex than “human resources”. This research agenda can be developed by exposing qualification potential to demonstrate how experience of life history and everyday life comprises, and give insights into the problematic and repressive dimensions of work life and, accordingly, the potential for change. On the basis of critical theory, this article analyses the experience of adult men intersecting with the workplace culture of nursing.

#### **Zusammenfassung**

Die derzeitig bestehende europäische Agenda des „lebenslangen Lernens“ stellt eine Herausforderung für die qualitative Lern- und Bildungsforschung dar. Dabei bilden Theorie und Methodologie menschliche Erfahrungen weit komplexer ab, als sie die sogenannten „Human Ressourcen“ offen darlegen und erfassen können. Die Forschungsagenda sollte deshalb insbesondere durch die Offenlegung von Qualifikationspotentialen weiter entwickelt werden, um zu demonstrieren, welche Erfahrungen aus Lebensgeschichte und Alltagsleben, und dabei gerade auch die problematischen und repressiven Dimensionen des Arbeitslebens und die entsprechenden Potentiale Veränderungen ermöglichen. Vor dem Hintergrund der kritischen Theorie wird in diesem Beitrag die Erfahrung von erwachsenen Männern analysiert, die an ihrem Arbeitsplatz „Pflegekultur“ aufgesucht wurden.

## Adult Learning – a Political and a Personal Agenda

*Societally speaking* adult education has been the most expanding sector of education the last few decades. Its institutional forms are subject to experiment and change in both formal and non-formal dimensions, the interplay between formal

education and in-formal learning are forever developing into new forms. General basic education, vocational training as well as re-socialisation programmes may have their different profiles, but they all serve fundamental social and political aims in the reproduction and renewal of modern societies. Lately Adult Education and learning has been assigned even greater importance for the European knowledge based economy.

*Subjectively speaking* these historical agendas are largely invisible and less important. Adult learners rarely perceive of themselves as “human resources” or “knowledge producers”. Individual motivation comprise dedicated leisure time cultural activity, pragmatic re-qualification on the job or for a job as well as downright rejection of the regressive position of the pupil. For most people, however, training and education have become every day life practises, as pleasurable or slightly burdensome, but recurring, enterprise that co-exist complexly with work and family life. Predominant in some life phases, marginal in others – training and education are an important medium of the individual and exceptional life history.

The mediating arena for these historical, societal logics and the complex subjective motivations is still predominantly institutional – in schools – or organizational – in workplaces (Salling Olesen 1989). Traditional educational and pedagogical research as well as modernized curricula of workplace learning tend to define their research questions and the projected goal within the respective fixed institutional settings. They thereby miss the vital point that each learning enterprise contains subjective appropriation of historical change – and that, complementarily, historical changes are mediated through a variety of subjective appropriations. Learning is – individually and collectively – so much more, and sometimes so much less, than its educational cultures know by.

The need for a deeper understanding of learning is notified by a dramatic shift in political discourses in the field within few years. First of all the new discourses indicate an intensified interest in chasing the potential for adult learning everywhere and in everyone. In the prevailing political and managerial discourse of “knowledge society” (European Commission 2002) the notion of Lifelong Learning has gained new strength, although with new meanings. Once a programmatic term of egalitarian education, literacy and enlightenment it now encompasses also the criticism to the modern confidence in education and the shift of the focus away from education to new learning arenas. Despite the relatively higher priority given to education its institutions are regarded partly inadequate to fill their purpose. The new discourses embrace learning rather than education – increasingly defining education as only one among several human resources, emphasising learning in the workplace and elsewhere in everyday life as at least equal to formal education and training.

## Rethinking Educational Research

The shift in the discourse itself invites a critical examination (Rubenson 1996). Realistically the broader horizon of lifelong learning has primarily won influence due to industrial needs for new skills and competences. It reflects a political economic focus on the preservation of the competitive advantage of the European and North American capitalist centres. However, the fact that human resources have achieved this societal position presents an intellectual challenge to re-examine the role of education and learning in democratic reform strategies.

Educational research must widen its empirical domain, reconstruct its basic conceptual framework and its methodology in order to contribute to this discussion of new agendas and illuminate the contradictions and implications of the new discourses. It is a well established fact in (adult) education research that formal settings are less than supportive to adult learning (e.g. Ahrenkiel & Illeris 2000). Industrial sociology knows that most often work life itself restricts the uses of competence – but that at the same time most work processes – and progress – actually function by means of employees' "invisible", unrecognised competences. Our ambition is to develop a methodology which not only "supplies the economy with necessary competence", but which reveals potentials for learning that has not been met in previous practices – and which are often unrecognized by the learners themselves.

In this paper we want to present some methodological ideas of our 'life history approach', which has been developed in response to these challenges to educational research (Salling Olesen 1996). Our basic idea is to focus on *the learning subject in context*, thereby examining the complex and specific mediation between subjective life histories and societal/historical transformations, giving impulses to learning as well as resistance. We focus on exemplary cases in specific, historical transitions. Transitions are interpreted in their subjective form and shape, and we look at the subjective meaning of participation in education in this light – all interpreted in the context of a subjective life history with its past experiences, future plans and ambitions. Our approach embraces pre- and subconscious experience that is accessible only through a reflection based on a psychoanalytical social psychology.

Our approach falls well within what Krüger&Marotzki (1999) call 'biographische Bildungsforschung', which includes a broad range of interpretive methods, using different data collection methods and based on different theoretical frameworks. Marotzki (1995, 1999) includes in-depth hermeneutic methods informed by psychoanalysis in a category of 'deep structural' interpretation methods. He points out that the interpretation is technically well elaborated, but has mainly been used in other research areas like work research and social psychology studies. In Denmark, however, these research works as well as cultural studies based on critical theory and psychoanalytic social psychology – and their methodological implications – have been an important framework for the life history approach in education and learning research. Though we have picked up much inspiration from Germany our presentation may also reveal a slightly different analytical approach from the ones known in German educational research.

## Profession – Identity – Gender

In order to give a direct illustration and reference for the following discussion of methodology, we will present a case and some interpretations from an evaluation research project (Nielsen & Weber 1997). At first glance it is simply a story about troublesome re-training – and about a well known stereotype in the discourse of adult education, namely that of the adult, skilled male, who is not easily letting go of his well-established craftsman's virtues. However, the example deals with over-all structural transformations and shifts in the gendered division of labour in the caring professions, and it demonstrates deeply rooted subjective involvement in transgressing gendered qualities in work and education.

The text is about learning in a practice period in social work in a training programme for unemployed adults. It should be read as an exemplary case – from a comprehensive body of texts produced by people in similar situations of societal transformation: Even when motivation appears one-sided, and when societal demands are well defined – the subjective enterprise is a complex one.

According to the text Teddy's skilled labour "standards of quality" are an obstacle to his learning – but they are a product of his life long, formal and informal learning. Teddy is presently experiencing break-up's in the labour market, and he needs to survive as a provider, a family man and a citizen<sup>1</sup>. Teddy show us that the inhabitants, the learning subjects, of the knowledge society probably know much more than those who coined the phrase might want to learn.

### Teddy's Standards of Quality

Teddy is a skilled carpenter, who has been out of a job for a couple of years. "Construction is down" he relates pragmatically – so now he is training for the job that is available, one as a social assistant in the local hospital, looking after mental patients in the psychiatric wards. Contributing to the evaluation of the training in an group discussion – thematized on the subjective ups and downs of the learning processes – he describes his practical training as follows (Nielsen & Weber 1997, p.88 ff):

*"There were quite a few of us who had clashes with the wards, as it is, because they came along and expected things to be done the way we had been taught, or even just the way they felt like, themselves. And then along come the others who say, well we've always done things like this, you know. Take the laundry, just an example. Where I was, the laundry was clearly of a higher importance than the patients. And then I said, like, that goddamn laundry, it's of no bloody importance. Let's go on out for a walk, shall we! [But] it is not [allowed] until the laundry has been looked after, not up there, it isn't! And so I had a clash with them, because I said "That laundry, it doesn't matter shit! We can look after that when we come back, can't we!". That's what I mean"*

## Elaborating

*"I think that, what really annoys me, that is that the theory that we learn out here, that's how things should be, isn't it. And then, when we come into the wards [in the practical training KW] then there just isn't time for it. That is something that really, really annoys me. And, well, you know, it's probably also that a man has some kind of a conscience, or whatever it is. And theory that really is an issue, and they .... I mean, we really do learn a lot here. And so it's just a pity, that out in the wards ... they tell us that we can go out and change things for the better. But that is really hard when you are a trainee, when you have problems getting listened too ... being a man and all .... and yet, I do feel that it is really very, very wrong, according to theory, so, so I do think it's a bit much that they just send us here, and tell us that it is our problem ... instead of actually teaching those things also, around it."*

This is indeed a text "full of sound and fury". As verbal expression of subjective material for experience – professional and personal learning – it signifies a great deal. We read the text first for its information, its realistic reference to situations and for its ability to communicate to us as inhabitants of the same civilization *what this is about*. We proceed to register *how* the text communicates, how it signifies importance, positive or negative connotations and emotions, and thirdly we *confront these two readings*. Thus we not only challenge our own understanding of the referential level of the text – we may be uninformed, we may be intrigues – but we also confront the immanent meaning of the text in both the logic and the emotional dimensions with our own analytic and empathic understanding. We may finally be able to put the question "*why*" Teddy talks in this way about these things – and at least tentatively grasp his deeply personal, yet exemplary historical experience. The text production in a thematic group discussion as well as the steps of reading is inspired by Lorenzer 1986 (cp. Volmerg & Leithäuser 1988)<sup>2</sup>.

*On the informative level* these passages are about a conflict between newcomers in a workplace and the workplace routines. The conflict is between the trainees in the hospital wards, what they are taught from the theoretical part of the training, and the trainees perception of the needs of the patients – to e.g. come out for a walk – vs. the "way we've always done things", laundry as a professional task – represented by nursing staff, whose profession (qualified nursing) and sex (female) are however not explicit. In the next passage we see a parallel conflict between "theory", "what we've learnt", how things "should be", "having a conscience" versus practice, what there is(n't) time for and (implicitly) not having a conscience. During the latter passage Teddy's involvement becomes explicit in his reference to the duty of changing things for the better and listening to problems – arising from his (implicit) double deviance from staff: a male trainee! – and finally blaming the education, the training programme as such for not teaching him and his mates the "things around it". The "logic" of the paragraph is fairly clear. The referential meaning is about a hierarchal work-place and the difficulty of the trainee or the newly educated staff to mediate their wisdom with the less ideal conditions of every day labour, including the idiosyncrasies of staff! – and it corresponds with a culturally accepted picture. As researchers of the field – and as readers of this article – we know what Teddy is talking about.

Our analysis proceeds to ask “how” Teddy is talking.

- The reference to the agents of the conflict is peculiarly blurred. Though Teddy is logically part of the “we” of male trainees, up against the “them”, the staff, this is not immediately visible in the text. “A few of *us*” are the “*they*” of the following sentence, then again “we” in “the way *we*’d been taught”, finally becoming “they” in the way they felt like “*themselves*”. Teddy’s sympathies are represented through the conflict of other members of his group. The possession of “a conscience” is attributed to “a man” – obviously himself as a (hu)man, as a carpenter and as a male. The opponent is verbally “the others”, the laundry (important to “them”) and finally “I” had a clash over that. Besides it should be observed that the “us” in “Let’s go for a walk” refers to Teddy and *the patients*.
- In the second paragraph the antagonism is between the theory, represented by Teddy, and the wards and its scarcity of time. Teddy clearly identifies with “theory” (how it should be, having a conscience, really an issue) against the “very, very wrong” practice – which is “a pity” that has proved “hard” to face, that has caused “problems being listened to”. Aggression becomes directed against a new “they”, namely those who have been teaching him: he moves from “we learn” via the split “they – I mean we really learn a lot here” to “they tell us we can go ...”, “they send us here”, and they “tell us it is our problem”. His position is martyr-like, he is the cannon fodder in the war between professional standards and reality. The good will of Teddy and his mates are consistently signalled in the text: They “came along”, they felt things “themselves”, Teddy himself heatedly suggested the activity of walking – thus triggering off the institutional power of the department, administered by the nursing staff, whose reaction was the almost parental “not until!” Action versus passive laundry routine, qualification versus power, humane involvement versus petty housewifely routine, parental professional authority against the not-so-young pupil or rebel! However “manly” this conflict is sketched, it is finally “being a man and all” that sums up the *powerlessness* of the experience.
- Emotional involvement is signalled in two ways. Firstly – when talking about the laundry – Teddy swears. The laundry (a clinical problem of hygiene) is an absurd formality, almost an act directed against the patients. Culturally laundry is a woman’s thing, and so Teddy’s defamation of it, the “goddamn” laundry is clearly also directed against the female staff, it is – also – the staff who is “of no bloody importance”, who “doesn’t matter shit!”. Secondly, when talking about theory, Teddy stumbles over the words, he repeats the words signalling his involvement: “really annoys me”, “really, really annoys me”, “really hard”, “really very, very wrong” – the blame on the teaching authorities being slightly more balanced: what they do is “a bit much”.

When we proceed to ask “*how* is Teddy talking *about what*”, i.e. how does the text demonstrate the distribution of insights and emotions between the different positions in the conflicts, it becomes clear that Teddy’s sympathies or, indeed, his identification is signalled in the personal pronouns of the text: He attaches to his peer-group of fellow trainees, to the patients *and* to the authority of theo-

retical expertise – i.e. to groups which he currently is *equal to*, which he is currently *above* and which he is currently *subordinate to*, respectively. He distances himself from the staff – which he is about to become.

Let us consider the somewhat over-dramatized example of *the laundry* in this perspective: In the professional discourse in hospitals laundry is a problem of hygiene – a problem that should immediately be solved for risk of infection. That is what Teddy will, or rather should, learn from his supervisors<sup>3</sup>.

As discussed above the laundry is a woman's task – which Teddy, the man, puts himself above. Paradoxically, the resistance against the gendered job leads him to fight the enemy with her own weapons. The communicative and empathic qualities that Teddy wants to install, are culturally speaking a traditional quality of the "other sex", the female gender. So Teddy is actually fighting hard for the installation of the traditionally relevant job qualities – only they must be made his own, he must make them part of himself, not just *do like* the woman – let alone blankly accept her instructions. Becoming (like the female) staff is threatening, and this is what Teddy's emotional enterprise is about. It is a necessary subjective detour<sup>4</sup>.

We may leave aside the colloquial associations of washing one's laundry in public, though in a certain sense this is what Teddy is doing when he tells about his problems in the thematic discussion group in the research context. His active rejection of the laundry, however, has wider contextual as well as cultural meanings. The laundry that doesn't matter "shit" brings about associations of the nursing of infants – or in context, of the bodily secretions of patients, which is a recurrent source of conflict, because the men in his group actively resists the intimacy it brings about. The further cultural associations of soiled linen, sheets and bodies, serves as a further horizon of the obviously deep involvement that is displayed.

Teddy's orientations are steps of "identifications" – and the conflict thus as the core of his learning potential. Identification is a psychological process that develops through approach, imitation, affiliation, fight for possession of the desired object and finally internalization of it: a set of positively cathected ideas that contribute to the consistent experience of self. So we can see the verbalization of the conflict as a representation of the subjective appropriation of the material and basically politically defined situation that he lives in. A sociological elaboration of the societal nature of the various conflicts fall outside the scope of this article, but none of them are incidental (Weber (Ed.) 2001, Filander 2003). Becoming like or becoming "a social assistant" is no "natural" orientation for a skilled worker of Teddy's generation. Accordingly, distinguishing his own feelings of pain and pleasure, his attribution of the sensations to specific elements in the situation, and attaching his perceptions to more general standards of right and wrong is essential for his ability to learn just the more superficial skills and orientations of the job. It is not as if he was learning a new technique for changing the wheel of his car<sup>5</sup>!

## Educational Implications of Identity Crises

In an educational context we could make a curriculum of the analysis of each conflict, of the respective organizational, clinical and psychological rationalities at stake and of their interplay – but their subjective quality would hardly be stimulated by that. In fact we might inspire reductive rationalization. As a study-directing “problem” in a self-directed project based training, however, Teddy and his colleagues might be able to themselves decipher some of the confusion. Space for sorting out the ambivalence and its foundation in existing problems would indeed be a necessary prerequisite for learning cognitively.

As for Teddy’s potentials for learning in a more functional, critical and progressive sense it is fair to point out that his current double identification with the interest of the patients and the importance of theoretical insight constitutes a key challenge to the development of a critical professionalism in the caring professions. The idea of “going out for a walk” actually comprises the “getting out” of the institutional confinement, “walking” in the sense of being allowed physical activity instead of drugged inactivity, and being addressed as “us” by a non-confined human. It represents dimensions of a most relevant critique of institutions and their effects on the institutionalized human beings. To simply be able to perceive and express those elementary needs of the patients is – deplorably – most often the priority of the professional training for care to unlearn. So the collective experience of Teddy and his colleagues is not only negative and critical – it legitimately highlights the boundaries of a humane care giving hospital organization – and the possibilities beyond the currency perceived everyday lifestyle of the ward.

## Gender „Stereotypes“ in Adult Education?

In the general perspective of adult education we might have focussed on Teddy’s complement of gender – *the mature woman*, who *willingly* enters the classroom and who readily accepts authority and curriculum – be it in popular enlightenment, general, continuing education, or at work. “She” is well known to educators all over the Western world. Empirical research – not only in Denmark – amply illustrates that beyond the surface of the well-known dedication of the women in adult education a complex and ambivalent subjective process takes place (e.g. Weber 1996b). A life history framework used to understanding these processes point to the high tolerance of ambivalence that current adult generations of women have developed during their double socialization and double societalization (cf. Knapp 1990) and to historically gendered subjectivity – achieving autonomy via intimacy (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg 1994). It furthermore acknowledges the interplay of experience with the learning environments. These theoretical frameworks point to the fact that positive dedication and involvement may not only lead to self-esteem and qualification, but also represent strategies of self-exploitation.

Analyses of experimental training programmes with expanded subjective space expose, however, more hopeful prospects – if educational settings are defined with a suitable distance to and a subjectively relevant thematization of problems in every day life, the classic modern idea of gaining autonomy through education seems to hold (Salling Olesen 1994, Weber 1999).

## Critical Theory as Framework of Researching Learning

So how does our analysis of “Teddy” distinguish itself in the academic landscape currently theorizing lifelong learning?

As a transnational policy, “lifelong learning” vitally influences the preconditions of learning. It must therefore be subject to critical research, pointing to the potential of the concept to embrace comprehensive, open and subversive learning processes, serving as a ‘deconstruction’ or an ‘ideology critique’ of educational discourses and institutional idealism.

Our life history approach aims at studying the lifelong learning process in the perspective of the subject, the learner. In contrast to postmodern positions critical theory pays primary attention to socialisation, i.e. to the basic production of human subjectivity. We emphasize the socially produced and historically dynamic character of human subjectivity, and its inner contradictions. For example Teddy reacts in a culturally standard “masculine” pattern, and we recognize the typical pride of the skilled worker in his insistence on his standards of quality. Yet Teddy’s experience is complex and exclusively his own. Empirically we know nothing about his specific version of a life history as a boy and an adolescent, his relations to father, mother, brothers and sisters, to peer groups and colleagues. In this context it suffices to know that such relations lend their energy and specific shape to his experience. The present learning and identity process has a dynamic which is Teddy’s personal variety of professional and gender development – which contributes to his societal development as well.

So “lifelong learning” can be seen as a production of subjectivity, the concept of “subjectivity” referring to the individual dealing with social reality, and to the quality of a collective, conscious practice. Practically and empirically, learning is always an individual process, but this conceptualization points to its historical character, to the fact that individuals and groups produce, reproduce and alter society during socialization. The subject is dialectically embedded in a social history, produced through individual life history, integrating the contradictions of social life, at the same time developing its capacity for self regulated reconciliation or mediation between desires and social reality (Negt & Kluge 1981, S. 45f). When subjectivity is conceptualized in historical terms – comprising the experience of modernization – it is exposed as a process which may gradually *produce* the modern autonomous subject. The subject is, however, rendered problematic in the course of the very same historical process (Salling Olesen & Weber 2002, Schäfer 1993, Vester 1974) and to grasp that dynamic we introduce the concept of experience.

## The Concept of Experience – and the Specificity of the Learning Subject

Embracing the subject-object dialectic, consciousness beings produce as well as presupposed in conscious and active social practise, we suggest the core concept “*experience*” taken up from Adorno and Oskar Negt (cf. Negt. 1996). In the context of adult learning this concept contextualizes the potentials for learning in education as well as in everyday life, in individual *life history*, and in the *objectivation of collective cultural experience in the form of (professional) knowledge*. All three levels – learning, life experience, and knowledge – represent aspects or modalities of experience, intrinsically constituted through each other.

This conceptual framework brings the abstraction: “learning” into the context of reality in everyday life and life history. Experience is formed actively by subjectivity in an interplay between what is realistic and what is permitted within the horizon of every day life situations as well as what is recalled or subconsciously dynamized by life history. Previous experience forms the preconditions for future experience. Conscious learning is embedded in practical interaction of potentially condensing subjective meaning, that then caused emotional reactions, and changes the perception of self and situation.

Everyday life social practices provide a horizon for perception, a definition of situations and for the constitution of collective and habitual routine. This syndrome is conceptualized as an epochal form of consciousness – as opposed to ideologies – by Thomas Leithäuser (1976) as “everyday life consciousness” (Alltagsbewusstsein). In every day lives flooded with impulses and demands, individual and collective mechanisms of consciousness handle anxieties and ambivalence. The interpretation of perception and observations is a current element in an active, psychic and cultural acquisition of reality. The maintenance of a routine demands an active selection of perceptions and knowledge in accordance with convention or reality – by socially and societally accepted defence mechanisms. For example Teddy encounters the defensive routines in the workplace, and he is accordingly confronted with his personal life history shaping his habitual reactions. When he articulates the conflicts in his newly learned professional terms he articulates a historically new version of authority conflicts in the wards. His skilled worker’s autonomy, his gendered perceptions and his resistance against his position in the hospital hierarchy is untimely and “out of place” in the work-place culture. But in a life history perspective and in a broader political perspective his definitions are not only acceptable – they are embodying critical potential.

The critical potential is there to be exposed, because every day perception comprise social and societal contradictions and ambiguities, along with the subjective state they activate – the pain and pleasure that constitute experience. Culturally important and subjectively tabooed experience may be kept under the level of pragmatic consciousness, but the awareness of the complexity of experience is latent – struggling with the every day language to find cultural form, as when Teddy signals his ambitions by numerous “very’s” and “really’s”. So the

consciousness of every day life comprises the perception and awareness of problems, of potential alternative social practices, of 'un-lived lives'. It holds a potential for seeing things differently and for alternative social practice. In the Teddy case the sense of communication and empathy may generate a less defensive professional attitude than the one Teddy and his fellow students are up against. Working these contradictions out – is his or their – potential experience building process. Thus the concept of experience illuminates how the potential for learning is embedded in everyday life practice, informed by life history. The potential for learning is in re-configurations of the contradictory perceptions. Emotional and practical aspects of the learner's involvement is the precondition of this intellectual enterprise.

All banal every day life practice like this controversy is a part of an individual, subjective life history. Yet the same reality and the same knowledge possess entirely different meanings for different people. Each man has his own perception. The specific differentiations are not necessarily accessible to conscious elaboration, but they are never the less active in the learning process. That's why learning is unpredictable and not easily controlled.

## Knowledge and Life History

We may further illuminate the nature of learning – and its relation to experience – by emphasizing the social relativity and practical embeddedness of knowledge. Knowledge is at the same time integrated in ways of seeing and talking about reality (discourses) – and it is always known by somebody in some context, embedded in social practices which cannot be reduced to discourse. So there is no *absolute* difference between 'scientific knowledge', 'knowledges of social practice', and 'everyday life consciousness'. This 'social constructedness' of knowledge in a broad sense is a commonplace in the sociology of knowledge as well as post modern philosophy. Much more controversial is the relation between the subjective nature of knowledge and its societal and cultural meaning, sometimes stated as its "objective" meaning.

Alfred Lorenzer's preliminary theory of socialization (Lorenzer 1972) provides a conceptual link between the individual subjectivity (the embodying of the social in the psyche) and the culture and language (the codifying of knowledge and collective experience)<sup>6</sup>. According to Lorenzer the biological development and the (necessary) social interaction around the needs of the child are gradually intertwined in the production of the individual subjectivity. The Mother-Child-Dyad is the first 'common subject' for this production of subjective patterns of practice. Through the gradual separation of child from mother, the interaction becomes the production process of the child's stable *forms of interaction*, of the language acquisition, and of the establishment of language as a general symbolic system. Through the separation and interaction with physical and social reality the child gradually builds up individual subjectivity – which can be

conceptualized as a learning process, cf. recent empirical infant psychology (Stern 1985). Contradictions of societal structure and the cultural ways of signifying them are built into a systematically contradictory, though individual, subjectivity.

The following is a preliminary way of theorizing genetically the double relation or dialectic between cultural and historical, objectivised knowledge and its subjective acquisition and meaning:

On the one hand life history produces symbols, meanings and language, informed by a socialization process and its contradictions, always involving the individual emotionally and relationally. Knowledge as a social construct with a historical genesis and implication is acquired and reconstructed in the media of language and symbols whose meaning is informed by life history experience.

On the other hand societal structures and social relations are not transparent – they can only be understood by interpretation and reconstruction on an inter-subjective or cultural level. Therefore experience is produced dynamically within the medium of societal knowledge.

In Adorno's criticism of positivist social science it is stressed that the point of critical theory is to reconfigure the social 'fact' or action in its historical and subjective context, i.e. to understand its dynamics rather than reifying it as a fixed object. Since the experiencing subjects (here: the social scientist) is conditionally integrated in social reality, this position reinstalls the historical and subjective nature of critical theory as an act of learning about reality and about yourself at the same time. Although we are not pursuing a knowledge sociology or meta-scientific question here, this is basic framework of understanding learning as an experiencing process.

## Theorizing Learning

Pursuing the conceptualization of learning, however, let us elaborate on this a bit further. We encounter all phenomena and actions in situations of social practice, our need to deal with them and understand them are always already embedded in this situation – and vice versa: The recognition of a situation relates it subjectively to previous experience, comprising emotional qualities and identity aspects. Recognition of novelties implies double differentiations: Differentiation from other objective phenomena and situations, that appear similar, and differentiation from the situative images of life history. Both differentiations are cognitive as well as emotional – and so they involve different positions of the subject in relation to the situations.

When new phenomena are perceived in terms of well known ones by basic recognition and mechanisms of complexity reduction, the process becomes guided by the emotional reactions to well known phenomena, to the situation and to the projected expectations within it. And as learning is basically related to observation and systematization of deviations – be they new phenomena or new contextual factors – this is a process of cognitive as well as of emotional and social change.

The implication of methodology for theorized learning are discussed below. For learning theory it means that every learning process is an individual, subjective interpretation process, which is of course systematically variable in dimensions of gender, class, ethnic origin and situational context. Given the attempt to reshape theory of (adult) learning within this concept, the need to develop some of these dimensions, their specifications and historical character logically follows. Accordingly, the life history approach encompasses empirical studies of learning processes and educational careers, that enables theorized learning in the following historical context: People learn in the social practices of their time and situation, and according to their socialization – yet their learning depends on themselves and on the environments offered. Our access to their learning is an interactive interpretation, which does not confuse the medium and the text with the actual living learners.

## Methodology: Hermeneutics – and beyond

By focussing on life history we have assumed that learning processes and participation in education are embedded in an (individual) life history, in which social circumstances and societal conditions are likewise subjectively integrated.

The telos of the life history approach is to *understand* the subjective perspective of learning and participation in education. So our interest is a hermeneutic one. We invite subjective expressions in communication, we turn them into texts, and we interpret them in order to understand the subjective transaction or experience. The format of the production of spoken communication, the interaction in the research setting, and the procedure of text production are themselves important aspects of the interpretation<sup>7</sup>.

Hermeneutics generally assumes the possibility of establishing a communal horizon, enabling understanding, on the basis of an everyday language or a shared tradition of meaning. So do we. But we also assume that this mutual understanding is problematic and dynamic in two specific, interrelated, manners: The appearance of societal contradictions in everyday life and language, and the dynamic psychic nature of the communicative situation. This is no simple additive matter. Hence we add some methodological complications to the hermeneutic enterprise.

One underlying assumption goes back to Marxian social theory, namely that the societal constitution of social relations allows structural dynamics to appear as interaction between independent subjects or social groups, e.g. in the societal gender relations. Another assumption refers to psychoanalytic theory about the unconscious dynamics as a level of subjectivity, which contributes to consciousness and communication. The psychoanalytic social psychology, informed by Lorenzer as well as group psychology (e.g. Morgenroth 2001), suggests an approach to the individual experience of contradictory social conditions and to how socialization – especially language acquisition – allows for certain experiences to

become social and verbally explicit, while others remain silent or appear in distorted or even idiosyncratic ways.

Structural contradictions are implicit in social interaction. In early childhood, biological development, basic needs and the child's dependent interaction with the world produce a complex relation between the social meanings of language and life history experience in all its bodily, emotional and relational aspects. The cognitive and communicative potentials of language are shaped by emotional and relational experiences<sup>8</sup>. So in order to go beyond the information given in the referential meanings of communication – in the accepted language games – we have taken the notion of *in depth hermeneutics* (Lorenzer 1986, Leithäuser & Volmerg 1988) as our overall concept. We do not *only* take the subjective expressions for granted – we look for meanings and implications going beyond the knowledge or intent of the acting, knowing or speaking subject. Alternatively, we conceive reality as contradictory and repressive, and assume that critical interpretation should always be an attempt to develop the underlying or repressed possible actions of the subject. From this follows a double attempt to 'deconstruct' the meanings and actions, and to 'construct' other possible meanings and actions, using the active consciousness of the interpreter or the group of interpreters. This necessitates reflection of the position of the researcher(s) and of the transference and counter-transference that is imminent in communication – not in order to establish a neutral position, but in order to reflect the specific dynamic of the production of meaning (cf. Hunt 1989 p. 57).

In comparison a biographical narration performed in an interview may be an endeavour creating continuity and habitual meaning. At the same time it may be prohibitive in relation to specific directions of experience. A group interaction involves the constitution of a common reference and solidarity or antagonism in the group, which catalyzes preconscious ideas – at the same time excluding certain elements of experience. Focussing the interpretation on the ruptures and 'holes', on the inconsistencies, on the emotional signals, etc. of this constructive activity opens new interpretations – as well as a perspective of new learning opportunities for the protagonist.

In the interpretation procedures based on psychoanalytical social psychology the insights into subconscious aspects of situational communication and of culture become helpful in creative reconstructions – as opposed to reducing texts to illustration. Inner and outer realities are both appreciated. For example, by theoretically and practically – research-wise – appreciating structural aspects of social life that may be constructed as such *as well as* psychological structures, which are actively part of learning and consciousness – although they may reside beyond conscious regulation of social practice and expression. Habermas has argued similarly, that the distorted language games have implications on the level of societal structures and their appearance, thus suggesting a qualitative approach to historical facts, i.e. an ideology critique and an in-depth hermeneutic approach to consciousness of social appearance (Habermas 1971).

## Conclusion

Our tradition of *critical theory* shares with a number of discourses with Human Resource Management, organizational learning and “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger 1991) that focus non-formal learning and on the variety of learning situations. We share with post-modern positions (Usher & Edwards 1994) the idea of learning as a multiple, subjective process in all domains of everyday life – as an unpredictable cultural production of experience full of contradictions and variations.

In sum how does our analysis of Teddy respond to the new challenges to research into adult education and lifelong learning?

The notion of experience refers to a specific history of the learning subject in context. Teddy is a man with a specific work life experience, and is now relating to a work context with a different culture and facing formal professional norms. His life history has a continuity, and his subjectivity is related to its progression.

This has a specific significance in today’s discussion on lifelong learning. The academic discursive shift from education to learning refers to an abstract individual without such a history. If we relate it to the policies that are practically pursued in the name of lifelong learning, one of the obvious trends is to dismantle the progression of the institutional normal biography, and substitute it with a market regulation. The life course and career after secondary education/adolescence is intended or assumed to be a recurrent number of loops without any substantial progression or inner sequence. The notion of experience yields an alternative – whereas several other critical discourses abstain from this – either in order to avoid essentialist ideas of the subject (post modernism) or because a situational or organisational context forms the referential context (e.g. the discourse of situated learning, intuitive expertise or theories of professionalism).

So the concern with the experience and learning process of specific subjects forms the most proper response to the new challenges – because it helps discover potentials, and because its perspective fundamentally opposes a neo-liberal version of the lifelong learning policy, based on market regulation. The case of Teddy shows the complexity of such analysis, but also that its specific nature is related to basic societal dimensions of subjectivity. A methodology which links careful qualitative analysis with basic theorizing of the learning subject introduces a progressive and enlightening development for the research field.

## Notes

- 1 The underlying assumption on our part is that the skilled worker’s work identity as a craftsman and bread-winner is a subjective state in individuals and a dynamic societal prerequisite even in present late modern societies – as empirically researched by e.g. Willis 1977, Brock 1987, 1990, Rasmussen 1990, Weber 1996a. Current masculin-

ity studies tend to deconstruct this assumption as a myth or an essentialism – e.g. Connell 1995, Collinson & Hearn 1996 – or to analyze it in terms of power relations/hegemony – e.g. Edley & Wetherell 1995. Teddy's text points to the everyday, subjective qualities of the transitions of work identity.

- 2 We shall elaborate elements of the theoretical background of this procedure below.
- 3 By the way, Teddy allegedly did learn something to this effect – when, for identical reasons, he refused to give time priority to changing the bandage of an old lady's leg when he was practising in district health and being taught by the district nurse. Teddy thought the *lady* in question was more in need of a chat, and he failed to recognize her clinical "*patient's* needs". So the laundry consistently represents an otherwise plausible conflict between meeting clinical or psychological and social needs.
- 4 The split between the caring and the controlling practises of women in the caring professions have been exhaustingly analyzed with reference to both professional qualification demands, institutional analysis and gendered socialization (e.g. Lindgren 1992).
- 5 <sup>1</sup>Teddy's approach may be seen in the perspective of masculine identifications moving via autonomy towards intimacy, only when the object is won and possessed can the balanced realistic interpersonal communication take on intimacy and empathy, "relational competence" can be experienced (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg 1994, p. 92, cp. Weber 1996a).
- 6 The line of theory can be traced within the more reality oriented trends in the history of psychoanalysis from Sandor Ferenczi (1970, 1972) over object relations theory (Bowlby 1969-80) to present empirically founded social psychology (Morgenroth 1996, Becker-Schmidt 2001, Weber 2001).
- 7 Besides the references already established – Lorenzer's concepts of language as symbolic interaction, Leithäuser's concept of situation as a constituent of everyday life – we draw on the basically abstract concepts of rule-following and language game of the later Wittgenstein.
- 8 In Lorenzer's terms language comprises accepted symbols that connect socially acknowledged meanings with experiences in socially acknowledged language games, as well as verbal expressions resulting from cleaved interaction – reified *signs*, well defined in language but isolated from their experiential meaning, and *clichés*, linguistic entities directed by traumatic emotional reactions, that have been dissolved from their original experiential content. The point here is not Lorenzer's specific theory, but its implications for the role of language in researching subjectivity.

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