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*Published in:*  
Pratique de Formation

*Publication date:*  
2009

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Olesen, H. S. (2009). Learning in life history - psycho-societal interpretations of biographies. *Pratique de Formation*, (55), 107-130.

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# **Learning in life history - psycho-societal interpretations of biographies**

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## **Abstract**

Taking its point of departure from some critical remarks about some of the most important recent theorizing of learning, this article presents an alternative framework for theorizing learning as a subjective process in a social and societal context, based on life history research. The key concepts of subjectivity and experience, derived from European critical theory, are briefly introduced with respect to their intellectual background. Based on examples from the author's research into the professional learning ~~of general practitioners~~, the article outlines the implications of these concepts in relation to an understanding of emotional aspects of learning in everyday life and to an understanding of knowledge. The pivotal role of language use and language socialisation is explained in brief, and a psychodynamic complement to a language game concept of language use is developed.

## **Keywords**

Subjectivity; experience; learning; identity; psychosocietal; life history

From many years of international interaction and collaboration, it is my impression that there are substantial and systematic paradigmatic differences between the international discourse dominated by Anglo-Saxon thinking, and continental European, especially German, traditions in theorising learning in life history. At the same time, there seem to be important convergences in the issues and questions we deal with, as well as mutual sympathies around basic educational and political engagements. Recently, the development of empirical research studying the significance of life experience for adult learning and practical education based on biographical self reflection seems to correspond with our (Danish) research strategy, in spite of differing conceptual frameworks.

The background for our work in the Danish Life History Project<sup>1</sup> was partly a theoretical critique of traditional pedagogical theory, based on a wider conception of experience building (Salling Olesen 1989), and partly a practical engagement in training and education for unemployed and marginalized people. We wanted to develop a research methodology for understanding learning motives – and resistances – in the context of past, present and future life experiences. And we wanted to enable self-reflective methods in training, even when it was aiming at immediate effects of skills and employment.

The project emerged as a meta-reflection on several projects dealing with people in specific societal transitions or conflicts such as redundancy, career shift, social exclusion and so on. One of the early studies followed unemployed unskilled women on a training scheme aiming at their future employment in semi-skilled jobs. This one-year course, aiming only at women, included specific up-skilling, general education and personal development (Salling Olesen 1994, 2004b). Our research followed a practical experiment. It combined survey questionnaires, observation and informal conversation on the shop floor, as well as three intensive interviews with a small sample. Following the process from the perspective of the women and hearing their interpretations of the course and the trainee periods, as well as their first job experiences after the course, we learned about the women's perspective on work, based on typical female experiences of lousy jobs, unemployment, and a permanent conflict between parental commitments and working hours, and the internalized misrecognition of home work. Whereas the employment scheme is based on a wage labour rationale we gained insights into a much more differentiated view of the motivation (and lack of motivation) for learning for employment. It was clear that all the learning processes - whether they entailed basic schooling or training at a metal work bench or driving a twenty-ton truck - were also gender and work identity processes of the learning women. We saw women reconsidering gender experiences and gender roles in their partnerships, their relations to mothers, etc, as they worked together with other women and developed new self esteem. We saw their ideas about work change as they experienced themselves as competent workers. But these processes were very individualistic: sometimes they were explicit reflections, like a woman saying that her relationship with her husband had changed dramatically; sometimes they could be recognized in relation to a specific job experience; and sometimes they could be recognised very subtly in relation to material such as one

woman's connection between the steel she worked on and the horses she had always ridden. If the results are not surprising when summarized in this way, it confirms for us the idea of working with the life histories and life worlds of individual learners.

As we developed the theory and methodology, the scope also broadened: New and different samples such as adolescents and professionals were included, and the interpretational perspective broadened in order to incorporate questions related to specific contents of learning and its relation to knowledge and skills. It opened our eyes to the complexity of the subjective dynamic of fundamental societal and cultural 'structures' like gender and work identity and made clear that we needed to move methodologically from empathy to more theoretically informed interpretations. A recent PhD dissertation dealt with the learning of trainees in home care, and analysed their working situation in the homes of elderly people as a learning environment for mostly young girls (Liveng, 2007). In one way this is just another example of gender and work identity issues, though very different from the employment scheme described above. We can analyse professional learning as a personal identity process. Emphasizing the specific relational and emotional quality of the caring situations, it is obvious that the engagement of the student is interwoven with a personal life history experience which is individual, gendered and class-related, all embodied in the student in space and through social relations. It includes conscious as well as unconscious motives, and most often ambivalent engagements, which need interpretation. A sociological perspective might point out other relations in this field (managerial power relations in caring services, the precariousness of the social relations seen from the perspective of the care receiver) that are not at all explicit within the students' perceptions. The subjective focus of life history study can therefore be enriched by aspects of the social environment in questions that are not readily experienced by the learner. The discussion therefore explored the insights that could be gained from psychodynamic and societal considerations respectively.

Thus we can return to general learning theory, but in a new way. We may relieve such theory of its abstract generality by seeing learning as an identity process which is carried out in relation to a *specific social context*. Although referring to these empirical studies, my focus here is on the relations between (social research) methodology and theory (of learning). I particularly want to explain why and how we draw on psychoanalytic insights in the interpretation of subjective experiences. A central challenge for learning theory is to avoid the usual dichotomy between the

individual and the soci(et)al level of analysis and I want to elaborate how societal relations play a role not only 'from the outside', shaping the social situation, but also 'from the inside', by the societal production of the learner subject throughout life history. This also has much broader resonance with social theory, politics and epistemology than there is space for here (Leledakis, 1995; Salling Olesen, 2002a, 2002b).

It is striking how little influence psychoanalytic traditions have had within adult education. This may have to do with the mainstream understanding of psychoanalysis as a more or less deterministic theory of individual psychic development, which is only relevant for clinical psychology, or a view that psychoanalysis has an excessive emphasis on emotional aspects of social relations. But psychoanalytical theory has many different branches, most of which have developed far beyond these stereotypes. In this context I draw on psychoanalysis as a framework for the interpretation of cultural phenomena, seeing psychic dynamics as produced by societal relations and representing an inner psychic modality of culture – what might be called the embodied culture. Emotional and cognitive processes are seen as practically identical or closely interwoven, being aspects of the subjective processing of cultural meaning and societal conditions. By studying the production of the relating subject in which emotional and cognitive processes are united (the life history), our attention is led to symbolic activity and language use and their relation to lived experience. Paradigmatically this framework for analysing learning as individual subjective experience without losing sight of its societal dimension is a mediation or synthesis of critical theory and a symbol interpretational focus within psychoanalysis.

It is not possible to discuss and justify these theoretical developments here but I hope to open a dialogue between adult education community and a continental European tradition of critical theory (Lorenzer, 1977; Salling Olesen, 2002a, 2002b) which is not well known within adult education research and, it seems, even less while the international community is becoming Anglophone. In a way it is understandable that adult educators have mostly avoided psychoanalysis - it is a rich and complex discipline in itself, and the intellectual discussions within it are obviously interwoven with professional practices in a quite different professional field, a therapeutic practice. Possibly, some undigested transfers of clinical observations and simplistic meta-psychology (i.e. the personality model which plays a significant role in American adult education) to teaching and learning realms have been made. But often it seems

as if the reception of psychoanalytical inspirations is linked with a defensive rejection of simple insights as if they were threatening. After all nobody would, in general, deny that emotional aspects - motivation, engagement, identity etc – are central to adult learning, but the idea that this influence is partly unconscious and partly formed by earlier life experiences seems to be provocative. What might be at stake is the presentiment that psychoanalytical thinking might problematize some of the idealized assumptions of the conscious and autonomous learner on which progressive adult education is most often grounded. The well-justified respect for the integrity of the adult learner can, however, easily lead us towards a normative and individualistic conception that prevents a richer understanding of the learner subject and his/her life experiences, especially the subjective dynamic of relating to knowledge and practices- that is, the dynamics of learning.

The challenge therefore is to develop adult education and learning into a critical and empirical science which respects the integrity of the learner, but offers frameworks and insights into the subject-object dialectic of experience and agency: learning is conditioned by, but at the same time a dynamic aspect of, this dialectic.

A fruitful approach is to study individuals who are learning under conditions of societal changes and conflicts, understanding the subjective meaning of these societal events and conditions for them in the context of their life experience and life prospects. We try to understand motivation and participation in education as well as the dynamics of learning processes. Biographical and life history approaches in a variety of forms, guided and inspired by a conceptual framework of critical social theory, help us to focus on the particular learning individual without abstracting them from the context of their immediate situation as well as the wider and deeper societal dimensions. Very often, but not exclusively, such changes and conflicts are related to work and employment. They include technological shifts, new forms of work organisation and management, redundancy, or perhaps not obtaining access to the labour market at all. But the specific types of pressure and workload in everyday life, for example the 'double work' for women, or environmental problems, are part of it. It seems to us that the study of work-related learning is also productive for a general theory of learning because 'work' as a context for the individual learner has exemplary qualities, covering a concrete and specific life world at the same time as it is the central factor in the societal order and dynamic. Work-related learning in the widest sense is also socialisation or 'societalization' of the individual.

Next, I take my point of departure from some recent developments in theorizing work and learning, pointing out in unfair briefness some advances and some critical limitations, which I think can be resolved and complemented by a my life history framework.

### **New learning theory in the era of lifelong learning**

Theorizing learning has previously been the exclusive concern of schools and the discipline of education, developing historically from abstract philosophy towards a more and more technical discipline. Accordingly, most learning research has been shaped by institutional education and the transfer of culture and cumulative modes of learning. Sometimes attention has widened to include 'reality' and students' real experiences, most frequently as a tool for more efficient education and training. Developmental psychology, instructional psychology and theories of curricular structure have prevailed. Recently, interest in human resources from industry has boosted interest in broader theories of learning and subjectivity. However, many of these new learning discourses remain 'ideological' in the sense that, when talking about individuals learning in contexts of 'organisations', 'tools', 'knowledge' and 'practices', not to mention 'creativity' and 'innovation', they deal with important and novel issues in very abstract ways, without reflection of specific context.

The increasing interest in lifelong learning and learning in the workplace has advanced new theoretical approaches, which also have more general implications. First, this interest has exposed the significance of the social context of learning. Inspired by anthropological thinking about cultural transmission, learning is seen as socialisation in a cultural sense. The participation and gradual inclusion in a community of practice - the group of people whose shared practice also forms a cultural framework and meaning making (Lave and Wenger 1991) - lends to learning research a framework for understanding the cultural dimensions of learning even very simple skills. The early anthropological or cultural theories of learning have - rightly, I think - been criticized for a conservative bias because they tend to mould the learner in the forms of already established practices or organisations under consideration. In Lave and Wenger's work, the tailors in Liberia become tailors like their masters. Wenger (1998) seems to avoid this critique by generalizing the notion of a community

of practice such that it is not necessarily a concrete social context. In his model, learning is connected with the trajectory of the learning individual across and between a number of communities in which (s)he participates and negotiates meaning and identity. However, whereas the subjective meaning of the immediate workplace context is obvious, the fact that 'work' is a societal life condition, and the meanings and conflicts related to this, are effectively edited out. The social outlook is pretty narrow. Furthermore, the relations between a community of practice and all the interesting and conflicting social affiliations of the worker in and in relation to the workplace (such as formal organisation of a company, informal organisation(s) in the workplace, professional affiliations, trade union, family situation and so on) remain very vague. I think this vagueness may be responsible for the fact that practical analytical applications of the concepts tend to identify the context of subjective meaning making with one concrete entity defined by, for example, a task in a work organisation, or by location. Wenger's point of the trajectory across and the potential conflicts between different communities of practice is lost in application. In more systems-oriented approaches to cultural learning theory (e.g. Yrjö Engeström's version of activity theory), this vagueness is promoted to a virtue of generalising relations in organisations which is popular in management research. But in relation to learning it leaves no theoretical trace of the dialectic between particular (individual) perspectives and meaning making, and the organisational totality of systems functionality (or dysfunctionality) - the important innovation that anthropological or cultural theory brought into learning theory in the first place. Issues of power also disappear.

This anthropological inspiration has put learning into its cultural context. But it does not provide useful answers for the other important questions in relation to a theory of learning: what are the driving forces and dynamics of the way in which the learning individual makes meaning of and 'negotiates' his/her identity in already existing social communities? And by which criteria can we state that this ongoing modification of identity and meaning making has the quality of learning? In fact, is there a theory of learning, or is it only a relevant, but partial, account of (parts of) the social context in which learning may take place? To create a theory of learning, we need to theorize the learner as a subject in her/his own right, and the processes that s/he is undergoing.



To date, it seemed difficult to connect the attention to social context in work-related learning theory with those concepts of the individual learner and learning potential which are available in learning psychology and cognitive science. However this has now been attempted with some contributions more rewarding than others. In his book on workplace learning, Stephen Billett (2001) refers - critically though - to anthropological concepts of situated learning to frame learning within the workplace, and combines this with constructivist learning psychology (Piaget and onwards), seeing learning as the result of practical problem solving in the work process. This brings important insights: first the socially embedded and material nature of learning, and second, attention to the agency of the learner. This is eye-opening in the promotion of learning in the workplace because it emphasizes that workers are always learning all the time, and that there are endless possibilities for the creation of workplaces which are more supportive of and stimulating for workers' learning. However, the workplace as a social context remains abstracted; learning is seen in particular cases of interplay between the 'materiality' of the work process and the worker. This abstraction may have to do with the strategic, practical development perspective, and limits the theorizing of the societal context of learning.

But I also see some limitations in the understanding of the subjective aspects of learning. The learning processes are understood as the cognitive aspect of problem solving (and knowledge building). By distinguishing routine and non-routine work, Billett defines work situations in relation to the experience of the learner subject as problems to be solved or not. But this distinction or dichotomy between routine and challenge also simplifies the possible meanings embedded in the materiality of the work processes and the social situation. Work 'means more' to the worker, related to his or her subjective experience, than this distinction embraces. The possible learning outcome (or no outcome) of the meeting between a challenge/task or problem and the worker depends on more complicated relations between worker and the perceived challenges, as can be seen from Billett's examples. We need to account theoretically for these complexities.

Eraut (1994) has analysed professional knowledge and competences in terms of the ways of knowing and using knowledge in work situations. He provides interesting and distinctive discussions of theories of knowledge and knowledge use, and relates it to features of the work situation and the types of work tasks being performed. In this way he provides a useful corrective to the generalizing theories of knowledge and professions, and emphasizes especially the processual and contextual nature of knowledge use. Indirectly, by theorizing the ways in which knowledge is used and how knowledge resources are modified in problem solving processes of work, this is also a way of theorizing learning, in principle within a similar model to Billett's analysis.

But because of its point of departure, this contribution to learning theory is restricted to, or at least strongly prioritizes, cognitive dimensions. In spite of an obvious awareness of other dimensions - the personal experiences of the learner, the specific nature of the work - they appear as ad hoc analytic observations and distinctions rather than being theorized. Eraut has another mission - to study development of knowledge and competence. I would, however, argue that this mission could gain strength by paying systematic attention to the dynamics of learning and to the subjective meaning of work and knowledge for the professional. But that is another discussion (Salling Olesen 2000, 2001).

One might also point out the general limitations of these approaches in relation to the wider societal context and its specific influence on the immediate situation, e.g. power relations and historical changes within a work place. And such approaches also share a tendency to operate with abstract learner subjects, individuals without history, both in the sense of an individual life history and in the sense of societal and cultural attributes such as gender. They bring valuable insights but they need to be reinterpreted and complemented.

In a very elementary sense, the life history approach draws attention to the individual lived life as a context for learning. We do not try to produce a causality track of the individual life course, but instead, try to understand how specific individuals experience their present in the light of their past and their subjectively projected future. This is not intended to echo the individual self account of learning biography and identity. Unlike certain narrative biographical approaches, we want to attend not only to this conscious self presentation, but also to its relation to partly opaque societal conditions and unrecognized aspects of the embodiment of the subjective dynamic (Salling Olesen 2004b).

### **Subjectivity**

In our approach, *subjectivity* - the way of relating to the world which is characterized by intention, agency and engaging interaction with something outside yourself - and *experience* - consciousness building through subjective processing of perceptions and impressions from the world – are closely related core concepts. These concepts are not unique to our approach but their use and theoretical explanation is quite problematic within the English tradition and – even - language (Hodkinson 2004). Only a few aspects of and implications for this position can be explored in the following, but I hope to convince readers of the relevance of this way of theorizing. Those who find this presentation too brief, or are inspired by it, may find more elaborated versions in Salling Olesen (1989, 2002a), Salling Olesen & Weber (2001) and in Weber (2001).

Subjectivity is relational. Individuals (or groups, but that is another and complicated story) constitute themselves as subjects in their agency and interaction with others and the world, and their experience building in this interaction. There is an *inner* dialectic relation between the subject and the world. In social philosophy and theory this can be termed a subject-object dialectic in the tradition descending from Hegel through Marx and the Frankfurt School, particularly in the work of Adorno (1976, 2000). The Frankfurt tradition of critical theory understands human subjectivity as a product of socialisation, in which a specific version of cultural and social experience is embodied, becoming a complex of conscious and unconscious preconditions for agency and experience. In opposition to liberal notions of the independent, free and rational subject, critical theory assumes that subjectivity is a historical and dynamic entity which is only gradually *constituted* in a learning relation to biological and social reality.

Subjectivity is also collective and societal: it is constituted in societal agency - e.g. the women in the example above becoming genuine wage labourers by experiencing themselves as competent workers. The ability to learn is based on cultural orientations. Culture exists in socially articulated practices, meanings and symbols that are sometimes attached to artefacts or stabilised in social institutions but also embodied in the agents of culture, and (re)produced in agency and consciousness. In their way, each of the women in the example embodies female experiences of work, female roles (e.g. child care) and women's learning (Salling Olesen 2004a). The second key concept, experience, can help us to understand the consequences for learning.

Critical theory synthesizes theoretical elements from Marxism (societal and historical factors) and psychoanalysis (the embodied and symbolic forms of psychodynamic processes, characterized by contradictions and tensions). These theoretical orientations are based on the knowledge that neither societal relation nor psychic dynamics are immediately transparent. The use of psychoanalysis implies that the psychic processes in which societal relations are mediated are not fully transparent and conscious, but also unconscious and preconscious - this is the most fundamental theoretical contribution to social science from psychoanalysis. One of the important observations of a Marxist analysis of societal relations is that those relations appear in systematically distorted forms.

To suggest that a life history approach to adult learning may contribute to a theoretical concept of subjectivity may be thought of grandiose, but it is also a strategy to bring these philosophical concepts to concrete research, recognizing their historical nature. In order to understand how subjectivity is constituted as concrete relations, we need to interpret individual subjective reactions and consciousness in the context of culture, and this is where life history interpretation enters the picture. Practically, we carry out what are, basically, hermeneutic interpretations of life history narratives, group interactions, or other subjective expressions transcribed into a text; we guide the interpretations with the basic conceptual framework and enrich them with knowledge of societal, historical and psychic contexts. Though individual subjective expressions may be unique and unpredictable, they are not coincidental. By interpreting them, we sensitize the conceptual framework to important differentiating factors and conditions in the field, such as gender, ethnicity, or work

identities; or such as the identification potential in specific qualities of work processes (Salling Olesen & Weber 2002).

## **Experience**

The empirical life history approach applies the abstract concept of subjectivity on specific, historical, material people. In order to situate a theory of learning and the practice of education in a corresponding way, seeing it as the subjective 'acquisition' of concrete reality, making it a part of the subject itself, I suggest a concept of *experience* developed from this tradition by Theodor W. Adorno and Oskar Negt (1999). When it was introduced into labour education by Negt, it provided a framework for understanding political learning and class consciousness in relation to learning in everyday working class life. I saw and see it as a conceptual 're-embedding' of learning in everyday life: 'Experience is the process whereby we as human beings, individually and collectively, consciously master reality, and the ever-living understanding of this reality and our relation to it. Experiences in the plural...as in everyday language... are to be seen as products of this process....Experience is a *subjective* process....[It is] also a *collective* process...through a socially structured consciousness...finally an *active, critical and creative* process...' (Salling Olesen, 1989, p 8).

The theoretical advantage of the concept of experience is to connect a broad phenomenological and pragmatic notion of everyday life experience with its societal as well as its individual psychic dimensions. Actually Adorno's route to Marxism went via a critique of Husserl's phenomenology, with his realisation that no thing or phenomenon can be conceived without realizing its full societal situatedness<sup>2</sup>. For the empirical approach, the notion of experience offers an operational model with three aspects or modalities, three relatively independent dynamics, mediated through each other in every agency and learning process: immediate experience, life (history) experience, and cultural knowledge. The consciousness of everyday life is a situated and embodied experience, closely related to the engagement of the individual in specific practices. The situation is structurally embedded in societal history, but is also influenced by life experience and culturally available semantic schemes, and the ways in which these are individually acquired in life experience.

We can situate empirical material as mediations of these dynamics. The material will include individual experience building throughout *individual life history*, with interference between cognitive and emotional aspects coming in a specific version in every individual. Every individual has specific emotional and social experiences which have sedimented a general view of the world and ways of seeing him/herself. Let us refer to the introduction of new technologies and materials in a craft, e.g. plastic tubes instead of steel and copper pipes in plumbing. Every plumber has experience of gaining control of steel pipes, cutting threads, and of the new easier ways to handle copper pipes. These materials and techniques are part of his identity (because it is a 'he', and the control of the work process is also a male experience). The plumber may, at least under the influence of payment by the piece, realize the very practical use of plastic tubes in some situations, and soften his prejudice against them within an instrumental rationale. We may therefore understand *identity* processes in terms of this sedimentation and ongoing engagement in the world. Identity is thereby not seen as a final and stable self definition, but as a partly fluent, partly contradictory, and always active engagement and (re)construction of oneself. However, to crack a joke: a pipe is never just a pipe for the plumber.

We can see *knowledge, symbols and norms* as forms of culturally objectivised experience: in relation to the development of societal labour we may speak of an industrial experience, or an urban experience, or a female experience of double work – and more specifically we can see crafts or professions as collective experiences that have been tried out and stabilized. We can even see literacy and mathematical modelling from this perspective. Learning is a progressive process, transforming collective cultural experiences (knowledge, skills and normative directions) into individual experience, making meaning of specific perceptions, changing social practices, and constituting an individual subject in so doing. We want to understand the complexities of this process

So far this conception has drawn upon a broad stream of phenomenological and constructivist theories in sociological, psychological and educational thinking. They differ in their view of our access to the world. Mainstream phenomenological thinking emphasizes the examination of the world as it can be perceived. Constructivist theories, including Marxism, emphasize that this perception is culturally mediated, formed by our language and ideas. Critical theory specifically holds that no object can be properly understood without its relation to societal totality and, drawing on Marx, that social objects particularly appear in a systematically distorted way. Obviously the notion quoted above tries to mediate between these differences. But in my opinion, it is the elaboration of the *subjective dynamic* of experience and identity with the support of psychodynamic insights as well as Marxist concepts which enables an understanding of learning in everyday life.

Clearly the subjective handling of the social in everyday life is not only a cognitive phenomenon. Consciousness in practical interaction incorporates all its meanings for the experiencing subject(s) - the emotions connected with this situation and with the subject matter of the situation, and the perception of oneself and of the situation. Learning is activated by and influenced by emotional involvement, comprising moments of learning as well as moments of defence. We are particularly interested in the interference between cognitive and emotional aspects of individual experience building in specific social contexts, and between individual and collective meaning making.

Let us briefly reconsider the example of routines. Everyday life in work is characterized by collective and habitual routines. Perceptions and cognitive processes are also guided by the social and relational emotions attached to these well known practices, to the situation and to projected expectations within it. In a life situation which is generally flooded with impulses and demands, individual and collective mechanisms of consciousness building preserve the individual from anxieties and ambivalences. When non-routine phenomena or new contextual factors occur, there are not only (cognitive) problems to be solved. The very observation and systematization of deviations and novelties is also a process of emotional and social change of the learner. This change is challenging; it may overload the learner, and in some cases it is particularly threatening because it activates life historical experiences or emotional relations in an anxiety-provoking way.

The maintenance of a routine is not as passive as the notion seems to suggest: it is most often an active editing of perceptions and knowledge in accordance with possible practices - a defence mechanism. I call this form of consciousness 'everyday life consciousness', with a concept – *Altagsbewusstsein* - borrowed from Leithäuser and others (Leithäuser, 1976; Leithäuser and Volmerg, 1989). Leithäuser's theoretical framework for understanding the subjective dynamic of this consciousness as a defence mechanism provides a reverse complement to a theory of learning. The selection and interpretation of perceptions is part of an active, psychic and cultural acquisition which defines the situation in a practicable way - that is, through active, partly collective, defence mechanisms.

Defence is a mediated form of 'realism' with a limited scope or coercive focus, with the subject paying attention to certain aspects of the interplay between social reality and inner dynamics, and not very sensitive to social reality. We can define an open, embracing attention to inner as well as outer realities as the emotional precondition for, and sometimes also the outcome of learning. So by reflecting and changing everyday life routines of work life, we may open dynamic learning processes because they relate not only to the immediate situation but to more comprehensive life experiences of the significance of work for the constitution of the subject. But defences may also hold the potential for seeing things differently and for alternative social practice. An 'awareness' of problems, unexpected impulses, alternative social practices, 'un-lived lives' from one's own life history, unsatisfied ambitions may also be present in conflict prevention. . There is potential for a learning dynamic in defensive routines, cognitively linked with emotional and practical aspects of the learner's involvement in that situation. Professionals' interpretations of everyday practical challenges may often be interpreted as an ambiguity of reductive routine solutions and presentiment or explicit dissatisfaction, such as my own interpretations of general medical practitioners experiences (Salling Olesen 2007).

It may be necessary to state (again) that all these elements in the psychic dynamic are socialized, i.e. comprise the installation of societal constraints and self regulation in the human body. Referring back to subjectivity this does not mean that we install a social determination instead of a biological one. Instead, it means that we see embodied life experience as conditioning experience building throughout life – and hence also a potential source of knowledge. Generally speaking defensive and reality oriented aspects are dialectically connected in a way of knowing about the situation



and the world, and learning takes place in this dialectic. Cognitive aspects of these emotional dynamics can also be conceptualized by the psychoanalytic concepts of conscious, preconscious and unconscious, but I shall leave the discussion of this subjective dynamic of consciousness(es) here, and move on to explore some of its consequences in relation to knowing and learning.

## **Learning and Language(s)**

I will devote the rest of this article to the role of language in the relations between different forms of experience - symbolic knowledge, context awareness (reflection), and immediate, sensual perception - connecting a knowledge sociology perspective and the psychodynamic understanding of cultural symbolisation. The cultural resources which are mediated in symbolic forms (language(s)) have implications for the learning and experience process of everyday life, and also for research methodology.

Knowledge is a social construct with a historical genesis and implications, always acquired and reconstructed by somebody in some context, as the sociology of knowledge, critical theory and post-modern philosophy have pointed out from quite different angles. From this, it follows that there is no *absolute* difference between 'scientific knowledge', 'formal knowledge', 'knowledges of social practice', 'everyday life consciousness', and 'life experience'. The typological differences can be defined in relation to their genesis (who generates each type of knowledge), institutional contexts, power relations and hegemonies, etc., but the questions about the 'who', 'where' and 'when' of knowing and learning are mostly more productive than typologies. The notion of experience aligns with this pragmatic notion of knowledge and points to the subjective aspect of knowing, and especially the question of how symbols, meanings and language connect cultural meanings with individual emotional and relational experience, informed by a socialization process.

For the individual, subject knowledge has the status of cultural resources for understanding everyday life as well as mediating the totality of life experience. This appears very clearly in professions and well defined occupations (crafts) which present cases with a well defined body of knowledge. In my own empirical research about general practitioners (GPs), I study the subjective handling of everyday work

situations with the use of a professional bio-medical knowledge base (Salling Olesen 2007). Sometimes this knowledge will allow the GP to understand and take action in a relatively unproblematic way; in other cases it does not provide a very helpful framework. There is an ongoing, dynamic tension between collective societal experience (bio-medical knowledge) and the clinical defining and problem-solving experience of the individual GP. The tension is handled by an individual who is subjectively committed by a strong professional obligation to omnipotent agency as well as by the fact of being bodily and socially present in relation to another human being with a problem, anxieties, etc. The institutional relation of the professional to the patient and to his profession requires that (s)he must be able to take action; it sometimes means that the situation must be defined (by bio-medical knowledge) in a way that allows action (for example, write a prescription). This may objectively be a more or less appropriate action. Any uncertainty on the side of the doctor may result in a defensive process, precluding doubts and dissatisfaction, but it may also lead to learning. On the one hand, the interpretation of the concrete situation is informed by his or her personal life experience and, on the other, although this is an extremely slow process, it will contribute, bit by bit, to his or her life experience as well as to the clinical collective experience. I think professions are exemplary cases of the interplay between societal knowledge and subjective learning in work situations, because professional knowledge is, as it were, societally assigned to the work situation, and the professional worker is subjectively involved in complex practices in which (s)he is responsible for a knowledge based agency. The notion of profession includes an identification of each individual practitioner with the knowledge, practice and norms of the profession. In the end, therefore, the subjective engagement of the individual practitioner will be morally and politically related to the quality of the work product or the service provided.

I think this point can be generalized to the situation of workers in general<sup>3</sup>. Of course, some situations may be less subjectively engaging, the relevant knowledge resources may be less well defined than in professions, and so on. General social knowledge can be very differentiated between individuals and groups, and this is essential for subjectivity (as in the example of gendered skills and knowledge); particularly in relation to work, we draw on more or less specific knowledge related to professions and occupations, acquired by education, training and previous work careers. But such differences only mean that the relation becomes empirically more complex while exposing the historical nature of what seems general.

Language use in social practice is crucial for a better understanding of the relation between subjective engagement and the societal meanings involved in this knowing and learning process. In line with Wittgenstein's concept of language games we can see the meanings of language as defined in social interaction, and being in continuous re-negotiation, containing the ongoing experience process of the participants in the language game, and their communication. From this perspective, the problem solving in a work situation is a combined application of the language resources to define, react to or deliberate the task, and an impulse that s/he can bring to the language game. We have already seen how this language use will involve not only the cognitive operation of the task and the situation, but a complex of emotional investments which are totally integrated with and influence the cognitive operation.

We can develop this understanding of language by looking at the social 'production' of the language user. The constitution of the individual subject is conditioned by his/her inclusion in the culture, and this means being a competent participant in its language games. Alfred Lorenzer's materialist theory of socialization (Lorenzer, 1972, 1977) offers an essential understanding of the link between individual subjectivity (the embodying of psyche) and culture and language (the codifying of knowledge and collective experience in disciplines or discourses): The biological development and the (necessary) social interaction around the needs of the child gradually adjoin in the production of individual subjectivity. The mother-child dyad is the first 'joint subject' for this production of patterns of practice. Later, through the gradual separation of the child from the mother, the interaction produces the *interaction patterns* of the child and its acquisition of language. Through the separation of and interaction with physical and social reality, the child gradually builds up its individual subjectivity. The individual experience of being-in-the-world is built around the relation between a sensual bodily and social experience and its representation in societal language use. Later learning will elaborate this relation and the subject will engage in new language games on the basis of this experience.

Combining these theoretical elements, we can develop a holistic endogenous framework of understanding subjectivity and learning. Learning can be seen as a situated adoption of language games, which enables signification of experiences of the learner subject. It should also be emphasized that language there is not just one discursive language. Any social symbol system which enables communication and shared meaning can be seen as a language. Different languages may have different features, and they may relate differently to societal institutions of communication and work on the one hand, and to the sensual and embodied experience of the language user on the other hand. Music or poetic languages alike have been seen as languages with a particular potential for communicating experiences that were not included/expressed in ordinary, discursive language. They can be seen as different language games within or outside ordinary language.

Learning and knowing is still about a subject relating both experimentally and through mediation to an objective reality, and taking place in a subject-object interaction. For critical theory, the specific objective reality of work and specific qualities of the work situation is a decisive condition of and object for learning; but access to reality is not simple and direct. Epistemologically the subject-object dialectic of learning theory is similar to the reflections of the social sciences which depart from naturalism without arriving at a relativistic constructivism. According to Adorno's criticism of positivist social science, the point of critical theory is to reconfigure the social 'fact' or action in its historical and subjective context, i.e. to understand it as dynamic rather than as a fixed, reified object (Adorno, 1969/76). This position reinstalls the historical and subjective nature of theory as an act of learning about reality (empirical research) and about the learner subject (the social sciences) since the experiencing subjects (the social scientist) are already also part of the social reality. Although we are not pursuing a knowledge sociology or meta-scientific question here, this is a useful framework for understanding learning as an experiencing process.

On an individual level, learning is based on the subjective dynamic of knowledge construction. In social practice, cognitive activity is conditioned in subjective dynamics – so for example in personal interaction in the clinic for the GP. The difficulty of expressing certain aspects of individual experience in the language games available in the situation is not always just an objective difficulty, it may often result from an editing influence of defensive patterns. In meaning making, there are more or less conscious individual experiences that are not represented at all in the language

game, but are still attached to it by individual participants, and even more experiences which are represented in the language game in a way which does not cover fully or very well the referential meaning or emotional quality they have for some participants. For this reason social meanings established in language use are always surrounded by a 'halo' of surplus meaning, which may be only partly social, referring to the amount of experience which is societally structured, but not culturally recognized and remaining at the boundary of the socialisable meaning. Resources for learning are to be found on and beyond the boundary of linguistic meaning making.

The fact that these experience building processes are partly conscious, and partly un- or pre-conscious, can be traced in language use, and it is therefore an essential reason for applying in-depth hermeneutic interpretations. We reconstruct and identify experiences of social practice residing in the discourses and images of an interview. Life stories and the very telling them are pieces of identity (re)construction, in which a (new) position is taken within the culturally possible interpretations of and positions in this context. At the same time we are attentive to ambiguities, ruptures and remarkable aspects of what is told and, to some extent, to the way of telling. The interpretation includes subjective meanings which are obvious and well defined in language games as well as those which are only vaguely or not at all articulated in the speech of the interview persons. Informed by theoretical concepts and context knowledge, these observations of the text may identify dynamics, uncertainties and ambivalent expressions. E.g. the materiality of work is reflected in the moorlands between bodily and conscious experiences and their linguistic articulation, between individual and cultural meanings. The multitude and transformations of cultural meanings (e.g. academic knowledge) are terrains in which the subjective process of meaning making can be articulated.

## **Conclusion**

Life history and biographical contexts of individual learning experiences provide a holistic and situated understanding of learning. But it may also leave an under-theorization of learning processes. The Life History project at Roskilde understands the subjective dynamics of experience and learning with inspiration from psychoanalytic interpretations of culture in a societal context. Using the context of work and learning in the workplace, I have identified the key concepts of subjectivity

and experience, and developed a framework of understanding knowledge, knowing and learning. A language-oriented theory of socialization connects ideas about the constitution of the individual learner subject with an outline of a general theory about the subjective dynamic of learning and cultural production.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Life History project at Roskilde University is a theoretical and methodological project. Based on a family of empirical projects, we explore conceptual frameworks of analysis and try out a variety of empirical methods for the production of data and interpretation (Salling Olesen 1996, 2004c; Weber, 1998, 2001, 2007; Salling Olesen and Weber, 2002; Weber and Dybbroe, 2003). Depending on the particular case, interpretations are thematically centred on **work** and/or **gender**, assuming that these themes organize (the most) important aspects of learning. Empirical studies of learning in a wide variety of groups and situations are available in the general references for the Life History project at [http://www.ruc.dk/paes/forskning/livslang/livshistorieprojektet/publikationer\\_1/](http://www.ruc.dk/paes/forskning/livslang/livshistorieprojektet/publikationer_1/). The project received funding from the Danish Research Councils' joint Welfare Research programme.

<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that this notion of experience has substantially different implications from that of Dewey (1916, 1934), especially in an Anglophone educational academic context. Dewey advanced experiential learning as a critical response to education being far from reality, normative and oppressive, which was an adequate critique in that context. But his notion of experience was quite rational(istic) and 'scientistic'.

<sup>3</sup> In analysing professions, I have worked out a heuristic model which directs attention to similar dynamics, and I think this model can be elaborated as a more general representation of work-related learning (Salling Olesen, 2007). The research on general practitioners has received support from the Danish Research Council of the Humanities and the Health Foundation of the Public Medical Insurance.

## Acknowledgements

This article has been published in almost the same form in the journal *Studies in the Education of Adults*, one of the most influential UK publications in adult education.

The journal can be ordered from the publisher at [subscriptions@niace.org.uk](mailto:subscriptions@niace.org.uk).

I want to thank the editor, professor Miriam Zukas, for the permission and for editorial comments. I want to acknowledge discussions with students, colleagues and guest professors in the Graduate School of Lifelong Learning, as well as a number of rather different communities of which I mention just a few: The ESREA Working-Life and Learning, the Biography and the Life History research networks, the Researching

Work and Learning conference and the International Research Group for Psychosocietal analysis have set the issues and challenges that this article is trying to respond to and have given inspiration, arguments and hints for which I am grateful,

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