Subjectivity and Work. Psycho-societal interpretation of life histories

Abstract:

This paper will invite you into a methodological and theoretical exercise, examining different ways of theorizing work identity or the subjective side of work. It has a political perspective to the general requirement for individuals to adapt flexibly to the changes of societal work, but the emphasis is on the methodological case about how subjectivities can be theorized and researched empirically in in relation to societal changes in work. A point of departure is taken in Richard Sennett’s critique of the consequences for socialisation and culture of the new capitalism. A life history interpretation of a case from research into engineers’ career and life experience is being presented, and it is argued that this analysis, by attending to specific circumstances and subjective ambivalences opens richer and more dynamic picture of subjectivity changes. The analytic approach draws on hermeneutic understanding of the specific subject(s), symbolic interactionism as well as a psychosocietal framework based in critical theory’s synthesis of Marxist and Psychoanalytical inspirations.

Key words: work identity, flexibilisation, engineering, life history, subjectivity

My paper is based on results and ideas from the Life History project at Roskilde University. It is a key point in our life history approach to learning that we need to study (learning) subjects in societal and historical context in order to understand learning processes across education and everyday life, and in order to really appreciate the potentials of learning. Learning theory and research methods must bridge the gap between the individual life history, with its conscious and un-conscious continuities and ruptures, and the societal history in which we all take part, or are “taken as parts”. Th paper will invite you into a methodological and theoretical exercise, examining different ways of theorizing work identity or the subjective side of work (Salling Olesen/Weber 2001) in the light of corresponding ways of interpreting concrete cases.

I shall take the point of departure in the relation between human subjectivity and the nature of work, and its historical dynamics. Since there seems to be some significant cross cultural differences in conceptualising subjectivity, I will make my point by comparing with one of the most important Anglo-American critical discourses, Richard Sennett.

Like many others I have read Sennetts critique of the new capitalism with great interest and enthusiasm, because he goes against the stream and hits a nerve with his book title The Corrosion of Character and its observations of the cultural side of the new capitalism. I have also read it with a little irritation which I think has to do with his way of being political, which is a very moralistic, appealing to the readers concern. I think a critical social analysis should look out for the ambiguity in the social object studied. On the one side it seems productive to assume that subjectivity is shaped by and an integral aspect of an epochal societal constitution of work, thereby establishing an epochal social character, on the other side the method must allow, or more precisely, must assist in understanding the complexity, the contradictions and the open ends in of subjective engagement in the societal, epochal order.

So the methodological exercise is about different discourses of critical thinking, and their relation to certain types of empirical studies. I am going to argue that Sennetts critique reproduces a dichotomized relation between societal objectivity, here work, and subjectivity, whereas a life history approach may reveal a more dynamic relation. In the main part of the paper I will compare two real cases. I will illustrate the perspectives by comparing an analysis example from Sennetts book (1998) with a case from our own life history research, inviting for a discussion about the interpretation of this case.

I might have confronted some scholars that I myself find much more problematic than Sennett. But Sennett is an important exemplar exactly because he takes a basic critical position and because he enters the discussion about work with a broad sociological and cultural outlook, and consequently he draws fundamental perspectives from his analysis. One might have compared Sennetts analysis with a continental European theorist like Oskar Negt, who in many aspects shares Sennetts diagnosis, but reaches distinctly different practical and political conclusions (Negt/Kluge, 1981). However, the main intention is to explore the methodological potential in a life history approach for establishing a critical position which is not dichotomizing. A deeper theoretical discussion about the implications for work identity and for theory of learning must be taken up at a different occasion.

**Flexibilisation and lifelong learning**

Industry and business managers proclaim that the development of work processes requires greater flexibility of manpower. Human labour is seen as a necessary resource but also a possible constraint to the development of work and economy. This ideological use of the notion flexibility not only successfully blurs different meanings of the word - on the one side the flexibilisation of availability in time (work hours) and space (mobility), on the other side a quality of labour (advanced way of working, attitude) as a main parameter of competition for the capitalist centres - but it also blurs and reduces the political and dynamic relation between learning and work into a one-sided adaptation. Capital seems to take care of historical development, where as life histories are seen as a more or less successful adaptation processes, in which the parameter for success is *flexibility.*

In this discourse there is little space for and even less appreciation of the work experience and concrete capacity of human labour. Competence is abstracted from its context and developed, creativity is increasingly specialised and put into laboratory ghettoes, far from the ordinary workplace. The notion of flexibilisation is so powerful that it is even echoed in critical discourses on work, at least as a common denominator for very different progressive ideas about a future development of work, some mainly oriented towards industrial competitiveness, some mainly oriented towards humanisation of work. And the other side, the labour movement, trade unions, and professions are (most often) stuck in a discussion between *resistance* (preserving jobs, content of work, social regulation) and *unconditioned acceptance* of the role of labour as mouldable object for flexibilisation. On this background it appears to be an evident challenge for research into learning and work to conceptualise and identify the dialectic between the objective work context with its external imperatives and the subjective participation of living workers. We must look out for the experiental and visionary endeavour, which might be characterized as *inclined flexibility*. With inclined flexibility I mean an openness and realistic sensitivity to the demands and challenges of work, however performed by a concrete person which has his/her own subjective orientation and may reform it during the process. Flexibility is an indispensable aspect of individual as well as collective self-regulation capacity, a notion of the ability to learn and develop new aspirations in experiental processes.

On one level it is a matter of (not) recognizing subjective contributions of workers to the work process and the development of work, as well as the potentials for learning within the work process. On another level it is a matter of how the history of work influences culture and identities - and eventually the reflective potential of the societally produced subject to imagine and create a new reality.

Richard Sennett represents one of the most important critical discourses on the development of capitalist work life and its cultural implications. I do not know if Richard Sennett will accept the attribution conservative but he presents an analysis of declining personal integrity, from the worker generation with a firm set of values and a strong identification with a specific job and specific qualities of this job to a new yuppie generation who have flexible attitudes, and have no specific identification with any specific job. He makes a general point of this in his book title: *The corrosion of character* (1998)*.*

Sennett observes a number of examples of changing personal relation to work, and relates it broadly to a cultural shift and specifically to the real changes taking place in the new capitalism. The line of argument is that the shifts in work life lead to an erosion on a personal and cultural level. The request of industry for identity-less human beings, people that can be moulded easily and frequently, in Sennetts analysis goes with the assumption about the decline of collectivistic attitudes in working class by an individualisation process: People becoming less involved in each other. More abstract brains, less emotions and bonds to locality, less solidarity and collective responsibility. He gives a very bleak picture in which aspects of learning and competence building in the new types of work seem almost entirely absent.

The key issue is the relation between the way in which the societal development of work might influence workers everyday life and subjectivity, and the way in which subjective articulation and learning may result in collective experience and institution building.

In a General Qualification research project about the nature of new requirements on Workers qualifications, in order to develop vocational education and training, we tried to establish a conceptual framework for the relations between work and learning as a subjective process (Salling Olesen 1996). A model was designed which enabled a mapping of the levels of subjective engagement in qualitative changes of work, and their interrelation with other areas of life. This model suggests that this engagement in work, including the permanent requirement for flexible adaptation, actually induce more complex learning processes, which interrelate with a process of personal development and experience building, connected by what we with some reservations called an identity process. Conversely these learning processes might also result in new levels and new ways of active participation. The model was a heuristic one, meant to overcome the one-sided simplicity, which did at that time rule the social technology of continuing education planning, and today also the management discourse of human resources. I think this was quite productive in the context.

What we did not quite succeed was to theorize how the subject, the living worker, is shaped in a historical process in which work plays a significant but not exclusive role. The relation between man and work was reversed as compared with prevailing management and policy discourses, but at the cost that man in this case appeared as a rather abstract learning subject, and the individual and local learning processes cut off from societal process of democratisation and struggle for social interests, as some critiques emphasized (Aagaard Nielsen, 1997).

As a consequence of the unresolved dichotomy the concept of general qualification may tend to support wishful assumptions of capital driven humanisation of work. This obvious tendency has often been pointed out, in spite of the fact that we set out to explore the conditions for a human learning driven transformation of work - related to a critique of capitalism as such.

In the first place I just want to acknowledge that the need for a methodological discussion is also inherent in our own research. Having done that then, the question is how we can discover the material dialectic rather than constructing an idealistic or moralistic dichotomy.

 Sennett’s point goes in the opposite direction: Thereality in the new capitalism does not facilitate learning. Flexibilizing of the individual person is a permanent adaptation and identification with an accelerating change process, which in reality does represent an exaggerated demand on most people. The human competence of adaptation is overloaded by economic, technological and organisational dynamics. Imagination and creativity are pre-structured by them, and the self- regulating dialectic between experience, experiment and imagination of alternatives in a specific local context may tend to decline into sheer resistance or survival strategies.

Still, this is not the whole story, and may be not even the most important.In the Life History project we examine the ambiguities in the subjective experience of work - both the way in which people encounter changes taking place on their work place and the learning potentials in work as such - in the context of life experience. We look for the ways in which human flexibility encompasses formulation and realisation of subjective wishes and needs, i.e. how the adaption and reflective experience building are integrated in a specific subjective perspective. The interesting question about learning and work is how open and self-determined learning processes take place in specific situations, and we analyse how specific subjects, meeting new and changing phenomena and social practices, make meaning of them on the background of their previous life experiences, and also redefine themselves cognitively and emotionally. Learning has an important aspect of flexibilisation, but it is not the flexibilisation of unlimited plasticity in which the human labour is just mouldable to work requirements.

The methodological challenge is to catch the actual learning processes and the ambiguities in defence reactions instead of confirming the difficulty. We seek the inclinations within the flexibility. By coincidence we have an empirical case which allows for some form of comparison with Sennett’s position from a study on engineers relation to engineering education and work[[1]](#endnote-1). Engineers are professionals, they are identified with their occupation and competences, but they are also in a profession which is very directly exposed to societal shifts and dynamics. The following two sections are intended to give brief presentations of cases and interpretations in order to enable a discussion of the implications of the two respective approaches: Theorizing and Methodology.

**Sennetts Engineers**

Sennetts book does not provide much systematical information about the empirical background of his observations. The bits and pieces have the form of anecdotes, already interpreted and presented as examples for general trends and characteristics, so it is not possible to make direct discussion of this interpretation. We will rather have to relate to the overall argument, in order to understand how he interprets the exemplary cases that he actually presents. His account of observations raises several questions as to the selection of cases and their context, which will not be taken up right now, but should be kept in mind:

In which *sense* is the observation of the corrosion of character empirically evidenced? To which *extent* is it true/valid? - is it taking place for everyone, for many, or for those who are involved in a specific societal sub-domain? How can we empirically study and validate the observation?

What is the role of *work process* quality in this development? Are changes in workers identity caused by the work process, by societal relations at large, or is it informed by other factors? In either case, how uniform is the role of work process quality?

The questions that will be taken up are related to the subjective side of this process: What is the mechanism of detachment from work? Is it one of emotional and social blunting? Does it mean overcoming cognitive/knowledge based rigidities?

One of Sennetts 3-4 examples is a case on seven engineers, who were fired from the IBM when technology moved from mainframe computers to PC based structures. They also stand out as victims of the new capitalism who somehow preserve their human integrity. I bring a few quotes which present some clues:

...the engineers attempt to make sense of what had happened fell roughly into three stages. When I entered the discussions the men felt themselves passive victims of the corporation. But by the time the discussions came to a conclusion the dismissed employees had switched focus to their own behaviour (pg 124). In the meantime they had passed a phase where they blamed foreign influence in the form of globalized labour market and a Jewish manager (pg 127).

As science engineers the programmers believed in the virtues of technological developments like digital global communication. They also acknowledged the quality of the work coming from India (pg 128) - we love our work - the programmers began to speak about what they personally could and should have done earlier in their own careers in order to prevent their present plight...Matters of personal will and choice, professional standards, narratives of work, all emerged - save that the theme of this career discourse was failure rather than mastery...The IBM men began to blame themselves for having been too company dependent....They should have become entrepeneurs like kids in Silicon Valley, the home of small technology start-ups (pg 129).

And this last interpretation, Ive noticed, has coincided with the change in my neighbours behaviour in the community. Formerly town aldermen and school board members, they have dropped out from pursuing these offices. They arent afraid of holding up their heads...Theyve just lost interest in civic affairs. The one community engagement the men do keep up, indeed pursue with ever greater vigour, is membership in and stewardship of their local churches...The youngest, Paul, told me, When I was born again in Christ, I became more accepting, less striving. If my neighbours have taken responsibility for their life histories, that ethical act has taken their conduct in a particular direction; they have turned inward (pg 130)

Sennetts analysis of the moral erosion is important and worth considering. To a large extent I can endorse the criticism and the warnings - and even the almost apocalyptic last sentences of the book: What political programs follow from those inner needs, I simply dont know. But I do know a regime which provides human beings with no deep reasons to care about one other cannot long preserve its legitimacy (p148)

However I would argue that it easily turns into moralism instead of opening possible alternative ways of dealing with the contradictions of the new capitalism. In another important passage he is aware of the problem about the risk to become hermetic:

In drawing this picture I am well aware it risks, despite all qualifications, appearing as a contrast between the before, which was better, and now which is worse. None of us could desire to return to the security of Enricos or the Greek bakers generation...The problem we confront is how to organize our life histories now, in a capitalism which disposes us to drift.

The dilemma of how to organize a life narrative is partly clarified by probing how, in todayss capitalism, people cope with the future (Sennett1998, p 117).

This passage leads to the chapter about the redundant engineers. They are victims of the new capitalism, and they are in the context of the book the most explicit examples of a learning process. I think the not very biased selection of quotes enlightens how they learn by restoring their original character, but also that this takes them into a political dead end. They should have been professionally bright enough to anticipate the development of the computer industry. No wonder they turn to the church! Also Rose, a successful female in small business woman, and others learn in the sense of taking conscious consequences and to some extent reflect on new capitalism. But it seems from the language use/rhetoric that the process of the engineers is held in high esteem by Sennett. May be he is just pointing out that there is no way of being political in new capitalism except turn inward into (individual) moralism. I am not going deeper into this question by now, but I want to illustrate a different approach - leading to some preliminary conclusions about the interrelation between methodology, theory and political implications.

**Engineering as a Life history**: **Christian**

Christian has a quite typical engineers career as a combined operational manager and works engineer in one, and is now by 57 years of age unemployed after the plant has closed. But his story is also an unusual personalization of historical decline. Christian is the son of a gründer entrepeneur, i.e. a craftsman who established an industry from scratch. Christian more or less takes over the profession as well as the fate of the family industry. He grew up in an upcoming but wealthy family, where children were supposed to be seen but not heard. He would have liked to study history, but was easily convinced that engineering was more secure in terms of earning a living. He graduated as a production engineer and worked in a shipyard a few years as a time study engineer.

Christian married, had two children and entered into the family company, which by some business arrangement after his father had died, became a joint-stock company controlled by the former deputy of his father. So he is de facto an employee, though becoming the manager of a cast iron plant.

Meanwhile Christian’s wife died young, and he became a single father - which was unusual at the time, and difficult to comply with his work situation. Remaining in the family company, doing his well-paid managerial job in stable conditions became a way of surviving in this situation. He also tells with joy and identification about the multi-faceted job of taking the all-embracing role as personnel manager, quality manager and machinery tinker in a small plant. But Danish cast iron production goes down with shipbuilding in a competitive market - a few companies develop new technology and survive - Christians plant does neither - he has the nasty task of closing it down and having the machinery cut into scrap. Now he is unemployed - does not really see a possible future in work - he is behind with IT - his real strength would be in running a small plant - but this is, as he sees it, depending on experience and specific knowledge, so his chances are few:

 *Well, I do think it is late in life to learn something new or a whole new process, but I assume it is possible. I do know a good deal about joiners machinery* (pg 28)[[2]](#endnote-2).

**A losers story?**

Christian is telling a story of personal decline. He did not inherit family wealth, only the declining fate.

He does not complain very much about the manouevre that made him not co-owner but employee, but rather sees the fact that it was convenient to maintain the security in the family company, when his wife died and he was alone with the children.

*...there was nothing missing in the appearances/frameworks* *[in the parents home]. They were quite luxurious...*

*Yes, much has changed since that time. That is for sure (pg 3)*

*...I never inherited anything, but that doesnt matter now. Now there is, finally there is no more...He got the A-shares. Because at that time he was quite indispensable, thats how it is. Well, thats just history (pg 5)*

*...It was all prepared for. Well obviously it did not run smoothly, I must say...I couldnt continue that life at all. So it became this house - everything was in a way set up for something great...then only a couple of years passed, then my wife died, then I sat alone with two children...So I had the blessings of them all for myself. That is one of the reasons that I hang on in the company, you see...*

He did not change career at the time he could have done it. He lived 25 years with the foundry, and went down with it, which could have been blamed on this tragic family history, but he does not seem to regret that he did not. Things just happened to Christian.

Sometimes he seems to see his decline as a collective fate. He tells his story with much sorrow, and with a sober understanding of some causes: the industrial development in 3rd world countries (especially India) only leaves a niche for specialized and very high quality production in Denmark - a few other companies managed to survive because they were better in developing technology, they were/became big enough to buy the right equipment. However he also frequently refers with much bitterness to the difficult general climate for industry. This is a usual public discourse of complaint in small enterprises.

But there is also an other type of argument that pops up over and over in the interview, as an obvious outlet of aggression: the environmental demands set by government sucked up all possible surplus that could have been used for new investments. He is justifying retrospectively the polluting way people have handled chemicals at the time and with their knowledge, and he is blaming the unlucky fate to be a traditional foundry manager in the country where regulations come earlier than in the rest of the world. At the same time he describes in detail what an unpleasant environment a foundry is, and the very big environmental problems foundries have left behind (leaving heavy metals and chemical soils from the casting forms behind, Transcript pg 40f)). He is not presenting a technical argument against environmental policies, and he would even like to work as an environment controller (Transcript pg 37).

The sorrow seems to accompany the acceptance and understanding (taking on the fate), whereas the aggressions to environmental policy reveal a desire to look out for an external explanation for the failure.

**Is Christian an engineer?**

Christian is telling a story about the decline of a specific type of engineer, with which he identifies strongly, in a form which denies some other aspects of engineering which might have led to another story, provided he had taken the challenges to learn and change. His story is told in retrospect from the position of actually being unemployed and probably in a difficult job situation. But does he identify himself as an engineer?

A remarkable proportion of the interviewed engineers in our sample related in different ways to the difficulty of identifying proper engineering work in their job (Buch, 1999, Salling Olesen, 2002), but it may be questioned what an engineer really is. From other parts of the research project we know that engineering is profession in rapid change, and developing in quite diverse directions (reported only in Danish and in a more popular form, IDA 2000). A recent study in quite another historical situation, dealing with software engineering in China shows how technological changes, industrial structure, and culturally based career patterns leave us with quite a wide and changing variation in the very definition of engineering (Yang, 2011). Within this changing and diverse picture Christian has made one of the typical engineer careers

Is Christian *identifying himself* as an engineer? Not unambiguously:

*...I am born to become engineer, in the good old fashioned way that my father was a craftsman, and his father was a worker I assume. And that is how it must be, there must be some career improvements. So I don´t think we ever talked about any other options than I should become an engineer in my child home..*(Transscript pg 1)

*...So the only way to move upwards in career.... was to become an engineer. I would say, I rather bought the prestige embedded in it than...[the technical content] ...*..*In many ways I might just as well have been trained as a moulder, you see. It was not the right ambition in the family. Then you should rather be - there must be some progress in each generation. Until everything...When I started in the shipyard (engineering) was the only way to get, shall we say the prestige, which was necessary to get influence, which was by being an engineer* (Transscr. pg 20)*.*

Apparently he does not see his work as based on engineering - say that he actually used some of the skills from the education - he seems to define the real engineering by the technical side of it. He says:

 *...so, casting is more of a craft than it is engineering science, unless you run a big enterprise with much technology, if you run a small foundry, then it is mostly a question of knowhow, thats to say, experience. For instance.... about the raw materials you use...in the old days you would think it was superstition. Then, now we have some reports we read and use, you know. It has worked always, it is not more mystic than that. Then it is true, if you want to be upfront with technology like some foundries, then you need to include engineering science. Then we are talking about big foundries, which master a whole lot, you see.* (Transcription pg 15)

In other passages the connection of big foundries - high tech does not seem to have anything to do with engineering - and least of all himself: He mentions successful colleagues in foundries which have become more technical without their managers being engineers:

*Because it is very exaggerated - such a company which I came to manage. Well, it could have gone down another road, so that it had become more technical. I can see that most people who run a foundry today, they have been inherited for generations. Quite old companies. They are typically skilled moulders and have been in a master training and ...then entered the company. Almost none of them are engineers. And they survive...* (Transscr 20-21).

Christian mainly sticks to his previous explanation, that market and economy are decisive factors for success or failure. Some reflections here and there however suggest that engineering science might become relevant. He knows (at least retrospectively) some situations where technical skills and developments might have been important, but he did not use this knowledge at the time.

But then may be it would not be Christian? The option is mentioned in a very hypothetical way, whereas his identification with the small, craft based, declining foundry is clear and obvious:

*No, I was part of it. It was a depressing process. All what I had built in the 70ies, I have been involved in taking down during the last 6 months...cutting it into scrap iron...You dont get happy from that...It is also a disadvantage to have been the same place all your life. It doesnt sell very well* (pg 28)

*I cant sell my foundry career for having achieved this and that. I kept it alive in 29 years. I think that is an achievement, if you have seen how old it was...*(pg 31)

and with the job as a plant manager as well:

*...I am geared to handle everyday life in a small enterprise with the problems it raises. Yes, the whole horizon from being a spiritual adviser to the task of making an old scrap machine which is broke work again (Transcription pg 27) - Well, I do think it is late in life to learn something new or a whole new process, but I assume it is possible. I do know a good deal about joiners machinery* (pg 28).

**Turning points in life and career**

He also did not try out any individual career alternatives. We cannot know much about what he learned and how he developed in the context, but we can see now that he tells a story of collective fate where he did not and could not have acted differently. The idea that his job was not real engineering may have been less clear at the time than now in the story. But it seems connected with a deep ambivalence related to both his social origin and the choices made - see the quotations above, and the following:

*...My mother was very demanding, so I would not call it light cleaning work, hysterical cleaning, I would say..*(pg 6)

He realizes that in order to maintain his engineering qualification and remain in trade he should have made a shift when the decline of the family firm started. But that was exactly at the time where his wife died:

*So I had the blessings of them all for myself. That is one of the reasons that I hang on in the company, you see...well, at that time it was unthinkable that you would leave at 17.00 in order to pick up a child, or even before 17.00. They would have dropped dead laughing, if you had said so...That is the reason I stayed. Because at that time I realized - it became gradually clear to me, that there would be something, if the company shrunk and we were two to share, I mean my owner and me...it went OK. But I did actually feel like to try something else, but I was not very mobile at that time, one can state that. There I may feel grateful I had that job...*(pg 10-11)

He describes it very much as a matter of convenience. But actually he made an unusual decision, and used his social position to defend it (by keeping social authorities away from inspecting the children taking care of themselves). He has at a crucial point - at least as it seems now - chosen to be a lonely father in a male profession.

In the interview he at least two times returns to an alternative life prospect: He plays with an alternative dream, which he has had before starting the engineering study. At the time he dropped it readily because it wouldnt make a living - now it comes up:

*I am very interested in history, especially the viking period. I envy a man called...Petersen who was also an engineer. He graduated…and diving for wrecked viking ships, and became - I do not know whether he has been director in Roskilde [probably the Viking Ship Museum/HSO], but he had something at some time. This must be a dream job, but there is only one of that kind, that is how it is. You must also be careful not to destroy your real burning interests where you work...if it suddenly becomes a burdening routine* (Transcript pg 26).

So why did he not become a historian:

*Boys were technicians, women were into language at that time, thats how it must be. There were not many variations...when I had aired my inclination to read classics and history and things like that - it was incredible, so, it became only hobby or interests...*

Int*: How did you air it?*

*Well I suggested I might like to be educated in such things. They might also be useful in some way.*

Int*: To your parents?*

*Yes, yes. It was not appreciated, I have to say...- you cannot live from that, it is very funny but....Well they sold the message, I may say (pg 9)*

He seems to have been easily convinced - to have taken the view of his parents without protesting. We may consider if he ever articulated this vision between now and then. It does not seem to preoccupy him as a real identification or a practical plan. May be actually the interview situation - with two people coming from another reality, representing something like the alternative life he once aired, trigger this remembrance off?

**Future - Alternative visions?**

His professional prospect are down to the level of any job which can use his plant manager skills, and which is not socially degrading:

 *I do know a good deal about joiners machinery* (pg 28).

His real present enthusiasm is with boats and sailing, and the nearby Marina seems to organize his community relations. He has a girlfriend - since 6 years - a teacher, living in the country side, and Christian is considering to move to her house, realizing that it is practically more easy to move with his boat, than she having long distance to work. This seems the closest to painting a future vision - to connect this new marriage and the boat marina.

*Down to the harbour, where I have the boat, the most important thing in my life, you see, of material goods at least, the rest is unimportant. But - my children, I havent explained that, they both live abroad. So I just have the blessing of an old mother and then there is a cut, nobody who takes care of me* (pg 31)

The last sentence clearly expresses resignation about his relation to his children. His two children live in North America, his daughter making career, and his son, much to his dissatisfaction, considering to buy a boat and sail round the world instead of doing his IT career. The way his story deals with the children is remarkable - in spite of the circumstance that the interview was defined in a professional context.

Apart from the very modest assignment of importance to their role in his career, and the fact they had to look after themselves in childhood, he now tells that they live abroad, and he does not see them often. In one way they are out of the story. On the other side he has several comments about his son:

*My son, this is already a little worse. Unfortunately he is nourished with sailing...That is, thats not so nice* (pg 42).

*he was extremely bright. But he spends most of his time on realizing himself, I would say. While I desperately try to make insurances for all the risks that he has over there, with big costs , you know. You should not get ill in USA. Yes, [now remembering], it is cryptography that he studies. So that nobody can hack his things, you know.* (Transcript pg 42-43)

*. ..I clapped my hands, when I heard it. I thought he would come to Denmark, and establish an enterprise, where he could offer his services to the military and such, which must not be hacked (pg 43)*

 *... was happy with this, if he had not got these ideas to buy a boat for the money his old dad saved for his studies...he believes he can sail to a small pacific island and study the internet from there with his 12 volt computer...he has breathed polyester from he was small. That is for sure. But he could just have completed a degree before started it* (pg 43)

Annoyed dad! Almost aggressive - but also a little proud? - the polyester is the material for building and repairing boats. We can see in some other interviews engineers who are very similar to Christians son, and Christian also has some understanding. Especially in one passage it becomes very clear that he delegates his own more or less identified unlived life on his son:

*...Thank God young people nowadays do what they like, dont they, at this is really reasonable, seen in that way. So they dont regret it afterwards...But I must admit my force was in history and ancient classic arts first of all, but I realized this was not exactly a place where you could live decently, there were not many museum positions* (pg 2)

The son will dare to go his own ways, he will unite what in Christians present life seems to be object of primary identification, the sailing, with a profession (he will use his computer skills to sail, communicate, and become an engineer of a new type (hopefully).

**Preliminary conclusion of the interpretation**

Christian may be seen as a personification of a development in engineering, which lies behind the overall trend we found in our study, a great confusion in the professional identity: Where did real engineering go? Sennett paints a wider picture of the transformation of capitalism. He suggests that the objective basis of identification with work and professional competence is being ruined on the whole. In a wider context – which is not his mission – it would probably suggest that professions in the classical sense – people with a specific knowledge based occupation and work identity – will be erased. In Christian’s story “the greater history” appears mainly as inevitable trajectories, which he even now with the historical and personal decline largely endorses. But it more or less explicitly eludes the ways in which they have been contradictory at the time. In a life history perspective the small part of the industrial decline that he has performed is not altogether inevitable – it is very specifically related to a globalization on a business area – and it is also not altoghether negative – although it is for himself.

The analysis above suggests that Christians professional identity is closely linked with his social and personal life - his family background, his gender socialisation in the first place, but later also his family history. The early death of his wife on one hand seems to impede any professional development, but in context represents a gender experiment. Or may be it protects Christian from taking risks? We cannot - indeed not at this stage of analysis - be very certain about the impact of different aspects, but we have seen some of the complexities and the subjective investments in the choices made - or not made. Further it seems that we have discovered submerged life prospects and perspectives that did hardly appear in the conversation, and which may hardly have been very conscious in Christian’s life in the meantime - the alternative career.

We can see - in spite of the almost absent narration about the children and the very resignated status he makes - that especially the son is delegated to do what Christian never did himself, also in the sense of technology and knowledge Although ambivalent, and if not entirely conscious, he projects a new professional identity which encompasses both some of his own unlived lives and the historical shifts that made himself redundant on the – proud! - imagination of his son as a representative of a new relation to technology and work.

An empirical life history approach offers a richer account of the societal dimension of this story than just a unison transformation. The analysis also suggests the need for theorizing the subjective side of work in a broader way which takes into account the ambivalences and hidden identifications involved in defining professional and work related identities. The life history approach works with a notion of a contradictory and dynamic identity process, in which the individual - and in some respects also collectives - revise emotional and cognitive configurations. In this framework it is self evident that subjectivity is shaped by previous and present social reality, including work, but not once and for ever. The learning of the individual is embedded in the interrelation between changing reality, social (cultural) discourses, and personal practice and consciousness (Salling Olesen 2007; 2010). Even from the brief extracts quoted here it is obviously that Christian, in spite of his feeling of fate, is also ambivalent and emotional blaming it on himself and on coincidental “enemy images” like the environmental regulations almost in the same sentence. He acknowledges that “dying with the industry” of iron casting was also something he liked – taking all the technical and social and practical tasks of being the manager in a small plant – and he realizes that it was his ticket to be a single parent – in a time where men were not expected to have a career and look after two children at the same time. And actually the strongest example of ambivalence seems to be related to his son as a professional follower – disappointing but also object of a hopeful projection for a new way of following your desires and becoming a professional in the same life career.

These ambiguities and ambivalences are opened by an empirical approach which seeks to understand protagonists in a hermeneutic sense at the same time as theorizing them as exemplars of a psycho-societal history, directing the attention to the macro-historical transformations as well as to the micro-level local and subjective meanings.

Richard Sennett does not seem to recognise such promising opportunities for learning and active engagement of the workers in the future of new capitalism, . They are just floating with a stream. Those who really reflect and learn are those whose character remains solid and in-corrupted. But by scrolling all other aspects than the epochal shift in work and its subjective outcome he is also reducing not only complexity but also the attention to the open and hidden action perspectives and learning potentials of the protagonists.

I am sure this is all digested in Richard Sennet’s critique of the new capitalism. But it might also indicate a question about theorizing subjectivity, and the implications for political practice. In the case with the engineers to it seems there is a kind of moralistic (religious) reconciliation at the same time as blaming one self for not having shaped the societal development properly.

Sennetts main concept of the subject, the notion of character, has some similarity with what other theories call identity, and some of the same problems, namely the tendency to idealize it as conscious subjective relation to a given social reality, establishing a stable treaty between the individual psyche and a given social . On the one hand the character seems to be shaped overwhelmingly by work - which I think is reasonable, but oversimplified - but the dichotomy between learning subject (character) and societal context (work) is reproduced by the way in which character becomes subjectively significant. It then appears to be a personality trait once is has been imprinted. And the stability of this personality trait in the end turns into an idealised integrity of the person.

I tend so see an inner correlation between this dichotomy and the political moralism. If this is true it has interesting perspectives for a broader discussion of Sennetts notion of subjectivity and its dependency on liberal philosopy. The political dead end in Sennets critique of new capitalism could be seen as a historical comment to the the problems Charles Taylor attempt to define and overcome philosophically (1989) - but Taylors search for the sources of the self could also be seen as the challenge to study people and processes with an attention to the ways in which they have resources and learning potentials for something else than just being a character.

This is where a critically informed empirical approach comes in. Hope must be recognised in context We think that the methodological tools can be inspired very much from Marxist and a sociocultural adaptation of Psychoanalytical interpretation methods – we call it an in-depth hermeneutic or a communicative hermeneutic (a special issue of Forum for Qualitative Studies in 2012 will introduce this approach further – Salling Olesen, 2012).In an interesting footnote Berger&Luckmann (1966) quite fiercely ban the attempts to synthesize marxism and psychoanalysis with the reason that their epistemological interest are opposite to each other and opposite to a democratic, emancipatory perspective of critical social theory.

‘It is a rather ironic fact that neo-Marxist theorists have recently been seeking contact with Freud’ian psychology (which is fundamentally incompatible with anthropological assumptions of Marxism) without paying attention to Mead’ian theory of the dialectic between society and individual, which to a much higher degree would be in accordance with their own method’ (re-translation from Danish, 1979, p226).

This footnote is interesting because B&L’s book (questionably, I think) later have become seen by social constructivists as the first cornerstone work in social constructivism. My thesis is that this footnote is a demarcation of a fundamental difference in the conceptions of subjectivity between a (mainly) continental European tradition and a (mainly) North American tradition which is becoming hegemonic in the globalizing Anglophone scientific landscape.

We have been inspired by ideas from both pragmatism (using autobiographical methods in the version which has been among others promoted by Peter Alheit and others) and from German Critical theory which Berger&Luckmann criticizes so fiercely (Salling Olesen 2004; 2010; 2011).

The point about Mead is beyond dispute. But it can also be seen - without psychoanalyzing the strong defence of disciplinary boundaries and B&L’s distance to psychoanalysis - that their theory refers to an anthropological constant: The subject in history (and there is actually a social history in B&L’s theory - remains conceived as a voluntaristic individual. In B&L’s own handling there is a distinction between sociology and psychology, and they pay respect to disciplinary boundaries - in accordance with the absence of meta-scientific pretention in their constructivism. But this may exactly be the ironic point: Because they do not want to enter the slide of constructivism, they may avoid the meta-scientific questions that they have later been accredited the paternity to, and so they have to defend the disciplinary boundaries. Which seems to entail the free, individual subject as the agent in social interaction. We may assume that this is an interesting example of the claim that knowledge is always known by *somebody* in *a specific context* - constructivism is entirely different for B&L and for post structural feminists.

But this is a much more comprehensive story which can be taken up at another occasion.

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1. **Notes**

. This study was carried out in collaboration with the Danish Union of Engineers (IDA). The project dealt with the labour market of engineering, and with engineers subjective recognition pf their lives, their educational and job career, and their life perspectives. 17 individual life history interviews have been conducted. Most interviews were taken by Tania Christensen, and basically processed in collaboration with Vibeke Andersen, Anders Buch and Henning Salling Olesen. Some of the Engineers are portrayed in Christensen/Buch(1999). See also previous paper presented in the ESREA reseach network on Adult Education and the Labour Market IV (Buch, 1999), and elsewhere (Salling Olesen 2000, 2001, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Paging in the following quotations refers to Danish transscript of interview (50 pages), each piece translated by the author [↑](#endnote-ref-2)