**LIFE HISTORY APPROACH.**

**BIOGRAPHIES AND PSYCHO-SOCIETAL INTERPRETATION**

**A PROBLEM-ORIENTED METHODOLOGY DEVELOPMENT**  
This article summarizes experiences of a research strategy within adult education and lifelong learning. It focuses on adults’ *life histories* and their *subjective experience* of them as an empirical and theoretical framework for an understanding of their educational career and the dynamics in their learning processes. It is rooted in the theoretical and empirical research as well as social and political engagement of an interdisciplinary research group at Roskilde University DK. We have since 1970es in many concrete forms been preoccupied with the dependence and impact on learners’ social and cultural background of learning processes. Although emerging from quite specific education research questions it soon also involved the wider theoretical issue of the subjective dimensions in societal dynamic. I shall give just a couple of examples.

Firstly, there was a critical reflection on the socio-educational fact that education systems with egalitarian objectives have continued to reproduce class and gender differences - which is a central political issue in social welfare societies – in other more heterogenous societies ethnicity and religion might have been added. Historically it related to a phase of modernisation in which formal education played an increasing role in all aspects of social life: In the access to the labour market and professional careers, in the distribution of wealth and social priviliges – and as a necessary tool to navigate in everyday life. Yet it appeared that in societies which made great effort to expand formal education, to open access to all children and youngsters, and even to some extent provide compensating pathways for adults the result was a general increase in formal education level at the same time as patterns of social class and gender remained (ref Hansen….). In a more or less positivist educational sociology this issue was initially conceptualized as an effect of external *barriers* that limit certain subjects’ optimization of their social situation In the first place this explanation precluded any recognition of a differentiated subjective factor.The following introduction of a concept such as *cultural* barriers made it quite clear that a dichotomous explanatory model was unproductive. In order to explain individual careers and to understand the complex role of education in simultaneous social change and social reproduction we need not only to understand the differences in individual subjective orientations in a given objective societal environment but also to understand the ambiguities an inner dynamics of the subjects themselves We found the key to overcoming the dichotomy in a socialization theoretical understanding of the formation of subjectivity.

Secondly, we were increasingly involved in adult educational research and development. Some activities related to adult education with strong political engagement in trade unions and social movements. And some adult education and training was narrowly connected with labour market and work activities. Both types of adult learning could be seen as successful on the backdrop that substantial part of adults do not participate in any type of educational activities, and have strong resistance against doing so.

For adults living a “normal” life and participating voluntarily in education, teaching practices must obviously respond to their experiential background and everyday social life. But there were equally obviously striking differences in adult education in how to understand this experiential background. Learning in cultural or political organisations are defined by the activity itself, and may not at all be distinguished as learning – the learning is driven by the learners’ interest in the cause of the activity, contributing to the formation of collective experience - the learners are considered as political or cultural subjects. Opposite, most vocational education involves a more school like organisation with a prescribed curriculum defined by the needs in relation to a specific work process, and the learning taking place contributes to their competence and employability in relation to this work process - learners are seen as a labour force with only instrumental learning interests. But also this type of adult learning seems to engage adult learners, and paradoxically often some of those who seem most sceptic to education.

The challenge of adult education as a scientific reflection was therefore to understand how adult learning interests (and frequently also the lack of them) in an everyday life context could be conceptualized as genuine and relevant subjective articulations, informed by their (different) social situations. It became obvious that the technical question about how teaching could engage the life experiences of adult learners could only be handled by examining *whether* and how (adult) education could *contribute to* *learners’ experiential processes* (Salling Olesen 1989).

These (and other) issues came together in an theoretical effort to develop a specific concept of experience which understands connections between objective life courses (marked as they are by biology and society), the culture- and everyday life-oriented subjective interpretations of these, and the importance of these experiences for both *educational choice and career* and *learning processes as individual life history-based interactions with societal culture* in the broadest sense. Against this background, we viewed *empirical* research on individual life histories as a way to develop a new, interdisciplinary *theory* of education.

However, little funding was available for critical empirical social science in the waste land between conservative academia and theory-sceptical practitioners in community education, business, and also trade unions. Not until the 1980s did some opportunities arise in connection with the development and evaluation of curricula and teaching related to work and the labour market, and also in the trade union representative training. IN a number of projects, we succeeded in convincing external partners (government agencies, trade unions, major companies) that a qualitative study focused on participants’ life histories and lifeworlds was an important element of the project design, often combined with more traditional methods such as observations, questionnaires, etc. Our argument was simple: adults’ learning processes are primarily linked to their life experiences and general life situation. Therefore, a valid understanding of the driving forces in educational activity and the effects of education would necessitate a study of learning processes and the subjective meaning of teaching in the context of learners’ life histories. Then followed many and varied studies of people who on their own initiative, encouraged by their institution or downwright forced by their social situation participated in learning and education in the light of crises and upheavals, especially in their work and career (Salling Olesen 1994; Salling Olesen 1996; Weber 1995; Weber 2010a; Weber 2007; Salling Olesen & Weber 2002; Dybbroe 2002; Dybbroe 2012; Larsen et al. 1998)   
  
The specific methodology chosen for the various projects arose as a result of a political-practical dialogue on the pertinence of allowing learners to narrate, giving their own rationale for a study of their educational participation and how their learning processes were embedded in their life historical process in relation to other factors. The common starting point was solidarity with the learners, and the perception that the researchers should help to articulate their perspective. In practice, the choice of method in each project was obviously determined by the experience and interests of the particular researchers. Like many others in critical social research, we had used semi-structured qualitative interviews. But there was a real need (around 1990) to professionalize the research methodology and clarify the epistemological status of interviews. Our starting point, especially in the dialogue with external stakeholders, was to use the plausibility of life histories in a quasi-explanatory model in which individuals’ experience of their past and present objective life situations was an explanatory factor of their later life courses, including actual education, access to education (motivation, interests, perspectives) and actual learning processes, using life stories as a source of knowledge of objective life circumstances, sometimes together with other data (responses to questionnaires, observations of teaching and statistical and other background information). All the information and also narrative accounts could in this way be understood as knowledge about a subjective factor that could help to *explain* future subjective actions, including participation in education and the learning from it. Antikainen (Antikainen 1998) has formulated the theoretical concept of *learning identity* to represent this subjective experience that has a (causal) impact on the educational participation and learning interest of adults. Different multi-factor models have combined psychological and social factors in understanding participation and this type of theorizing is still in development. Antikainen’s concept of learning identity has re-emerged in our research when we have returned to prioritize issues of participation in education. A PhD project on the learning motivation of unskilled workers was based on the concept using life history interviews, and discussing the relationship between the different types of interpretation (Kondrup 2011; Kondrup 2013). In the life history project we focused on interpreting the individual experience of a lived life under certain societal conditions, assuming that it remained an active driver in and horizon for the individual’s present agency and learning processes, and itself still in ongoing formation. Especially in studies of professional learning it has appeared productive in understanding the subjective identity processes involved in professional careers. So we saw the interpretation of the individual story as a way of understanding not only actual behaviour but also the content and dynamics of learning processes, and it determined our priority of qualitative hermeneutic methods. The specific point in this priority has become clearer in retrospect, in relation to different multi-factor models (Rubenson & Salling Olesen 2007). In some ongoing projects about untraditional pathways to professional education I hope we shall be able to work out the relation between experience as a state and experience as a process.  
  
*The concept of experience* which originally structured our research questions (Salling Olesen 1985; Salling Olesen 1989) was taken from the Frankfurt School and its Marxist and psychodynamic theoretical tradition. In (Danish) adult educational practice it was linked to a notion of collective political learning processes, inspired by Negt, (Negt 1964; Negt 2001; Negt & Kluge 1972) , which transcended the immediate individual experience. In Negt’s version , collective learning processes (exemplarisches Lernen) were by definition only possible through communication of individual subjective experience of common societal conditions in a historical dialectic between everyday life experience and a mediated historical/theoretical knowledge. Our understanding of the participants’ experiences combined everyday practical plausibility with a conceptual coordination of the relationship between learning processes, everyday life, culture and the formation of societal institutions – informed by phenomenological sociology and Berger & Luckmann’s understanding of how specific individual actions contribute to the overall cultural productivity of society (scientifically, politically and practically,(Salling Olesen 1985; Berger & Luckmann 1966). It connects the *subjective entirety of learning processes*, including individual and collective meaning ascription of their content, with prior socialization processes and the objective life circumstances which provide their social and cultural framework and ascribes dynamics and a social transformational meaning to them.  
  
In order to substantiate this concept of experience, we viewed empirical analyses of specific individual experiences as mediations of non-concurrent but interrelated dynamics: on the one hand, individual inner psychic dynamics and their importance in identity processes, and on the other, *contradictions and historical conflicts* in various levels of societal formation that both structure the content of learning processes and provide framework conditions for them. This meant a dialectical understanding of relationships between individual and societal factors through the study of concrete subjective processes. With support from the Danish Research Council we organized *the life history project* (Salling Olesen 1996), designed as a theoretical and methodological umbrella for various empirical projects with a wide range of contexts and outputs, often on a broader basis than the purely pedagogical or educational. Apart from qualifying these projects, including PhDs, we aimed to use this diversity of research as a lever for the theoretical and methodological development of research into education and learning as empirical critical social science (Salling Olesen 2006)   
  
The orientation on learners rather than teaching allowed for a wide variety of inspirational influences from neighbouring disciplines dealing with the individual as a subject in a social context: cultural research, biographical research and (psychodynamic) socialization research - besides gender studies and Marxist social research. We sought theoretical models and concepts that went far beyond education and learning research and methodological experiences to be used in data production and processing.  
  
In the given situation, we needed a manageable and obviously practical methodology, but which also placed educational participation and its learning processes in a scientifically relevant context. We found these resources in extensive empirical biographical research. A lengthy visiting professorship of Peter Alheit who played a key role in educational biographical research in Europe (Alheit 1994b; Alheit 1994a; Alheit & Dausien 2002) had decisive influence. We also drew inspiration from sociological biographical research, including active involvement in the research committee “Biography and Society” of the International Sociological Association (Rosenthal 1995).

Such inspirations have enhanced the quality of our empirical research, especially at the methodological level (sampling, interviewing techniques, transcription, coding). They have also stimulated our work on more general methodological issues. This was an exciting challenge for a research environment previously mainly based on inspiration from critical theory, and thereby Marxism and psychoanalysis. The organization of the life history project enabled a more principled and critical discussion of the methodologies and the development of theoretical problems in an understanding of subjective dimensions of societal processes through empirical data analysis, at the same time as the research horizon was gradually redefined by the concept of lifelong learning, comprising learning processes in many specific situations, which could be both educational situations and everyday life situations such as work processes.

**II. Key Concepts** **and Theoretical Traditions**

Biographical and Life History research is a very diverse stock of research and a number of different and divergent research inspirations. I shall point out some of the research perspectives that seem important for education and lifelong learning research, in terms of conceptual framework, the methodology underpinning the research and the strategic and technical development of research.

The concept of biography and the concept of life history have been chosen here to signify an *approach* to our research field, adult education and learning, which is in itself multiple and only vaguely delimited. Although these concepts are often used in a broad and general manner, the terminology does give some signal of the research tradition. They have both placed the individual learner or participant in education centre stage, and they underpin the general turn from a focus on educational intention and teaching to a focus on understanding learning and education from his or her perspective. But in a quite different way, which actually covers quite different epistemological and practical perspectives.

Neither of the two concepts biography or life history would form a unifying principle, and more complicated: In several versions each of the two key concepts tends to subordinate the other one. I prefer to talk about *approach* instead of a *method* or a *theory* because we talk about a broad stream of research traditions to which some belong mainly by their application of specific date collection methods, whereas others share a theoretical object but are quite different in their concrete method.

“Biography” has been the most continuously shared concept, very often connected with a direct use of autobiographies or biographies as the empirical material of this research. The continuity is, however, deceptive, as it refers to quite different current practice. In some traditions the research is focussing on the individual’s story as a source of knowledge. In this context biography and life history research has generally assumed the function of alternative knowledge or perspective, giving voice to specific experiences vis a vis dominant cultural, political or institutional ideas. This goes from oral history traditions, where the focus is on the local or individual version of history, and also the many forms of heroic biographies where particular individuals or groups of individuals are interesting in themselves, to biographical sociology, which also treats biographies as sources of knowledge in the sense of realism, from “the polish peasant” (Thomas & Znaniecki 1927) to Daniel Bertaux’s sociological studies into class and occupations (Bertaux 1981; Bertaux & Thompson 1997). Some of this research has developed as a very local and specific attention to a particular group of people in a specific context - most often asking them to tell their own story, but sometimes reconstructing their stories on the basis of interviews and/or other sources of information about their life as it appears to the learners themselves. In this “realist” tradition biographies tell us about the social reality of (potential) learners.

However, the epistemology of biographical research in education have been more interested in the narration or the active construction of the subject itself. They are generally developed on the basis of symbolic interactionism first developed by G.H. Mead and others), and draw a basic line of on to current social constructionism. “Biography” in the cognitive analysis of narratives as developed by Fritz Schütze (Schütze 1984)), and furthermore by Alheit, can be seen as a narrative (re)construction of the action schemes in the individual lived life. This approach combining structural analysis of narratives with interactionism is also recognizable as a strong sub-stream in sociological research (Rosenthal 1995). Other developments see biography as a specific representation of individual experiences, or of cultural orientations, based on the assumption that the very narrative act is the most direct or the most interesting representation of the learner subject. However, one may also emphasize other aspects than the narrative’s structural similarity to the agency of everyday life. In our first life history studies, we conducted thematic, semi-structured interviews on concrete life histories, in relation to e.g. experiences of education, gender socialization, work experience, work identity and future prospects. The themes were theoretically justified expectations of how structural conditions could have a differentiated impact on the interviewees’ life histories, but the analyses were also marked by a very open attitude to the empirical material. If the biography is seen neither as a source of lived life, nor as a proxy, it will be clear that, although the same linguistic interface is involved, the narrator is subjectively formulating experience of this lived life - and possibly also trying to “talk around” certain aspects of it. The gestalt character of narration draws the telling close to subjective impressions of the narrative present, including aspects of emotions, mood and sensory perception, which provide experience of the life history that would not be reflected in a more logical argumentative discourse. In our early projects inspired by biographical research we sought to understand whether and how education gives them opportunities for self-definition and autonomous expression (Larsen 1992; Salling Olesen 1994). Precisely at a time of disruption, where women only with difficulty and against obvious odds define their lives as their own, a biographical approach may be particularly relevant because it shows “solidarity” with their effort to gain relative autonomy as wage earners. But we have also seen that unemployed people, subject to obvious structural constraints, produce narratives about their struggle to secure a position in certain segments of the labour market which also include ideas of real self-determination in (working) life and can fuel alternative life plans that are quite beyond the intended qualificational perspective. The narratives as a whole were interpreted as an expression of the individual perception of a “destiny” in society, where specific work experience, class and gender played key roles. Autobiographical interviews represent interviewees’ interpretations of their life histories as they wish to portray them at the moment of narrating.

Life History is a notion not less ambiguous than biography. When research defines itself as “biographical” it may, depending on different epistemologies, refer to the actual “reality” of lived life or to the subjective biographical account of it. “Life history” may similarly be used interchangeable with “life course” or with “life story” to signify this real, objective series of events, or the relatively unproblematic account of them. However, when I speak of “life history approach” this key concept refers to the complex of *a subjective life experience and the individual life(-ves) it is based in,* seeing the individual life course as the relevant context for understanding the individual subjective experience, and understanding individual lives as intrinsically societal. It is basically a hermeneutic notion. Within this conceptual framework “biography” is used in its more literal meaning as a notion of the specific form of text in which somebody describes a life, and autobiography describing one’s own life, subordinated under the concept of life history (Salling Olesen 1996; Salling Olesen 2010; Salling Olesen 2004; Weber 1998). This way of using the concept biography shares with the former version of biographical research - the “realist” one - the interest in the particular historical events and social realities, and with the second - the “constructivist” one - the idea that biography is an interpretation in which the subjective significance can be expressed by the protagonist himself or by others. Neither the relevant sources of empirical evidence nor the final interpretation are delimited with the specific individual. Biography is seen as a specific format of describing one’s own life experience (autobiography) or the lives of others, but this format (“construction”) is just one possible way of telling it, and must be read as a subjective expression and representation of a life experience seen from a specific time and place. On a practical methodological level this means that biographical accounts are just seen as “texts” which have specific qualities. In my own research group a multitude of data formats have been used. Beside individual biographical interviews different forms of thematic group discussions and focus group interviews have been useful in situations where the research was related to shared significant experiences of a group of people (Weber 2010b; Weber 2010a; Dybbroe 2012), and also variations of ethnographic field study, texts in the form of video-recorded practices etc (Liveng 2010).

In such approaches the concept of life history focuses on the subjective appropriation of living conditions, with particular emphasis on significant conflicts and transformations. They have an explicit epistemological interest in understanding the inseparable nature of subjective and societal experience, thus exposing not only the societal preconditioning of subjectivity but also the complex dynamics of human being, individually and collectively influencing societal development. They mostly draw on psycho-societal research traditions, which comprise the understanding of sub- and preconscious levels of consciousness, individually and collectively, in life histories and in everyday lives. The life history notion points to the understanding of the societal formation of subjectivity in the individual life, and the interplay between this historical subject and social contexts in everyday life (Salling Olesen 2007b; Salling Olesen 2007a; Salling Olesen 2010).

Other uses of Life History have developed in a more or less critical dialogue with sociological research on life courses in terms of longitudinal studies of populations situated in and moving across social spaces of families, educational settings, work life, etc., more or less correlated with background variables like social class, ethnicity, gender and cohort/generation. This use of life history, which is more “realistic”, combine and triangulate with qualitative studies with a view to expose the interplay between structural preconditions and subjective experience in the formation of traditional as well as late- or post-modern biographies. The different meanings of the key concepts and the different emphasis on them may appear crude but they both trace the epistemological interests in different approaches and also yield a clue to how the different research perspectives are handled in research practice.

On the backdrop of the different research perspectives and the different paradigmatic inspirations we think that the challenge is to define in which ways biography and life history research can contribute to the development of (adult) education and learning as a research domain - in terms of topics, theorizing and methodology. The shared idea of focussing the attention of education research on the learners is decisive. People are always interesting in themselves in their concrete multitude. For our research it is the understanding of them as learning subjects in their respective societal and cultural context which is interesting. Biography and life history has potential to enrich this understanding. By understanding specific cultures and practices from inside, from the subjective outlook of their inhabitants and agents it will provide an empirical base for theorising subjectivity and learning in a comprehensive way, also enabling a better understanding of the interplay of learning inside and outside of formal education and training. We also hope to move learning theory beyond the traditional dichotomies of social versus individual or societal versus subjective The general attention to language, which has influenced social sciences including psychology in the last couple of decades, has wiped out previous clear differences between social sciences dealing with institutions and the social activity of human beings, and cultural sciences dealing with their symbolic articulations in language use and artefacts (Habermas 1988). It also opens new ways of theorizing subjectivity.

Concepts of subjectivity and identity may be defined primarily in terms of conscious meaning making. Focussing on the very telling, emphasizing the narrative structure of remembering, implies a theoretical idea that narrativity provides a more comprehensive account of the subjective logic in human agency and most often that the narration is in itself an identity production (narrative identity). But also the analysis of cognitive structures, which seems to assume a homological relation between narration and real life agency can be seen as a way of identifying the subject with it’s imagined (in cognitive structures) possible agency and social positions. Both positions assign the conscious self regulatory meaning making the status of subjectivity. They have some epistemological overlap with concepts of discourse, and might include also positions where the script of this meaning making is seen as entirely societally determined - hence they may be called constructivist in the contemporary Anglophone terminology - but this is in a way not important here, because they see the very capacity to narrate as a constitutive quality of subjectivity. In practical terms there is a different emphasis in the orientation on the concrete agency of telling and “gestalting” (making meaning by imagining a concrete whole), or on the identification of basic patterns in agency.

The linguistic turn, while helping us out of naïve realism and in this way allowing an understanding of the subjective moment in societal reality – as well as in the epistemic subject also raises some difficulties in terms of a reductive understanding of the relation between language and embodied experience, and the relation between language and societal reality (as can be seen in the increasing discussion of the linguistic turn). This is a quite important aspect in relation to learning and the possibility to theorize learning in the context of the biography/Life History.   
Marxist social theory and psychoanalysis, as conveyed by the tradition of critical theory, were the general frames of reference for our work. Both involved a theoretical premise of non-transparency, meaning that reality is not entirely transparent for either the actor or the observer. In positions inspired by Frankfurt-school Critical theory it is an important presumption to understand society as a contradictory and non-transparent totality of relations, which are included in the life experience of any individual. But this is in a way also an empirical question provided we see subjects as constituted by interaction in a specific societal context: Societal relations and conflicts will appear in interpretation of subjective material. Identities can be conceptualized as a mediating level of the social meaning making in relation to available life conditions and cultural scripts, and subject to ongoing re-configurations, i.e. learning is also always reconfiguration of identity(Salling Olesen 2001; Salling Olesen 2007a) . In this cultural analysis the classical concept of unconscious is redefined as societally produced rather than drive related, and hence a semantic realm. Subjectivity may then be conceptualized as embracing conscious (linguistic) as well as pre- and unconscious (non-linguistic) dimensions of the life experience of the individual socialisation. The societal production (or construction) of subjects can be seen as a comprehensive process of experiencing the world and building conscious as well as unconscious, defensive dynamics to deal with it, and the relations between the sensual experience and the possible meaning making can be seen as an interactive relation, regulated by societal as well as by embodied but un- or preconscious dynamics.

Against this background, we reached an understanding of a looser coupling between data production and analysis/interpretation. But as long as the requirements of a hermeneutic procedure are met, the objectified data may be transcriptions of various kinds of interviews or interactions and also field notes, audio and video recordings, etc. This does not imply irrelevance of the data production method or the characteristics of the data. On the contrary, reflections on aspects of data production form part of the interpretation process, and this then becomes a crucial link between the concrete analysis and the research question. In the next section I shall go deeper into the development of this approach, which we first named in-depth hermeneutics, and then a psycho-societal approach after the interpretation procedure applied.  
  
**III. THE SOCIALITY OF SUBJECTIVITY**  
  
The aim of the life history project was to establish an understanding of learning processes and education from a subjective perspective. Empirical research of concrete subjective expressions - including biographical narratives - was intended to elucidate the experiences of specific people of lived life and its sociality. Oskar Negt’s reformulation of the basis of political learning processes (1964) was the first major attempt at a connection between the subjective endeavours of everyday life and non-structuralist Marxism. Until then, subjective factors appeared to be reduced to either false consciousness or class consciousness, which in a global context were colonized by the Leninist political understanding of Soviet communism or by various elitist avant-garde theories. In the neo-Marxist debate in Western Europe, which included the Frankfurt School, the revival of Marx’s analysis of capital opened up a new recognition of subjectivity, so that at least criticism of the dominance of exchange value and the commodity form could actively change society. In the education economy there arose a rudimentary understanding of the significance of the human factor in system change, but mostly only as an analysis of contradictions in the capitalist system. Parts of the new left (e.g. via Marcuse) were also inspired by Freudo-Marxist thinking, which had otherwise been somewhat marginalized in a form of drive-based essentialism in the 1930s (Reich). But most of these theoretical developments were in fact still very abstract “openings” of particular importance for the general critique of capitalism - Frankfurt School critical theory was for example generally seen as “pessimistic” because it correctly identified the pervasive effects of the capitalist political economy on all levels of cultural and social life.  
  
Since the life history project distinguished between biographical life history and the narrator as a situated subject, it became clear that the object of analysis was the subjective act where the subject in a given situation (usually specified by research) interprets lived life and its circumstances, and more or less consciously envisions his future life. We must try to understand the individual subject’s relationship with himself and the world as a path to understanding subjectivity as an aspect of sociality in a broader sense. We were not primarily interested in the individual, but saw him/her as exemplary, as a specific person who could variously enhance our understanding of how subjective processes *can* emerge.  
  
We were therefore especially interested in the contradictions, the “breaks” and “gaps”, which appeared in some of the biographical narratives, as pointed out by both analysts (see Schütze 1984) and critics (Nielsen 2005) of narrative structural analysis. They are particularly interesting in potentially enabling an entry point to an analysis of how both recognized and unrecognized circumstances and experiences are involved in the processing of conflicts and constraints and are attributed new meaning. One can first look for signs of the defence mechanisms that are inevitably embedded in a narrative self-representation. The story can in itself be a form of rationalization to provide a coherent and reasoned view of one’s life. But the task of narration, including requirements for concretisation and completion, will naturally also involve topics and memories already surrounded by defensive reactions such as repression or rationalization, or a need may arise to “repair” elements of the story during narration. They may appear as flaws in logic or narrative, contradictions, obvious omissions, breaks in the story line, changing evaluations of people and relationships, etc. But they can also be expressed by directly opposing inner emotions. Apart from helping to reconstruct objective elements and enhancing our understanding of how the narrator interprets them, they may also sometimes be perceived as expressions of ambivalence, i.e. emotional ambiguity regarding some aspects of the narrative or the basic self-representation itself. Ambivalences are particularly interesting subjective expressions for two reasons (Becker-Schmidt 1982; Weber 1995). Firstly, they could represent cultural and societal contradictions of interest in understanding the relationship of the individual narrative to a broader context. Secondly, our fundamental research interest lay in learning, especially the learning processes of everyday life, as mentioned in the introductory comments on educational research issues. Learning processes involve shifts of consciousness and discontinuities on many levels, and both logical ruptures and emotional ambivalences in the autobiographical narrative can therefore indicate learning processes or provide the potential for them.  
  
Our methodological approach in the life history project was (deep) hermeneutic interpretation, inspired by a method based on social psychology which Leithäuser et al. used in research into working life and everyday life (Leithäuser & Volmerg 1988). Here too we adopted a proven empirical method that could plausibly be justified in social intervention projects (Salling Olesen & Weber 2002), albeit with a quite different theoretical basis from biographical research. It is primarily a procedure for textual interpretation, mostly generated through transcription of themed group discussions (a cross between a focus group interview and a social psychology experiment). The group discussion is stimulated by a chosen theme the researchers expect to be of vital importance to the participants. Group discussions establish group dynamics that may be assumed to include elements of unconscious interaction involving participants in relationships to each other and perhaps to a particular theme. The interpretation is not aimed at individual life historical experiences but at understanding the indications of subjective experience activated by the theme in the social interaction. This is also fundamentally an example of hermeneutic interpretational practice, and the aim is to understand interaction and meaning in a broader societal context *through* analysis of the psychodynamic levels of communication. This psychoanalytically inspired interpretational practice was originally developed as cultural analysis, with e.g. works of art as its primary empirical object. Leithäuser and colleagues applied it thus first to working life, and its use was later expanded to a variety of material that objectifies social interaction in everyday life situations and organizations in the form of texts in the broadest sense (Leithäuser 2012) . This was further developed by the *International Research Group for PsychoSocietal Analysis* (Salling Salling Olesen 2012) which included German, Danish and British researchers.

The methodology is based on the psychoanalytic recognition that subjective meaning is rooted in life historical memories that are scenic wholes. Cognition and emotion in a present situation activate memories of similar past situations, and initiate a process of cognitive and emotional differentiation. In a social interpretation, one can thus achieve a more comprehensive understanding of subjective aspects of this situation by trying to understand the scenic recollections it might activate for the people involved. The first point in this scenic *understanding* is to interpret subjective meaning and especially conflicts, by attending to emotional and relational aspects of communication which require a situated attention and imagination. But it is also important to understand how the whole of a societal context has influenced subjective experience and forms the context for conscious as well as unconscious imagination of a future. Within the theoretical framework it would be more appropriate to talk about a wider (in a societal context) rather than a deeper understanding of the meaning under study than what is normally understood in hermeneutic interpretation. It counts on levels of meaning which may not be represented, or not adequately represented, in the socialized language, but nevertheless are embodied and subjectively significant. In brief: All the marginal(ized) meanings.

The main theoretical originator of the methodology, Alfred Lorenzer, called his method in-depth or deep hermeneutics (Lorenzer 1986) to indicate that the method is hermeneutic but also goes beyond an understanding of the immediate social surface. The depth metaphor is problematic since it connotes certain stereotypical understandings of psychoanalysis as an objectification that allows the analysis to “uncover” deep-lying “causes” in the psyche. This stereotype is fed by the original Freudian theory of drives but is far removed from the interactional understandings of psychodynamics of all the researchers involved. Conversely “psycho-societal analysis” points out that its mandate is to broaden its perspective in both psychodynamic and societal directions.  
  
It is primarily Lorenzer’s theory of socialization and language acquisition that provides a theoretical basis for this type of interpretation. Lorenzer’s socialization theory is based on the material, social and bodily interaction experiences of early childhood, and its particular feature is the symbolization of these life experiences through language acquisition. In connection with Wittgenstein’s language-game theory, he sees socialization as an entry into the linguistic communities that establish an attachment between the individual, situated and sensory experiences and a socially defined semantics (symbolization). This originally interested him because he saw disturbance and discontinuity in this process as a key to the understanding of various mental disorders. But it gradually became a complete socialization theory, providing an understanding of how the total interactional experience is translated into pre-verbal interaction forms and then becomes part of symbolization, enabling the individual psyche to include both conscious and unconscious dimensions and be in lifelong development and transformation. It is not possible here to present further details, which may be found in a special issue of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (2012/3).

In order to reach this form of scenic understanding the psycho-societal approach takes advantage of the researcher’s subjective relationship to the field being researched. The point here is that imagination is scenic in its format: it inter-relates all informative, sensory and situated impressions in holistic images. The strength of this theoretical background is that it offers a material explanation of how unconscious subjective dynamics in everyday situations are based on life experiences (social interaction). It thus becomes more readily comprehensible that the interpretation of linguistic material can provide access to meanings that are not explicitly formulated in language but must be interpreted by the researcher’s imagination. In order to *achieve* this kind of scenic understanding, the approach uses the researcher’s (interpreter’s) subjective relationship to the field under study. Psycho-societal interpretation uses the experience of psychoanalysis of communication between interpreter and interpreted text that is socially produced but unconscious. With reference to the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and countertransference, one obtains a theoretical understanding of the fundamental methodological question of the interpreter’s involvement in the interpretation, which is reflected in any hermeneutical method. In practical terms, the researcher’s imagination is supported in the analysis of social interaction through interpretation groups and similar social interactions, which both encourage a variety of conceptions and also represent a kind of first step in a communicative validation.  
  
The assumption that the researcher’s conscious and unconscious prior experiences are resources in interpretation, and not “disruptive elements”, touches on a principled discussion we have often met in the discussion of biographical research. It concerns the relationship between the researcher’s pre-understanding/prior knowledge and his/her interpretation of the interview subject’s knowledge of and meaning ascription to some of the same elements of the narrative. The researcher’s prior theoretical or empirical knowledge of objective social contexts and psychodynamics, such as defensive reactions and hence the potential distortion of life history by the biographical perspective, is used in this strategy as a store of insight or an analyst’s prerequisite for interpretation. This may be a particularly crucial point, since biographical research is based on respect for the interviewee, but this in reality applies to all qualitative research which aims to respect the autonomy of the research field. The delicate point, where the interpretation becomes “deep hermeneutical”, is where the researcher has an critical attitude to the interviewee’s stated interpretation of his/her life, and attempts to understand possible unconscious dynamics or to analyse it as pragmatic consciousness in connection with a specific societal practice and position (Leithäuser & Volmerg 1988; see Habermas’ argument in Habermas & Apel 1977). The critical aspect of the interpretation will then be to open up for the suppressed or latent features of this articulation - but still with the intention of understanding the subjective meanings (better).

The theoretical basis for this is on the one hand the analysis of how fundamental social structures appear systematically distorted in the immediate social practice and to the immediate experience. This is most fundamentally attributed to *Marx’s concepts of* *socially necessary ideological consciousness,* and in the critical theory tradition to the permeation of exchange value and reification into social relations and forms of everyday practices. On the other hand, most relevant is the psychodynamic theory of the unconscious and the understanding of the *psychodynamic defence mechanisms’ distortion* of communication and individual consciousness. Here too there is a “socially necessary distortion” insofar as defence mechanisms are necessary mediations of emotional aspects of practical lived life. In both of these bases lies a theoretical justification for a *materially produced intransparency*. The intention is thus by no means that the researcher must “see through” the distortions or reveal other causalities or explanations of the life course in the biography. They are rather to be used to enrich the understanding of the subjective expressions with an understanding of how they handle conditions of reality and their latent possibilities if this handling was altered. No more than this; the rest is up to the interpreted subjects. But this fundamental consideration should suggest why the critical interpretation is supplemented with an interpretation with space for learning processes and life historical opportunities.  
  
**IV. LIFE HISTORY, LEARNING PROCESSES AND WORK IDENTITY**  
  
The above methodological discussion was related to the general question of how to empirically study subjectivity in everyday life interaction. It was based on the argument that some key issues in pedagogy and educational research could best be theorized in this way, but also that this required a concept of subjectivity that is historically and societally specified. This relationship between subjectivity as the focal point and a societal macro perspective was the source of our interest in empirical methods. The life history approach was conceived as a unit of an empirical method based on life history or histories and a theoretical understanding of the social constitution of the subject.

Some of the issues in focus of critical education research during the 1980s - the need to refine the subjective dynamics related to educational participation and the need to theorize learning processes in a way that covers both life learning and more formal education - have meanwhile almost become mainstream policy issues under the heading of lifelong learning, with a dominant interest in how to mobilize all citizens’ subjective engagement in learning and educational participation. In this sense, developments have justified the research strategy but thereby also intensified the theoretical and methodological challenges for a critical research. I have described how we over time have redefined the methodology, primarily by taking a consistent hermeneutic position and supplementing the methodological repertoire, but also by developing a psycho-societal, analytical subject concept and including this in the interpretation of subjective aspects of the empirical data and also as a *prerequisite for the interpretation* in the understanding of the interpreting subject (researcher subjectivity).  
  
Two brief examples of further outcomes will illuminate how this can help in a *critical* handling of some of the educational policy issues emerging from the present-day landscape.  
  
The experience concept defines learning processes as an aspect of a life historical progression where previous experiences must constantly be imbedded or rendered invalid by new ones. This process is rooted in *forms of everyday practice*, or in other words is *lifeworld-based.* Individual perceptions of the outside world and identity formation are based on this practice-related experience. A relatively self-evident perspective on oneself and one’s immediate courses of action is established. However, life is neither static nor devoid of contradictions. Therefore, long before school and education, learning processes are taking place, which partly involve the processing of concrete conflicts and impulses and partly accumulate as an experience of one’s life and its development. Practical consciousness integrates some experiences and blocks others. Apart from practical consciousness and the relatively self-evident perception of oneself and the world, a store of non-integrated impressions and unrealized impulses is established. Simultaneously, additional knowledge and alternative perspectives on one’s lifeworld are offered by education and other social and cultural institutions. The individual subject constitutes itself through this lifeworld context.  
  
The socialization and consciousness research which underlies the methodological development of the life history project aims to understand the subjective aspects of this process on the basis of a life experience with both conscious and unconscious levels. Contemporary cutting-edge theories of learning processes are orientated in somewhat different directions - mostly either as social learning, linked to practice contexts, and/or a constructivist tendency that emphasizes that learning is cognitive model building and a problem-solving activity. The two trends are not mutually exclusive but one viewpoint tends to dominate in most studies. A life historical experience concept clarifies that they are interwoven. When for example in the name of lifelong learning one takes a critical view of the possible practical applications of scholastic knowledge and attempts to credit skills acquired outside formal education, the connection between the cognitive, relatively abstract process and its dependence on situatedness gains central importance. The understanding of the life history project of how unconscious dynamics remain active forces in consciousness and social interaction throughout life can now be linked to the concrete life historical experiential contexts in which a particular competency is acquired, and thus provide a less abstract understanding of learning processes (or the absence of learning processes in the form of resistance or routine lack of sensitivity). One could say that a psycho-societal analysis can incorporate both of these two developments of learning theory - social learning and constructivism. But it brings them together through a theoretical understanding of the material connection between specific individual learning processes and local interactions on the one hand and a historical or societal macro-context on the other - and this also represents a criticism. In the context of courses of study with a practical professional aim, this connection between abstract knowledge and thinking and concrete experiences and contexts is crucial.  
  
*Another* illustration of how a life history approach has proved productive is related to identity processes. The most simple example concerns people for whom this experience is negative and predominantly translated into opposition to education or a strongly instrumentalized attitude to it. In a sense, they seem unable to learn much because their sensitivity to the relevance of knowledge and skills is blocked. Our immediate reaction must be just to take note of their choice. However, awareness of the contextual experiential nature of this blocking and especially ambivalences and marginalized learning experiences will provide a more nuanced, solidarity perspective on educational abstinence.  
  
But even more illustrative are the identity processes related to vocations and professions. Professions have generally been considered either from within - through their identity-forming professionalism and practice repertoire, legitimized by a “mission” that was commonly altruistic - or from the outside, as societal categories defined by their special knowledge or competence, which therefore received (functionalism) or fought for (sociology of action) certain economic and social privileges. Neither of these perspectives - which both have a certain justification - include a sense of the professional as an individual human being who has incorporated professional knowledge and function in his/her subjectivity. This is an extremely interesting example of sociality and subjectivity being concretely expressed in all the individually specific learning histories of people becoming doctors, engineers, etc. If one studies professional identity and professional learning processes with a life historical empirical methodology, one gains insight into the reproduction of societal and labour divisions and the reproduction of expertise as learning processes that are far from linear and regularly successful. On the contrary, one realizes how professional expertise is shaped through and subordinated to subjective dynamics that may be “irrelevant” individual dynamics or perhaps provide insight into a collective professional defence system - or societal repression (e.g. the denial of death).  
  
Supported by Lorenzer’s further development of the language-game concept, we can gain a generic understanding of vocational or professional learning as subjective acquisition of culturally prescribed bodies of knowledge. Not unlike a discourse concept, we can view such expertise as a language game embedded in social practices. But where discourse analysis is most concerned with how the historically established discourse acts as a compelling medium for thought and communication in a specific domain at a given historical moment, or rather thus establishes a domain, determination is unimportant in the language-game concept. With Lorenzer’s expansion, we can consider reproduction in the language game as a relationship of exchange between the societal form of interaction (professional practice) and the individual process of sensory experience and we can view the unfolding of the individual learning process and the collective formation of experience in professional practice as an ongoing development of professional knowledge taking place in exchanges with the corporeal perception of work challenges and the practitioner’s life experience. An empirical analysis of the subjective aspects of these processes can contribute to a new theoretical framework for the analysis of vocational and professional development and education.  
  
These are just two briefly sketched examples of many possible approaches revealed by our research group. Using the concept of experience as the theoretical perspective on learning and education can help life historical, empirical analyses of everyday life, work and education to lead to a critical social scientific development in education and educational research. It also seems clear that the understanding of learning processes as a subjective dimension in all social interactions will enable these methodological experiences to be applied to other areas of research.  
  
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