

*Charlotte Højholt & Dorte Kousholt*

## **Researching conduct of life across children's life contexts Introduction**

- paper presented The Biennial Conference of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology, Nanjing, China, 2009

This paper discusses theoretical developments and methodological implications connected to working with Klaus Holzkamp's concept of conduct of life in empirical research.

The points we wish to make:

- Conduct of everyday life is a fundamental collective process
- Through investigating personal meanings we gain knowledge about social structure
- We want to illustrate consequences of these theoretical discussions for our understanding of family-problems and what kind of help that is needed.

We want to illustrate the practical consequence of a theoretical discussion

In that way we also want to illustrate that our theoretical discussion connect to problems in life that matter to people - what Hank Stam called wicked problems.

Holzkamp's theoretical work sowed the seeds to these points; however we have developed them in a specific direction. Our ambitions have been

(1) to strengthen and develop the aspects of his conceptualisations that can capture that human beings personal lives are inherently social and in this way to set the subject in plural.

(2) to grasp situated social interplay as it is played out in local contexts and

(3) to grasp subjective perspective connected to participation in and across different social contexts. Basically this has to do with developing theoretical thinking that deepens our understanding of the dialectic relation between persons and social practice.

The empirical basis for the discussions is different studies in and across contexts where children's lives take place (e.g. families, day care institutions and schools and arrangements for special help).

The example we draw on here is from a research project in a “Family work” institution. Families are placed at the Family work institution because of concerns from the social services about whether the parents are able to provide the necessary care for their child.

You will hear about a single mother, Claire, who lives at the Family work institution with her daughter Sara and her baby boy John. Claire has two other children who do not live with her at the moment. Sara is 4½ years old and goes to a regular day-care institution. Claire explains that she accepted to stay at the Family Work institution because she needed a place to stay after her ex-boyfriend threw her out. Furthermore, she was under pressure because John was born 2 month premature.

### **Part 1: Klaus Holzkamp’s concept of conduct of life and how we extend it and attach weight to special aspects.**

As you have heard in previous papers, Holzkamp raised a fundamental critique of the methodology of “mainstream psychology”, founded on the basic figure of natural science: that to gain scientific knowledge we must construct a “laboratory standard situation” where the subject matter we are interested in can be studied in isolation – free of disturbances.

Since the lives of human beings do not play out as a series of standard situations the epistemological problem about how to transfer knowledge developed in the standard situation to the “mess” of everyday life is unavoidable in mainstream psychology.

Holzkamp argues that to overcome a psychology where subjects are enclosed in psychological special functions, we need concepts that can capture the richness and complexity of people’s everyday life - in stead of disregarding it.

In his later work Holzkamp turns to the concept of *conduct of life* as a way to conceptualise the *active create processes* involved in leading a complex everyday life. The starting point was an interest in a better understanding of conditions for learning.

Holzkamp states that: “Conduct of life is an activity “every day” to organise, integrate and construct daily life in such a way that the different and conflicting demands that meet the individual can be combined and ‘resolved’“ (1998, p.27).

Holzkamp argues that developing our understanding of persons’ conduct of life is a fundamental theoretical problematic in psychology. Conduct of life serves as a concept for analysing mediating levels between socio-structural characteristic and subjective meanings and action possibilities. The concept turns our attention to the *meanings* in and *reasons* for acting.

Holzkamp relates the concept of conduct of life closely to the concept of self understanding. My self understanding is my understanding of my interest and possibilities *in relation to my conduct of life*. Herein lies a critique of traditional psychological concepts of self understanding as “my relation to myself” or of various kinds of an inner picture of a ‘self’. Holzkamp argues that persons’ self understanding can never be interpreted “from a standpoint outside” – but must be developed in cooperation through inter-subjective relations. This implicates that to develop knowledge in research about *other persons’* conduct of life and self understanding we must involve them as co-researchers.

In relation to the concept of conduct of life, Ole Dreier (2008) emphasizes that persons’ lives and engagements always are distributed between several contexts which are connected (or disconnected) in certain ways in societal arrangements. In that way Dreier has elaborated on the cross-contextual and social character of conduct of life. He argues that any theorizing of the person in psychology must be grounded in a consideration of structures of social practice.

### **Family conduct of life**

In our research about the life of children and families in Denmark we expand our understanding of the social and collective processes involved in conduct of everyday life.

We focus on family conduct of life and analyse the way in which the *different family members* arrange their *shared* as well as *separated* everyday life in relation to a multitude of demands from various places. Family members conduct their life *together* and in *relation* to each other.

The focus on family conduct of life turns our attention to the work of arranging a complex practice where different lives, interest and perspectives must be integrated and coordinated to *make family life work*.

The single mother, Claire, continuously deals with arranging a daily life with two small children that demands different and often conflicting things from her. She must prioritise her own resources and involve other parties when she needs help with the children. The organising of a family practice ties in with priorities and the distribution of limited resources and time.

Such continuous processes involve the constant handling, and overcoming of conflicts and dilemmas. Every solution is temporary and brings new conflicts and dilemmas. So conducting life as a parent is connected to exploring ways of arranging in relation to

conflicts and dilemmas and to possibilities for dealing with practical issues in everyday life.

Turning the concept of conduct of life from single person's lives to the processes of arranging a family life pushes our understanding of what routines in everyday life are about. Developing routines is not only my individual project. They must be created, negotiated, and may involve struggling, with other people whom my conduct of life must be coordinated with. Claire and Sara at the same time cooperate and struggle about how the routines of for example taking the bus home from day care institution should be. What kind of food Sara is allowed to eat on the way home, ways to sit in the bus and so on. The professionals tells Claire that she should establish more harmony in her relation to her daughter and but they also want her to prevent Sara from eating the sweets she wants.

Children and parents different perspectives are anchored in different locations and positions in the family and connected to different lives and possibilities in other places. Significant parts of family life are arranged in relation the everyday life of the children in other places. Our research across children's different life context has showed that the relation between parents and professionals in fundamental ways influences parents' possibilities for supporting the development of their child. Problems in the family often connect to *conflicts between different contexts* (and between adults) where the children take part.

## **Part 2 The learning of children seen in the light of the concept of conduct of life**

The learning processes of children have a compound structure as a basis as well as a developmental perspective. In today's western countries we have arranged a plurality of contexts for the life of our children, and in these different settings the children are together with each other and with grown-ups in different ways, and their activities are structured in relation to different purposes and conditions.

Children have to orientate in and deal with this plurality and the differences, involvements, possibilities of taking part and ways of participating as 'a person'.

One could say that children are in a process of learning to conduct a complex life and to make it 'their life' in a sense developing their personal preferences, priorities and standpoints. And in this way to develop self understanding.

The question of conducting ones live cannot be limited to a question of repeating what others have done before or adjusting to some kinds of given conditions. To live implies to *create conditions* – to estimate possibilities, make strategies and pursue ideas.

This very personal challenge is in one and the same time a fundamental social issue and relates closely to participation in social communities.

While doing observations in Sara's life across contexts we realize that Sara emphasizes to play with a girl of the same age, Maria, with whom she can carry through some of the role-plays she is curious about trying and learning. Sara's conditions for being with her best friend are influenced by another girl's presence and activities – and also by the way the pedagogues arrange the day and how the groups of children play together.

In this way the children make up the conditions of the life of each other and their interplay must be taken into consideration in an investigation of the *personal* conduct of life.

Sara is continuously investigating when and how she will become able to establish the plays, situations and interplay she is occupied about. She has to investigate *possibilities for participation, for engaging and for influencing situations* in her daily life.

And she is exploring this together with other persons. Observations from children's life across contexts, point to the way the children use their playmates in the ways they orientate in and transform connections and common structures of meanings in their compound life. They explore their life and its possibilities together and they develop personal preferences and subjective standpoints together.

Their possibilities of connecting their participation different places seem to be deeply related to their possibilities of being part of child communities.

This questions our understanding of the meanings of 'others' in the personal conduct of life. In psychology the development of children has often been understood as caused by different kinds of stimuli, role models or scaffolds for an individual project of learning. In this way other persons appear like either 'instruments' or 'limitations' for a quite isolated individual process.

We will emphasize the meanings of 'others' to a person's conduct of life as a question of intersubjectivity or you might say: how subjects live and learn together - participating in different kinds of social practice.

In this perspective Sara's interests in being with Maria is related to a question of possibilities of making coherence in her live and pursue processes of learning. So, conducting ones life and make it 'hang together' implies investigating such social possibilities – and such possibilities are *structurally arranged*.

By conducting our lives we are taking part in reproducing, negotiating and changing social structures and arranging our lives involves *exploring* structural possibilities, connections and restrictions in our life.

### **Methodological implications**

We find that this conceptual focus on an exploring intersubjectivity has consequences for the way we as researches may seek access to knowledge about persons as well as the social structures they take part in.

Sara's personal perspectives on her live and her way of dealing with conditions in her live not just tell us about her – through personal meanings we also learn about social structure.

My personal perspectives not just tell about me and my life but about my relationship to social situations and contexts.

In psychology we must explore the social through the personal and the other way around.

If we want to follow up on the dialectical intentions we cannot use an independent theory or investigation of social structure 'in it self' and try to connect these (abstract) structures to the subjects afterwards. In stead we must investigate the social structure through the personal ways subjects relate and ascribe meanings to these - as expressed in their participation and experiences.

E.g in the field of children we build up structures for helping children in need and when we explore the perspectives of subjects and their interplay we realise how professionals fight about distribution of responsibility in relation to these structures.

And we realise how children in a life across arrangement of help and general institutions get complicated conditions of participation in relation to these structures.

Sara has some special conditions for participating in the communities of children in the kindergarten and her personal perspectives on dilemmas in her live may teach us about the structure of contexts we have arranged for children and what kind of challenges and possibilities children deal with her.

We did not see that in the observations from the family life – some of the personal engagements of this girl are situated in other contexts than the family. Still they are important in understanding the personal perspectives of the girl – and important for the task in relation to *supporting her* and her family.

Seeking the personal perspectives we cannot just study the person 'in itself'. Even when we leave the experimental situation and join 'the natural daily life' we cannot understand a child just by focusing on the child.

We cannot understand the strategies of Sara with out knowing something about the social interplay she is occupied about, involving herself into and finding a way of dealing with. Personal reasons are connected to something in life and to understand a child as a person we must explore what is what is 'in front' of the child: What is the child directed to.

This is why we in our research participate *across* different contexts, and find it important to analyse *together* with the involved. We understand the subjects as 'co-researchers' in research and they take part in our curiosity while we try to take part in their search for action possibilities. In this way we talk about doing research through participation in social practice and cooperation with various parties.

### **Part 3 – The professional practice for supporting families in need**

In relation to the dilemmas in the life of children the professionals and the parents can have very different perspectives on "what's wrong". Where the mother points to difficulties in their life conditions (having no place to live, being a single mother), the professionals interpret the problems as related to "a weak relation" between mother and child.

In general, professionals often focus on different kind of *threats* in relation to the development of children and when it comes to intervention the picture of children's lives *narrows* into a question of attachment between the child and the mother.

This figure finds academic support in developmental psychology were the life of children is often conceptualized as a question of differentiating between balance and disturbance. In this way different life forms or dilemmas in life appears like threats to the development of a child.

The practical aspects of organising a family life, which can support the everyday life of the child, fall out of the professional focus. The very life tends to fall out and with that the ways the mother experiences the dilemmas here. The mother herself becomes the problem or with Thomas we could say she becomes the inferior other.

The personal conduct of life is conflictual due to conflicts between life contexts and e.g. contradictory demands or loss of disposal in relation to important conditions for 'making

life coherent'. In this way you may say that we emphasize coherence in the life in stead of in the personality.

### **The end...**

The concept of conduct of life brings theoretical possibilities for conceptualizing family life and family problems in another way from the one marginalizing groups of persons as problematic. This implies turning the concepts in direction of contradictions in life, social conflicts and *general* dilemmas in the common life humans live together.

Furthermore we would like to point to the action possibilities for the professionals in order to exceed individualized treatment of personalities and to work with the possibilities of participation in daily life different places.

This points to supporting the continuous work of the subjects themselves organizing this - and especially to organizing the cooperation between parent and professionals and between different groups of professionals in new ways.

The arrangement for family help could support Saras participation among peers and Claire's possibilities for involving in her daughters life – but this turns the attention into *other places and relations* and it challenges *the divisions of task* and responsibilities between the general system and the 'system for special help'. Or we could say: This involves working with social structure...

### **References**

- Dreier, O. (2007). The conduct of everyday life. In *Psychotherapy in everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holzamp, K. (1987). Critical psychology and overcoming of scientific indeterminacy in psychological theorizing. *Perspectives in Personality*, 2, 93-123
- Holzamp, K. (1995). 'Alltägliche Lebensführung als subjektwissenschaftliches Grundkonzept', *Das argument*, 212, 817 – 846.
- Højholt, C. (1999). Child development in trajectories of social practice. In W. Maiers.; B. Bayer.; B. Duarte Esgalhado. (Eds.). *Challenges to theoretical psychology*. North York: Captus Press.
- Højholt, C. (2006). El desarrollo infantil a través de sus contextos sociales. *Revista de Psicología y Ciencia Socia.*, 7(1), 22-40.



- Højholt, C. (2006b). Knowledge and professionalism – From the perspectives of children? *Journal of Critical Psychology*, 19, 81-160.
- Højholt, C. (2008) 'Participation in Communities - Living and Learning across different Contexts', in *ARECE - Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia.
- Højholt, C. (2008) 'Children's specific problems are connected to general dilemmas in relation to 'being part', paper presented at *The ISCAR Congress* at the University of California, San Diego Campus September 8 – 13 2008.
- Kousholt, D. (2007) *Familieliv fra et børneperspektiv - Fællesskaber i børns liv*. [Family life from a child perspective - The communities in children's life]. Ph.D. Dissertation. Roskilde University.
- Kousholt, D. (2008) The Everyday Life of Children Across Early Childhood Institution and The Family, *Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, 15 (nr. 1).
- Kousholt, D. (2008) Family work and the everyday life of children: Across the 'specific' and the 'general', paper presented at *The ISCAR Congress* at the University of California, San Diego Campus September 8 – 13 2008