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Be(com)ing a General Practitioner

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EUROPEAN STUDIES IN LIFELONG LEARNING
AND ADULT LEARNING RESEARCH

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Barbara Merrill
(eds.)

Using Biographical
and Life History Approaches
in the Study of Adult
and Lifelong Learning:
European Perspectives

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7 Professional Identities, Subjectivity, and Learning: Be(com)ing a General Practitioner

Henning Salling Olesen

This chapter brings an example of the life history approach to professional identity and professional learning, or more broadly the subjective aspects of professions. The Roskilde Life History Project studies learning across a number of educational and other contexts¹. Theoretically we organize our research around subjectivity and the mediations between societal context and subjective processes of learning and identity. The general perspective is to develop critical empirical research into learning, which seems to be of utmost centrality in a 'knowledge society' (Salling Olesen, 2002a; 2004b).

I have chosen to illustrate with examples from just one empirical study because concrete interpretation is the best way to illustrate our approach in the brief format allowed in this book. Kirsten Weber's article in this book provides another example. The example here is from a study of professional identity and learning of general practitioners². Other studies deal with nurses, engineers, teachers, and similar studies on a number of white-collar specialist workers (Salling Olesen, 2001a; 2001b; 2002c; 2003; 2004a; Weber & Salling Olesen, 2002, and a number of PhD dissertations published only in Danish).

Quite often, especially outside education, the challenge has been to convince readers about the importance of subjective aspects of learning. This can be assumed to be a shared vision in this book. Instead I can concentrate on methodological questions about the interrelation between theorising and concrete interpretation.

A Life History Approach to Learning

Our life history approach is an umbrella which integrates several inspirations and practical methods in an approximately united interpretive approach. The subjective moment in the social is in focus. We are not particularly interested in the individual *per se* or in discovering causality within the individual life course – we study individuals in order to understand common societal and cultural realities, in the first place learning and participation in education. We work with interpretation of a wide range of subjective actions (most often in textual form) in order to be able to understand the dynamics of subjective experience building in social context (Salling Olesen, 2004c).

In producing empirical material we often use autobiographical interviews. Unlike many sociologists we do not see biographies as information about micro-social relations, but rather as subjective expressions, like many others. Also other types of qualitative, loosely structured interviews can be used, provided they produce a piece of documentation of subjective meaning making in a context.

Usually the outcome is a transcription of a spoken interaction, and our analytical approach is mostly one of text analysis. The resulting transcription must be interpreted as a speech act in a specific context, not as 'the life history of...' some individuals. We may reflect on the implications of the specific constructive and synthesising effort we invite, when we ask people to tell their own life history, and how they may distinguish it from others. In this sense it is similar to a number of other transcribed speech acts.

Another procedure, which has proved useful, is a thematic group discussion which follows the rules of the classic social psychology group experiment (Morgenroth, 2001). A group discusses a prescribed theme, which is assumed to reflect important and often problematic experiences for the group members, and so is likely to trigger not only a conversation but also an interactive reaction. In this procedure the intention is to catalyse a communication and social dynamic in the group, which will reflect the subjective engagement of the participants in their specific situation and their interactive way of interpreting it. We have also worked with observations from fieldwork, which record interactions in the field as well as interactions between the observer and 'the field' – and several combinations. In these cases the way of documenting becomes different – diaries, field notes, introspections.

As a result we have a transcription, a text. Normally a record of the contact establishment, context, and the researchers' observations during the interaction is attached to the transcript. But the main emphasis is on texts, based on direct language use of the people whose learning processes and education trajectories we are studying. Regardless of the data production method the core of the methodology is the interpretation with the aim of theorizing subjectivity (Salling Olesen 2004c; Weber & Salling Olesen 2002).

A terminological note may help clarify our approach at this stage. We do not normally work with the biography as main interpretive conception. I talk about 'life history' rather than 'biography' referring to the subjectively experienced whole of life. I use 'biography' referring to the written or told account of a life, whether it is the autobiography or done by somebody else. I see this account as a piece of text, and like any other text in itself, it is an expression of subjective action in a context. Unlike discourse psychology and some interactionist sociological approaches we do not see the narrative self-construction as the decisive or exclusive account of subjectivity. This has to do with the theoretical

understanding of subjectivity and of language, which I will examine below in relation to learning.

Why Study Professionals?

First, professions are clearly politically important in themselves. They represent monopolies of knowledge and competence. Professions are backbones of modern societies, because they materialise the basic principles of rationality and division of labour, they secure some cohesion of society in spite of the division of labour and they secure the identification of its members with (their) rational role. Professionals are individuals who embody societal expertise and rationality, and who by a social concordat assume the responsibility for the general availability of this expertise. Professions and professionals have in this way played a very positive role in the modernization of societies, and have generally had a high legitimacy based on the combination of specialized knowledge and professional responsibility.

Without going deeper into political and philosophical discussions, it is important to state that the optimistic belief in science and rationality in itself is becoming increasingly questioned, as can be seen in the critique of positivism, in the accelerating doubts over new technology, in grassroots based political strategies, and in postmodern cultural critique. The traditional idea that scientific knowledge, without a 'knowing subject' and context, form the core of societal rationalization is outdated. A new way of dealing with knowledge and expertise is required. To the extent that professions still consist of collective experience and practice, the learning of professionals can become a key to developing quality in certain sectors, like health, as in the present instance, and to the democratization of knowledge and shared control.

Second, the identification of professionals with certain well-defined academic discourses and with more or less stereotyped practice experiences is a significant example of the societal constitution of subjectivity in late modernity. Doctors are not just individuals and not even just women or men, they are professionals who are subjectively constituted by their involvement in the professional practice, by belonging to and identifying with the profession. The subjective aspects of medical practice are the ways in which doctors relate to the knowledge base and knowledge production as well as how they engage in the challenges of their work tasks and in relation to people they meet there. We pay specific attention to the gender aspects of professions and professional identity. Gender is of course interesting in itself, but is particularly illuminating for the historical dimension of the mediation between subjectivity and society, because we can see how changes in societal gender relations may only take place when individuals change subjectively.

General Practitioner – Broker in a Profession Under Pressure

The medical profession is based on bio-medical knowledge which is extremely dynamic and pervasive. In its operational forms of clinical diagnosis and cure through medico-technical and pharmaceutical application, it exerts strong pressures on the profession in the form of an extra-professional industrialization: specialization, rapid change, substitution of the medical knowledge of the doctor with pharmaceuticals and technology.

On the top of the centrifugal forces influencing the medical profession as a whole the work situation of the GP in Denmark is affected by a number of particular organizational pressures. Increasing tasks are allocated, including prophylactic ones, which are more proactive than ordinary consultations; new pharmaceuticals and treatments are invented; the knowledge of many of the patients is increasing and, alongside this, their expectations. Above all, framing these developments, the GP is basically in a direct personal confrontation with the patient and their worries, hopes and anxieties. Many doctors feel under strong and contradictory pressure by these factors. We are interested in the ways in which they handle it: by learning new competences or by the fortification of traditional professional identities.

The medical profession has until now been able to maintain the professional monopoly and legitimacy to a much higher degree than most other of the classical professions (Freidson, 1975, 1994). The bio-medical knowledge forms the original legitimacy base of the profession, and is still defined as the almost exclusive rationality. However there is within the profession – unevenly recognised, and again epitomized in the general practice – a high awareness of complementary types of competence and experience involved in the medical practice. Bio-medical knowledge is crucial for the general practitioner, but the professional core tasks are equally dependent on communicative, empathic and caring competences. Also many doctors in hospitals who have a substantial task of direct patient consultation and conversation are confronted with the need for this less technical, more socially aware form of knowledge. Many contacts with patients include complicated needs and suffering of a medical, psychological, and social nature. Within the health sector the General Practitioner is, in the Danish welfare system, the responsible gatekeeper, who can elicit diagnoses and treatments, and the GP is responsible for the assessments about when to do something and when not.

The medical profession is traditionally mainly male, not only in terms of members but also in terms of self-understanding. The omnipotent role of the doctor who is master of life and death is a male stereotype. In Denmark there is a substantial change of the sex composition of the professionals. In some countries there is a majority of women, already, while in others, it is a growing minority. We are interested in the possible subjective aspects of this shift, and

the way in which it might influence professional conduct. The traditional doctor was a man, who (in best case) united the role as a medical expert with close and caring relations with patients, as a confidence-inspiring father figure. There is a world of difference between the male village doctor in Berger & Mohr (1969) and the lesbian doctor in inner London in Linden West's study (2001). We must of course not confuse sex with gender, simply equating rationalism and omnipotence with maleness, and the caring, empathic and communicative practices with femininity. The gender stereotypes do not cover the variety. To some extent the profession may remain predominantly male even with female actors, but on the other side it seems likely to make a difference, and our preliminary observations confirm that there is a relative interrelation between gender, learning, and professional identity (Hølge-Hazeltin, 2004). Studying gender difference without reducing this to gender stereotypes may provide a piece of understanding to our general question: in what ways do subjective factors shape knowledge-based work?

This interest in the gender issue is not entirely instrumental, seeing gender as an indicator of subjective engagement. Women conquer new land by becoming professionals. Apart from the possible class bias of this liberation, the (historical) synergetic intertwining of gender relations, division of labour and modernization may also in late modern societies be seen as a main path to women's emancipation.

Professional Identity as Learning in Life History

In sociological discussions of professional identity the existence of a homogenous, legitimate knowledge base and a useful function is presumed. The subjective condition for professionalization – the fact that a group of people identify with this knowledge base, perform similar competences to a rather high degree, take responsibility, and develop their own practice – is defined as an ethical quest (Abbott, 1981; Davis, 1999). I want to develop a concept of professional identity which is sensitive to empirical analysis of subjective processes of specific (groups of) individuals instead of the normative concept of professional ethics.

I see professional identity as a subjective effort of lifelong learning and identification in which individuals, with their life history, their gender etc., become able to fill an already existing tasks to some extent by acquiring already existing knowledge and creating their own practice and identity in relation to it (Salling Olesen, 2001a, 2001b). In this perspective the professional identity is the combined effort of these many learning processes and of the ongoing struggle with the demands of the task – integrated with their own general life experience. In this process they have to deal with their inabilities in relation to

this task, and their doubts about themselves in a never-ending story of defences and learning processes, and it has no predefined outcome. I have organized the analysis in the following small heuristic model (Salling Olesen, 2003, 2004a):

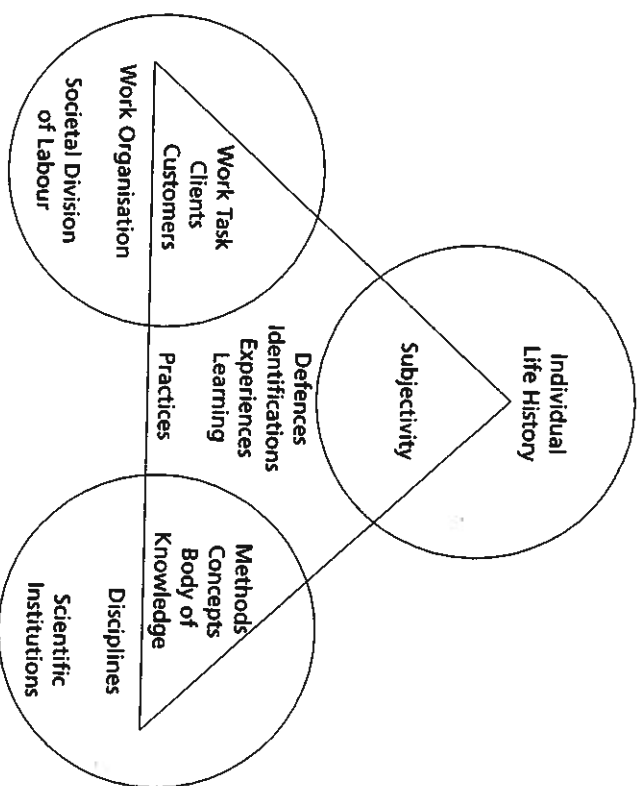


Figure 1. Heuristic model for analysis of professional identity learning processes

The model suggests that experience, defensive reactions, learning etc. of everyday life can be interpreted as a concrete mediation between three relatively independent dynamics: the societal work context, the knowledge base of the profession and the individual and collective subjectivities of the medical doctors.

I must leave out here a theoretical discussion of the identity concept in relation to socialization and the social psychology of work identity (see Salling Olesen & Weber, 2001, with inspiration from Becker-Schmidt et al., 1982). But in theorising as well as empirical interpretations we draw on insights from Marxism and psychoanalysis. The psychoanalytical theoretical ground does not imply, as many people usually assume, an individual psychological explanation of subjectivity. I am interested in the dialectic between the social and the psychodynamic levels, within specific professions. Marxist notions of work and

society help us contextualise the development of the profession within a history of modernisation. Psychoanalytic interpretation helps us to understand individual subjective reactions and consciousness – first of all defence reactions and identifications as psychodynamic mechanisms – as subjective mediations of culture, which in themselves, in turn, shape culture.

A profession illustrates this point very well because it deals with a subjective engagement which is clearly not individual, but societal. Culture exists in socially articulated meanings and symbols that are attached to artefacts and stabilised in social institutions. Female experiences and socialisation may influence the professional practice if they enable a different way of grasping situations, and they may contribute to a gradual change or growth in professional insights only in so far as they are generalized instead of remaining 'private', 'individual' or arbitrary. On the other hand cultural meanings are only reproduced by being used by somebody, and mediated by partly unconscious factors.

Two Examples of Interpretation

We interview doctors about their lives and their experiences from everyday practice, transcribe and interpret what they say in these contexts, but our main interest is with life histories as a context for understanding the subjective aspects of these processes. We work with the transcripts in different ways, both by cross case recollection of important themes, and with close textual analysis in single cases, trying to understand the person, her/his identity process and its rooting in life experiences, recent as well as more distant. The interviews provide informative description and narration combined with reflection on difficulties and ways of handling difficulties in everyday life practice. A number of themes are surfacing immediately across cases, e.g. for most interview persons the feeling of time pressure, which limits their possible way of conducting their optimal function. Many are preoccupied with techniques and strategies for the management of time and feelings of pressure. Sometimes the feeling comes out in the form of general complaints about work conditions, and in other cases it appears to explain strong irritation, sometimes even aggression, with patients. Many narratives and reflections are related to feelings of insufficiency in concrete situations or in relation to particular tasks. Several interviewees indicate that the very interview situation is a most welcome opportunity to have such reflective communication. Most interview persons relate their reflections (as they have also been invited to do) to their own particular way of being a GP, and to gender aspects, i.e. they have a general view that the role and institution is there, but can be filled in a personal way. This does not mean that their own practices and emotional involvement is entirely explicit and transparent to

themselves. These are the points of departure for deeper interpretation of certain parts of interviews.

A female doctor tells about a visit to a cancer patient in a hopeless state of illness, being invited by the daughter of the patient because her mother (the wife of the patient) was suffering very much from the situation and from the anger of the patient. It is understandably a painful situation for everyone. The patient himself has previously asked the doctor to stay away because her visits exposed his (new) and dependent situation in relation to the family. This is one of the cases where the interviewee narrates without much encouragement, and changes to reflections in between. The time schedule of the contact and communications becomes quite blurred in the interview, clearly it is not a structured situation for the GP. But she gradually realizes (or has realized during a longer trajectory) that she is unable to handle the situation in a satisfactory way. By our analysis it becomes obvious that this has to do with the relations she is in with the family members.

It appears obvious that the GP identifies with the man's feeling of having lost control: she has worked with suggestions about how to give him a more active role back (teaching his wife the use of computers, which was among his professional competences). We can see it as a way of relating positively to the patient in spite of being unable to do anything. She reveals negative feelings in relation to the two women in the situation – this could be because of the identification with the man's anger, it could also be because she feels being played around with (maybe the family members actually called her because they want her to hospitalize the patient to relieve them) – and she feels an object of angry reactions from the family members at the same time. But it could also be seen as a reversed gender reaction – they take the female role in the situation of care and compassion, and leave the impossible male role – to do something – to her. There is hardly any doubt that she feels obliged to be able to do something. The omnipotence-request or -desire appears in this interview, as in many others.

This is an important situation for the doctor where her professional skills have not been, and have not been felt to be, sufficient. She mentions that she has, as a consequence of this experience, registered for a course in palliative (pain relief) medicine. On the one side a very typical professional reaction – you seek necessary knowledge through a course in order to handle the situation better – but also a bit misplaced – the problem is not palliation, but care, social psychology and an ability to handle relations. But it is a clear example of the willingness to learn, which also appears in other passages of this interview, and in many other cases. She has, during the process, already been thinking of the need to learn something more to handle this type of situation. But the options available and maybe the omnipotence request make her choose what is offered.

A further example, also a female doctor, who is commenting more generally on her experience of being a GP. The interview is more discontinuous, jumping

between many topics and situations, which relate to conflicts and identifications, some of which are retrospectively related to her experiences of the hospital, before she went into general practice. She is mostly not very concrete, bringing few narratives and references to concrete events and time. We interpret this structure of the text as a manifestation of her loss of control and struggling to define herself. During the interview several references to patients' behaviour occur – patients are 'demanding and rude'. In a passage the feeling of flooding is condensed in telling about patients' use of their cell phones in her consultation/clinic. The clinic takes on specific importance as a private room, in which she offers her full attention to people, and yet they intrude into it with technical devices which are entirely alien to this function. It seems like the clinic becomes the metaphor for the particular hybrid relation between the doctor and the patient, in which she (professionally) makes herself (personally) available, in order to provide a space in which they can place their worries and anxieties – and the partly aggressive feeling of being offended in this space reveals a real identity crisis. This is certainly produced by real changes in patients' expectations (and means of communication), and of workload etc.

Close analysis of language use seems to reflect this identity conflict. The interview person changes her use of personal pronouns between "I" and "we" in a significant way of being inside-outside in relation to gender. She partly indicates herself to be a member of the doctors' community as opposed to women's community (in relation to the hospital where female nurses prevail), but also partly as a member of the profession. But also in defining herself out of the profession, referring to her own borders of tolerance. Her uncertainty comes out in an untranslatable way of talking about giving up the profession – she will "lay off the key" – which is a linguistic novelty, maybe combining 'laying off' and 'turning the key'. We may interpret it as a result of the fact that she has not ever dared to think this possibility before; it comes as a consequence of the reasoning and the emotional expressions of her difficulties during the interview.

Learning and Defence

Now the intention is to briefly indicate how life history interpretations of such empirical pieces can bring out something which is relevant for learning in general. We look for an all-embracing notion of learning. Obviously one aspect of professional learning is the learning of the necessary knowledge and skills to be included in the profession – learning *for* the profession. But I also refer to the learning which takes place *in* the professions, facing practical everyday tasks. Each professional may learn during his professional practice, and thereby increase his or her individual capacity to conduct professional work, as well as most likely gain insights for his/her own life in general. Some of this learning

from experience may just enhance previous education, much of it however demands revisions and reorientations of previous knowledge and understanding. In both cases I refer to intended as well as unintended learning. The above examples at least illustrate the need of these particular GPs to learn something (new) in order to be able to handle everyday practices, in which way this need is related to basic challenges in their professional identity, and also how much their consciousness and experience of everyday practices is defined by their involvement in the situation.

I see learning more generally as the building of insights and competences for self-regulation. It is subjective capacity building for realistic and efficient relation to the real world. But what is that and how can we best conceptualise learning processes? Learning theory has moved from ideas about acquisition (of already existing knowledge and skills), to thinking about learning in mainly two ways, sometimes combined. One is learning as construction, and another is learning as participation in practice. These ideas open up theoretical possibilities with reference to important aspects of learning, but there is still a tendency to reproduce the old dichotomy. That participation, for instance, appears to be more or less adaptation, simplifying the subjective moment of learning. And the construction process becomes detached from its referential as well as functional links to reality, as well as from its subjective (psychic) functions for the individual subjects, turning the process into narrow cognitivism. In our life history approach we (re)integrate the aspect of social participation and redefine the constructive efforts as subjective efforts, interpreting the flow of everyday life experience in the context of life history as well as to a more comprehensive context of collective cultural experience. These contexts are dimensions in understanding experience processes that are always *subjectively specific* and *historically situated*. The examples show the ways in which reflections and experience building are embedded in the dynamic subjective engagement in a practical situation, which is formed by an individual life history as well as by cultural resources.

In relation to learning we are particularly interested in the interference between cognitive and emotional aspects of the individual experience building, throughout social life. Clearly learning in everyday life is not a cognitive phenomenon only. Consciousness is embedded in practical interaction, incorporating all its meanings for the experiencing subject(s), the emotions connected with the present situation, the perception of one self and the situation. Perception is informed by the previous experience with its combined cognitive and emotional aspects that are the preconditions for the way of perceiving present situations.

A specific condition of professional learning is that everyday life perception is closely related to habitual routines. Tasks and experiences in everyday life, with their rich and complicated meaning for the individual practitioner, cannot

always be understood in the knowledge discourses available, nor can they simply be mastered via the practical routines of the work situation. But the imperative of practising which is built into any profession, involves the maintenance of a routine that is not passive, as the notion seems to suggest: it is an active editing of perceptions and knowledge in accordance with possible practices – a kind of defence mechanism.

Thomas Leithäuser and others use the concept "Everyday life consciousness" (*alltagsbewusstsein*) (Leithäuser, 1976; Salling Olesen, 1989) for an active, psychic and collective organizing of everyday life, which makes it practicable and emotionally relieving. The function is to avoid everyday life conflicts evoking deep feelings and anxieties all the time. I think we can see the subjective function of knowledge discourses for professionals in this perspective. They have a selective and reductive influence on perception, and enable the professional practitioner to fulfil the imperative of practising. In the professional monopoly of the work field the knowledge discourse serves as a defence by defining the observations and problems which can be understood and solved.

Elements of *defence* help the professional to stabilize self understanding and the feeling of mastering certain practices under conditions that may seem contradictory and threatening. But there are also elements of *curiosity and responsibility*, in which they face challenges and try to learn from them. Professionals are often aware of the limitations of their professional knowledge and competence. This sensitivity to reality is subjectively supported by more or less idealized ideas of the mission of the professions, of being able to perform rational and useful practice. The dynamic of defence and curiosity may be related to external conflicts of professional ideals and challenges, but it may also be related to their own life experience. In the defensive function of knowing is also embedded a preconscious 'awareness' of conflicts and difficulties, which in the first place evoke the defence. This awareness of alternative 'unlived lives' that were blocked in life history may be a reservoir for learning, which goes together with the professional responsibility in forming new ideas and objectives. There is no space for going deeper into these psychodynamic aspects but in general we have little or no chance to do it. It must suffice to know that they are there, that they may be individually different, and must be traced in concrete interpretations.

More generally it means that the defensive subjective function of knowing and reality-oriented learning are dialectically interrelated.

The interesting thing for our study is not to find out 'how much of this and how much of that'. Instead it is interesting to find out how these basic social psychological mechanisms of learning interact with specific challenges and contradictions of the professional practice, with different 'offers' of the

scientific knowledge base, and with their interrelation, and also to imagine how they might be different.

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

The analysis of language use is a pivotal issue, because this is the level where the emotional, cognitive and social dimensions are coming together. In line with Wittgenstein's concept of language games we can see professional knowledge as a collective production of social meaning, and therefore negotiable and changing, but at the same rooted in social practices. We can understand the psychic aspect of this "negotiation" with inspiration from Alfred Lorenzer's materialist theory of socialization and language acquisition (Lorenzer, 1972): about how the link between individual subjectivity and language is established in the first place. In the mother-child-dyad, through the gradual separation of the child from the mother, the child learns *interaction patterns* together with the acquisition of language. Contradictions of societal structure and the cultural way of signifying them are built into a systematically contradictory, though individual subjectivity. The individual's language use remains a mediation between the individual sensual experience and the meanings established by participating in the language games of the culture, i.e. (practically embedded) social interaction.

I suggest that it is important to apply such a perspective to the experience processes of professionals. The knowledge base of the profession is a language game in which relatively stable meanings are established. But to the extent that individual experiences – from professional practice or from previous life history – are not covered by or cannot be communicated in this dominant language game, they may still be manifest in their language use. In this 'halo' of surplus meaning some aspects of present experience – with its conflicts and the practice

imperative – are linked to and/or differentiated from past experiences of conflicts and relations in the language use. Interpretation of the language use is a key to the dynamics of the borderlines of possible meaning making in everyday life within a certain professional discourse and a certain professional practice.

These basic ideas about the relation between language use and life experience can be developed for adult learning in general. Experience is the product of the individual learning from the process of being-in-the-world. Learning and knowing is always taking place in cultural media informed by individual history (Salling Olesen 2004c). When we study the language use in and about specific, subjectively important situations, we may have to examine the basic dynamics of defensive or learning ways of relating to actual realities and practices. The life history is the subjective horizon on this process.

The Societal Perspective: Knowledge Democracy

Professions are interesting also in illustrating the social consequences of the subjective dialectic of learning and identification. Professional knowledge is institutionally stabilized knowledge, and based on similar knowledge monopolies and the specific semantic structure of knowledge domains, which must be seen as an *historical* product of a specific, capital driven modernization. The dissolution of centralized orders of rationality may take place in an asynchronous way but is somehow based in the historical process of late or developed modernity. Professions are solving concrete tasks – most often an immaterial service production – which combine knowledge, specific people and organizations. Professions in the classical sense were seen as natural, eternal, defined by a specific object, and basically legitimized by their scientific basis. Historically a number of service productions have been delegated to professional groups, and especially the welfare states have left to professionals to secure quality development in their domains. The medical profession is one of them. With the new public management influence we see – though quite differently in different countries and organizational contexts – a managerial turn (Filiander, 2003). These organizational change processes interact strongly with subjective experiences and learning of an organizations' members. Empirical studies into cultural process of learning and meaning making in the professional organization may give an intriguing insight into the interrelation between the specificities of work itself, the changes in the welfare state framework, and the development of knowledge in certain domains.

The relativization of knowledge and science is theoretically integrated in social constructivism and in the postmodern critique of modernist rationality and emancipation ideas. This is not the place for entering into a discussion of these positions. But a life history approach may be seen as a practical, analytical

pendant or alternative to these more general critiques. Life history studies into professions, professional practices, and professional identity, in this way, offer an additional contribution to a historical, empirical sociology of knowledge.

It is not only a matter of understanding the historical dynamics in a more differentiated way. It is also the great challenge of late modernity, or the 'knowledge society': The *knowledge democracy* problem. The social significance of knowledge increases – consequently also the democratic problem involved in expertise and delegation of knowledge based work to specific groups of people. We need a critical framework, which can indicate ways of improving democratic relations between experts and knowledge specialists and the general public, as well as help experts and professionals maintain their responsibility for the general well being in a way suitable for late modernity. Democratization without romanticism means finding ways in which a division of labour can be mediated by dynamic knowledge sharing and solidarity – in a way reviving ideas of an organic intellectualism (Gramsci, 1971). In a research strategy sense this means addressing issues of professional identity and learning in critical solidarity with the professionals. How can they conduct their mandate in a (more) democratic way?

We are convinced that a new professional identity must develop if the GP shall sustain his/her broker position between a more and more industrialized and technical health system and the task of meeting the messy needs of the individual patient. This new professional identity must be less modelled on a technical model of applying bio-medical knowledge to repair bodily malfunction, and more by ... what? – This is exactly the question one would like to raise with the profession and to be able to answer on the basis of the professionals' own learning processes. In this sense the aim of life history interpretation is to feed back to the people involved in the research.

To embrace this complexity more generally we need a historical framing of the sociological concepts of professions and knowledge, and we need to admit subjective dimensions of learning and identity into the social theory. Instead of the sociology of science, not to mention philosophy of science, we need a much more comprehensive 'sociology of knowing', which penetrates the boundaries between scientific knowledge, practical experience and learning in everyday life. May be we could name it an *ecological* conception of professions and knowledge based work, in order to emphasize the importance of the specific content of work, its quality of concrete life, and its rooting in specific people's subjectivity. It is the basic reproduction of life in a historical as well as evolutionary sense that increasingly depend on the subjective handling of knowledge (Negt & Kluge, 1981; Salling Olesen, 1999).

Conclusions

It should be emphasized that this article is a part of a work in progress: drawing theoretical and methodological experiences from previous projects on professionals for the ongoing empirical project on general medical practitioners. The underlying process of theorizing and developing methodology for empirical research into (lifelong) learning is an intended prime objective (Salling Olesen, 2004b).

The case has been made to conclude that Life History approaches provide a productive framework for studying subjective aspects of professional work and a professions' development, particularly professional identity and professional learning, in a social context, comprising the development of work as well as the discursive knowledge base of the profession.

Professions are exemplars for the development of knowledge-based work and for the significance of knowledge on the whole. Subjective factors of identification and learning will be decisive factors in understanding the interrelation between societal work, culture (societal knowing) and individual lives. The differentiating empirical study of the reconstruction of professional identities and being a professional can give important contributions to theorizing learning and knowledge in a knowledge society.

Notes

1. The life history project at Roskilde University is a theoretical and methodological project. Based on a conglomerate of empirical projects we explore conceptual frameworks of analysis and the testing out of a variety of empirical methods for production of data and interpretation (Salling Olesen 1996a, Weber, 1998). Depending on cases, interpretations were thematically centred on *work* and *gender*, assuming that these themes organize (the most) important aspects of learning. The project has received funding from the Danish Research Council for the Humanities.
2. The General Practitioner project is a collaboration between medical and lifelong learning research institutions, led by professor Hanne Hollnagel, Research Unit for General Practice, Copenhagen, and myself. The project has received funding from the Danish Research Council for the Humanities and from a health insurance foundation (*Sygekassernes Helsefond*). The interviews referred to here were conducted by Bibi Højle-Hazellon. They have been interpreted in several interpretation workshops whose contributions I would like to acknowledge collectively.
3. More systematically I suggest the concept of 'experience' of Theodor W. Adorno and Oskar Negt (recently commented in Negt 1999). This concept includes the consciousness being produced as well as presupposed in *social practice in everyday life*, to the continuous learning process of *individual life history*, and to the objectification of collective *cultural experience in the form of knowledge, symbols and norms*. All three levels – everyday life

learning, life experience, and collective knowledge – represent aspects or modalities of experience, and all are seen as internally defined through each other's. "Experience is the process whereby we as human beings, individually and collectively, consciously master reality, and the ever-living understanding of this reality and our relation to it" (Salling Olesen, 1989, p. 6-7).

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15 Biographical and Life History Approaches:
Commonalities and Differences in the Study of Adult
and Lifelong Learning

Linden West, Barbara Merrill and Anders Siig Andersen, with
Kirsten Weber and Henning Salling Olesen.

Commonalities and Differences

This book has illustrated, in fine detail, the use and potential of biographical, life history or narrative approaches in building deeper forms of understanding of processes of adult and lifelong learning – formal, informal, incidental and intimate – and their relationship, in diverse settings. The book offers many examples of the wealth of biographical and life history research, and its unique potential to illuminate people's lives and their interaction with the social world, and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and meaning in lives. And to illuminate the interplay of different experiences and forms of learning – from the most intimate to the most formal – in ways that challenge bureaucratic distinctions in learning and the tendency to compartmentalise experience. Clearly the book reflects the changing nature and boundaries of adult education, or adult and lifelong learning, as it flows through different and diverse sites, in a lifewide as well as lifelong sense. There is a rich tapestry of research and reflection woven into the chapters, covering widely different contexts – learning at work, in families, in political movements, in therapy, as well as in more formal educational settings – and drawing on various disciplinary influences and methodological assumptions.

There are obvious differences in emphasis in relation to the purpose and interpretative tasks of biographical research: is it for individualistic or collectivist ends, echoing an old debate in European adult education about social purpose? There are differences of perception regarding the nature of research itself, including what the researcher brings to processes of knowledge production, or at least as to whether it is important to make the auto/biographical process explicit. Yet there are shared assumptions and perspectives too, which transcend national and disciplinary boundaries. This includes – reaching back to the Chicago School – a fundamental respect for the subject as an agent in a life and in learning. And a commitment, as C. Wright Mills implied in his sociological imagination, to building interdisciplinary perspectives, which connect macro level forces to the most intimate features of the human psyche, and to seek to understand the interplay between them. Biographies mock single disciplinary frames and claims to know in some inclusive sense: we need

historical, psychological as well as sociological imagination, and maybe literary and poetic too. Some of which finds expression in the emergence of psychosocial understanding of subjectivity and processes of learning, drawing not only on sociology but also psychodynamic sources. Overall, the book illuminates how biographical and life history work operates within a framework of commonalities and difference, in relation to epistemology, theoretical sources and methodology. Approaches to generating narratives and their interpretation vary somewhat: if there are similarities in the methodological family, as in all families, there are important differences too.

In the German and Danish traditions, for instance, there has been an attempt to build what is termed a more objective hermeneutics – partly to establish the efficacy of biography (or life history!) within the academy, especially in sociology. In the United Kingdom, there is greater scepticism towards the positioning of the researcher as 'objective', under the influence of feminism and post-structuralism. There is greater emphasis given to the intersubjectivity at the core of research and an associated questioning of efforts to construct the 'truth' of a life or to present the researcher as easily distinguished from the 'object' of his/her enquiry. In this tradition, conventional genre distinctions between self and other, immediacy and memory, and even past and present, tend to unravel. This is not to suggest that attempts at analytic detachment or rigour are unimportant or undesirable; rather to recognise our partiality and the investment (and even projections) of the researcher's own self and affiliations in the process of making sense of other's lives.

It should be noted that biographical research, as applied to adult and lifelong learning, or adult education, has historically been characterised by considerable diversity. There are several reasons for this: one being the multi-disciplinary nature of education itself, which has, in part, influenced the study of adult and lifelong learning. Education comprises several sub-disciplines such as Philosophy, Psychology and Sociology, each with its own perspectives, and national and international scientific communities, as well as different channels for publication. A further factor is that many life history and biography researchers belong to and draw on more recent inter-disciplinary research fields, as illustrated by gender and cultural studies. These are fields having many parallels with research into adult and lifelong learning.

A further source of heterogeneity is the fact that adult education research has grown out of different educational traditions across Europe, such as liberal adult education, the labour movement, radical adult education, Christian social movements and more recently training and professional education. Nowadays there is fragmentation of purpose in the field, as teaching, learning and research take place in a many settings such as community centres, formal educational institutions, the workplace and informally, in the family. In the past, practical concerns and theoretical interests in using biography and life history as a tool in

gaining wider sociological or historical understanding were united under a shared enlightenment ethos. But these commonalities are no longer quite so obvious as contemporary adult and lifelong learning becomes more of an amalgam of varying traditions, institutions and practices. These range from socially critical or oppositional to more instrumentalist, self-reflective learning for professional or personal ends. Moreover, the voluntarist traditions of adult education in which learners, in some significant sense, chose to learn may be giving way to a pressure to engage in lifelong learning – in the sense of developing or refining marketable skills – in what can be seen as a more morally authoritarian, neo-liberal climate: learn or lose your benefits, or at least remain excluded from society and its opportunity structures (Field, 2000).

The Necessity of Biographical Research

Biography and biographical research may to an extent, as some authors have argued, be a product of late modernity and the rise of more individualistic, 'risk' cultures, in which responsibilities have tended to shift from the state on to individuals to keep themselves updated or look after themselves in old age. The historical scripts which tended to bind previous generations have weakened and this partly explains the growing relevance of such research approaches across social science. If class, for instance, remains a potent influence in terms of access to resources and power, including educational, its subjective grip appears to have loosened and there is a need to chronicle and theorise the processes involved. Moreover, as Alheit and Dausien explain in their chapter, societies are experiencing social change at a profound and, at times, frightening level, ranging from intimate relationships to the destabilising effects of economic globalisation, where whole communities can be deskilled overnight and collective lifeworlds can disintegrate (as in the older industrial areas of the United Kingdom), with a range of consequences for the social fabric and individual lives. The disorientations and historical disconnections of the late or post-modern period have spawned a therapeutic imperative in learning, as a norm, in many settings.

In such a context, we have to plan our biographical life even if structural constraints remain strong and resources scarce. We need to draw on our biographical resources to cope with the uncertainties, as well as opportunities, of modern life. Life experience has to be reflexively engaged with – biographical learning – drawing on a range of human and symbolic resources: to understand how this works, in practice, and how and why there can be greater synergy between different forms of learning – intimate, incidental, informal and institutional – becomes an important, even an essential task. The knowledge society demands the constant creation of new knowledge in unpredictable

conditions, rather than a passive consumption of fixed, inert, slabs of 'knowledge', passively injected into empty vessels, once upon a time. There is a need, especially, at the meso-level – in social spaces such as adult education and family learning centres, in the workplace, in local communities, and in a range of voluntary associations – for organisations to reconfigure themselves as 'environments' and 'agencies' for learning and to recognise the knowledge resources they have to offer and their role as reflexive learning organisations. Biographical research brings some of these imperatives to life, in rich detail, in ways that most other research cannot. Biographical research, in these terms, has become a necessity in its own right, whether as a distinct field of practice, or when using a mixed methods design, as described in Chapter 14.

Writing this book

It should be noted, in drawing the book to its conclusion, that writing and editing the text has been a challenge. Whose 'voice' the book represents and which perspectives were to be prominent was a matter of lively debate. Life history points to the understanding of the social formation of subjectivity in the individual life, and of the interplay between the historical subject and social contexts, in everyday life, including a focus on the role of learning in building agency (Salling Olesen 1996, Weber 1998). But differences, as well as commonalities, were alive in the editorial group. Key terms such as biography and life history are not necessarily employed in the same way. Terms can be used inter-changeably, or, in the case of some Danish authors, a clear distinction is made between biography as the told life and a life history, in which the researcher brings his or her interpretations and theoretical insights into play. Subjectivity itself – and the role of language, attachment and emotionality, alongside cognition in its formation – is a key area of debate. We return to this issue below.

It is also clear that different researchers may have different preoccupations, in part depending on their disciplinary affiliations: to build more adequate social theories that acknowledge the active role of subjects in making meaning and shaping social forms, for instance, or to interrogate the nature of learning, and the interplay of emotionality, cognition and narrative processes, in deeper, more holistic ways, in and across individual lives. Or to use life history or biography as a pedagogic tool: as a way of illuminating the lives and choices of learners in professional contexts, enabling them to work more effectively with others in genuinely learner-centred ways. There is a preoccupation, too, in particular chapters, with building self-understanding as a fundamental and explicit part of doing research and thinking about the other, as illustrated so vividly in Nod Miller's chapter.

Communication and Language

Moreover, we may each bring a different language into the space represented by the book, but in most cases this has to be translated into English. This is far from a neutral process and our meanings, in translation, can be lost. Language, as the poststructuralists remind us, is a powerful dimension of who we are, and it shapes our interactions with culture and others, as well as our understanding of the world. It is far from a neutral tool and constitutes as well as represents reality. We see and argue, in a sense, through the eye of language and, associatedly, the cultures in which it is embedded. Working cross-nationally is exciting and good, in that it enables the researcher to step outside national paradigms as we are introduced to new ideas, approaches and the differing *verstehen* of the social world (Merrill, 1997). But we have to work hard to communicate and understand each other. We are all potentially lost in translation.

Metaphors may not easily translate, for instance, while our examples are culturally embedded. It is too easy for those who speak English as a first language to forget how hard it can be for non-native English speakers to write academically, in English, and tell their stories without losing voice and nuance. As Hantrais and Ager remind us:

English is generally assumed to be the lingua franca of international research, confirming the belief amongst many English and American social scientists that there is no need to master a foreign tongue in order to collaborate effectively with members of a different speech community (1985, p 29).

Agnieszka Bron and Marianne Horsdal powerfully document, in their chapters, the centrality of language in relation to identity, to self, and even to sanity – in an embodied emotional as well as cognitive sense – and to meaning making processes, across time. Language expresses and embodies, as Ewa Hoffman wrote, our deepest memories of place, smells, traumas, moments of exhilaration and aspects of our deepest selves. But when forced to use another language, in a different culture, we can feel alienated from our embodied experience. At conferences, such as the ESREA Life History and Biographical Network, misunderstandings and frustration can arise when native English speakers listen to papers in English given by non-native English speakers and vice versa. Participating in European research projects, which have used biographical methods, has highlighted some very specific problems. Key concepts such as the adult student, higher education or access to education – which may seem straightforward – are problematic as they are interpreted and used differently. Concepts such as class, gender and ethnicity may be deemed less important in some countries than others, at least in an analytical sense, which can provoke dispute. There are differences of emphasis, across the

chapters, as to what conceptually shapes the interpretation of lived experience: far from simply being a technical approach to gathering and analysing data, biography and life history are channels and instruments shaped by values and varying epistemological, ontological as well as methodological assumptions.

The Cutting Edge

Yet if the territory of research is varied, the research represented in the pages of this book constitutes a cutting edge, no less, in challenging boundaries and redefining what research actually is. This includes challenging disciplinary or academic tribal boundaries but also in theorising learning and the subject called the learner. The emergence of psychosocial perspectives – drawing on depth psychology, sociology and history – exposes the limitations of conventional academic demarcations, in understanding learning but also subjectivity and its construction. Interdisciplinary approaches, where researchers from different disciplines work together as a team, enrich the data and processes of interpretation.

The value of interdisciplinarity is the way it can offer a fuller picture of the making of individuals in a historical, social, cultural but also psychological context, in dynamic interaction. If sociology has traditionally lacked a convincing account of how the social is internalised and finds expression in different ways, even in supposedly objectively similar situations, psychoanalytic perspectives offer a rich, nuanced and fine grained account of the developmental if also deeply contingent and idiosyncratic nature of subjectivity and learning. By sociologists, psychologists, narrative theorists and others working together, our understanding of life history, and of the subject called the learner, as well as the subject of learning, becomes more complete as an individual's actions, thoughts and behaviour are seen in terms of a dynamic interplay between psyche and the social, the individual and narrative resources, history and specific struggles, the person and her social situation, the lifeworld and a life history. This dynamic can involve movement from a 'me' to an 'I' in Mead's terms, as outlined in Agnieszka Bron's chapter: a shift having the active learning subject at its heart.

Biography and life history research are at the cutting edge of theorising the subject of learning as well as the subject called the learner. Beyond the reductionism of the cognitively driven information-processing subject of conventional social science (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000); or the unitary, a-social and ahistorical subject of some psychologically shaped writing about adult learning (West, 2002). The notion of 'subject' can in fact be understood in two different but overlapping senses throughout the book: first, the 'subject' as the focus of our studies, with regard to the policies, practices, experiences,

impacts and meanings of adult and lifelong learning. Second, the idea of the 'subject' having to do with ontological assumptions about what it is to be human, which, in turn, inevitably shape how we conceptualise learning and its purpose. Some assumptions about subjectivity – whether this is the defended subject of psychoanalytic thinking, or the rational unitary subject of humanist psychology and much North American writing on adult learning, or the multiple subject of poststructuralist and radical feminist thought – influence what we consider learning to be, how it is best facilitated and how we can most appropriately research it.

Marianne Horsdal's chapter on narrative, learning and traumatic experience graphically illustrates how our responses to new experience – our capacity to engage with this and learn from it, or resist it – seems to depend on processing our past and, in turn, finding some inner subjective strength, cohesion, and narrative resources, to make meaning and put demons to rest. Such subjectivity appears deeply dependent on the quality of our attachments to others – therapists, educators, a range of significant others – and on the whole network of relationships in which we are situated. We need to understand more of these inter- and intrasubjective processes, which may be foundational to human agency, in an increasingly unstable, fractured and, at times, traumatic world.

There is, in brief, across the book, major conceptual refinement of the idea of the subject, born out of the auto/biographical or life history imagination: beyond a cognitive processor of information; or a rational, coherent and autonomous subject in which identity is a relatively fixed and stable consciousness of one's position. There is, instead, an understanding of the subject as social, and psychological, defended as well as an agent in a life, at one and the same time. There is movement beyond the traditional dichotomies of social versus individual or the social versus subjective. In biography and life history research we find important ways of transcending such binaries, mostly embedded in and implied by ways of analysing narrative material.

Biography and life history offer, therefore, different ways of conceptualising the active construction of subjectivity, beyond cognitivism and essentialism. Some of the focus specifically relates to the role of language, as indicated, and understanding its central place in experience and consciousness building. The discursive turn, which has influenced social science, including psychology, in the last couple of decades, has undermined previously clear differences between the social sciences, whether dealing with institutions and/or the social activity of human beings, or in what we may term the cultural sciences, in dealing with symbolic articulations in language use and artefacts.

But notions of subjectivity embrace pre- and unconscious, felt and bodily dimensions of experience too, as well as language. This way of theorising draws, in part, on critical theory, which regards subjects as constituted in a subject-object dialectic, in a social context. But it also draws on psychoanalysis,

especially when the classical concept of the unconscious is redefined as socially produced rather than drive related. Subjectivity becomes conceptualised as a cultural product of an ongoing relation to society with conscious as well as pre- and unconscious dimensions. When society is seen as a contradictory and often hidden totality of relations, which are embedded in the life experience of individuals, the relations between sensual experience and the possible meanings attached to it, can be seen as an interactive relation but one regulated by social dynamics. What can be named and what stays repressed takes on a historic and social as well as a deeply intra-subjective guise.

Subjectivity, and becoming more of a subject also links, in some of the writing, to the place of emotionality and the quality of attachment to significant others – including in research – in shaping who we are, what we say, our capacity for learning, and our place in the world. This works at a pre-linguistic and emotional rather than a rational level, as described in the chapter by Linden West, drawing on what the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1998) called memory in feeling. Our more primitive selves can become riddled with anxiety, in new situations, as we may feel unsure as to whether we can cope or will be good enough: as patterns in the past may overwhelm a present. Anxiety easily undermines our capacity for relatedness or even thinking, in the sense of the capacity to play with symbols and to weave connections across disparate thoughts. Thoughts require a thinker, as the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1962) famously observed: we may defend against learning, whether with people or more symbolically, in many and diverse ways, as in the case of Gina and Shazir in Chapter 12, because taking risks may threaten a precarious sense of self. Biographical and life history perspectives, of this kind, provide a potent challenge to the narrow rationality, and the corresponding neglect of emotionality, that has sometimes characterised the literature of adult education (Hunt & West, 2006).

On Learning

The discussion of subjectivity implicit in many chapters – in the work of Weber, Olesen, West, Bron, Dominicé, Horsdal, Miller etc. – is decisive for understanding the subject of learning, itself, in new, more holistic ways. Learning is a subjective process, related to immediate sensory experience and to the specific situations in which we are placed, as well as the cultural bodies of knowledge or scripts for interpreting experience, mostly mediated via language(s), available to us. In recent learning theory two main developments are beginning to transcend the naive reification of content or seeing the learner as a container to be filled. One has to do with constructivism, whether individually based or ascribed, more radically, to being situated in relationships,

social networks and organisations. Another is related to immediate social practices and the way in which the potential learner(s) is/are participating in these practices, and makes meaning within them. Such developments enhance our theoretical understanding of learning.

Conventional learning theories frequently fail to situate learning processes in real lives and/or social and cultural-historical processes. The cumulative, retroactive and proactive dimension of human experience is reduced to a focus on the “mechanisms” of learning, or to superficial categories of learning styles. But the richness of biography and life history research can re-situate our understanding of learning in a more holistic, historical and specific way, as in interplay between life history and current context, power and what can or cannot be said in organisational or more intimate settings. This applies to work related learning, so poignantly illustrated in Salling Olesen’s chapter as well as in Andersen and Trojaborg’s work. Peoples’ responses to learning opportunities cannot be comprehended without reference to context, but set within a life history perspective. Biography and life history research provide the crucial link in explaining why people behave differently. Such research similarly enables a more holistic comprehension of the connectedness of experience, across time and place: building links between different spheres and stages of life. Hobbies, for instance, can become occupational; work experience can be used in struggles over personal identity and to make existential choices (Hodkinson et al., 2004).

Learning in its own Right

Moreover, biographical research itself, as a number of authors suggest, is a form of adult learning in its own right. Research is a kind of learning in partnership, drawing on self as well as the other, experience alongside theoretical insight, in dynamic, iterative as well as collaborative ways. In Edmée Ollagier’s compelling account, learners construct their biographies, and or collect others’, as a means of understanding gendered historical processes and women’s oppression, set within a changing historic frame. Barbara Merrill’s chapter likewise illuminates how biographies can be a site for collective learning and for forms of political conscientisation, as an antidote to overly individualistic preoccupations. There is, alongside this, a more existential or personal development oriented type of learning, based on a biographical approach. This invites participants to learn about themselves as individuals as well as professionals, but in a socially situated, historical, cultural as well as a pedagogical way.

Salling Olesen, in his chapter offers a model to help us map these different dimensions: he conceives professional identity as a subjective effort of lifelong learning and identification, in which individuals, with their life history, their

gender etc., are enabled to carry out complex tasks both by acquiring already existing knowledge but also by creating their own knowledge, practice and thus identity. Learning is the outcome of a dynamic interaction between self and a life, self and a working milieu, the individual and the culture of a profession or group, all set within historical processes, such as Modernisation (Salling Olesen, this volume). Professional identity is the combined creation of the interaction between these many and varied dimensions, with learning and agency, however limited, at its heart: this includes an ongoing struggle with particular demands, yet integrated with life experience as a whole. Doctors, for instance, have to deal with their inabilities in relation to certain tasks, but also their doubts about themselves in a never-ending story of defences and learning, with no predefined outcome. Research, in these terms, becomes a space for learning and weaving complex interconnections, sometimes in radically new ways.

Dominic too asserts that doing educational biographies – forging links across a life, and between self and other – is the means not only to self and critical understanding but also to enhanced professional practice. Adult educators like Dominic demonstrate the power of educational biographies as a reflective approach to training adult educators but also as an aid to improving practice over the course of professional careers. Biographies or life histories can be used in teaching and learning among adults in diverse settings, including marginalised groups in community contexts or with non-traditional adult students in higher education. "In these situations biographies could be used as a learning tool for understanding and challenging inequalities in schooling, family, workplace and the wider society" (Merrill, 2005, p. 142). As Stephen Brookfield has written:

Analyzing our autobiographies as learners has important implications for how we teach...the insights and meanings we draw from these deep experiences are likely to have a profound and long lasting influence...we may think we're teaching according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model, only to find, on reflection, that the foundations of our practice have been laid in our autobiographies as learners (Brookfield, 1995, p. 31).

Such a framework provides, it has been suggested, a starting point for a curriculum based on 'really useful knowledge' and transformation as espoused in the radical adult education tradition. The approach can undermine or at least challenge the currently pervasive instrumental tendency in research and education, as barriers between the researcher and the researched, teacher and taught, the personal and professional, fracture. We are reminded here that research is not value neutral: the research purpose and approaches are influenced by the values of the researcher. Research, like education, is political. As Becker (1969) reminds us in posing the question, 'Whose side are you on?', researchers need to ask questions of their relationship to marginalised groups. Life

histories/biographies have the potential for learning, in radical and oppositional ways: to reveal the inequalities and oppression experienced by people in their everyday lives. And biography and life history can enable educators to challenge one of the oldest barriers dominating the academy itself: between the personal and the social, intimate experience and the learning curriculum.

Developing the Conversation: Looking Back, Thinking Forward

We are still exploring the above range of commonalities and differences, and debating the nature of learning and subjectivity, in the work of the ESREA Life History and Biographical Networks. We want to build a future research agenda, drawing on our work to date. It is some 11 years since the publication of the previous ESREA book (Alheit et al., 1995). We have, in certain respects, travelled a long way. The opening section of the earlier book framed the debate mainly in terms of sociology. Nowadays, we talk in more interdisciplinary ways, if at times tentatively as we become anxious at moving out of well-established comfort zones. We are also preoccupied, or ought to be, with ethical issues: around the distinctions between therapy and research, for instance, and the importance of having supervision when involved in research, to enable us to process and think about the experience: about where to go and what to avoid.

In general, the underlying preoccupations of the earlier book, and the impetus it gave to this family of approaches, still hold true: at the micro level, people's social behaviour within their immediate social nexus no longer has such distinct contours, as relationships, intergenerational orientations, gender relations and classical structures of 'communitarianism' are in processes of dissolution. Utopias remain out of fashion, leaving an uncertain, anxiety-ridden neo-liberal world in which many people are reduced to confused spectators in the background. Biography is a kind of laboratory in which new experiences have to be anticipated and resources marshalled, in an emotionally open and experimental way: the alternative for many marginalized peoples can easily become the repressive defensiveness of fundamentalism.

Perhaps one further major difference between then and now, using the insights of biographical and life history research, is greater sensitivity towards the eclectic nature of the resources we require, in both an individual but also a collective sense, to keep on keeping on learning to be a subject. We need others, whether therapists, educators, colleagues, or fellow activists, to come alongside, as part of finding the narrative resources to question, challenge as well as knit together the confused, experiential fragments of life. We also require new and diverse meso level public spaces where we can work together to translate private problems into a language of politics and collective action: rebuilding the agora, as Zygmund Bauman (2000) put it. The crisis of conventional politics and the

alienation of many citizens are even more pronounced in 2006 than 1995 (apathy can be seen as a form of alienation), at a time when the need for collective conversations and for imaginative engagement with the other and otherness has become a survival necessity.

Distinguishing the Field

Against a backdrop of the book's different research perspectives and varying paradigmatic inspirations, there is a challenge to define in what ways biography and life history research might contribute further to the development of adult and lifelong learning as a research domain: in terms of topics, theory as well as methodology. A common orientation for educational biography and life history might be established by systematically distinguishing methodologies, and the values, political commitments and paradigmatic assumptions, which shape them. Diversity is enriching if we can also manage to structure a progressive discussion around commonalities and differences and how to address such issues in a more dialogical, developing and learning way.

There is also a challenge for the research 'family' to reach out to the policy makers, as argued in Chapter 14 by Schuller, Preston and Hammond. They make the case for a mixed methods approach to research and data collection as an essential complement to the much more widely accepted cross-disciplinary collaboration. Biographical research has its own intrinsic merits but these are enormously enhanced, they suggest, the more it is integrated with other forms of research. This offers, they conclude, significant challenges to the research community: to its methodological and organisational capacity and also to some prevailing epistemological attitudes. They question what are perceived to be some artificial dichotomies between quantitative and qualitative modes. They describe how a large cohort study can be seen as a collection of individual biographies told in slow motion (throughout the course of an individual's life), or a qualitative interview can be a source of quantitative data. There are economies of scope here, they insist: combining qualitative and quantitative data produces more than the sum of the parts. Policy makers are more comfortable with findings that can be generalised.

Such a suggestion will raise strong emotions in the research community, as there remain many researchers who feel that the two modalities are fundamentally and irreconcilably different, because of their divergent ideologies. There is a big epistemological challenge here, and our conversations need to engage with it. Perhaps the life history and biographical research community has come of age, and can engage with others, and their assumptions, in questioning but also potentially cooperative ways. On the other hand, as has been made clear throughout the book, research is not to be reduced to technicalities: it draws on

values and passions, as well as different theoretical insights and a range of assumptions about how the world works and the nature of being.

There may also be a conversation to be had about the relative weighting to be given to theory and experience in doing research of this kind. The phenomenologist, for instance, whose influence can be detected in some forms of biographical research, seeks to provide ways for people to dwell on and connect with things they experience, bracketing out as far as possible any pre-existing interpretations and ideas (Willis, 2005). Engaging in more open and exploratory ways with experience, and being open to other ways of describing it, becomes a hugely creative act in its own right, involving heart and imagination as much as intellect. The emphasis, in other approaches, can be more theoretical and focused than exploratory, at least in a phenomenological sense. Yet, as Adorno noted, (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1973) we easily substitute concepts for what they represent yet no concept can ever capture the richness of the reality. Of course, narrative without theory can easily become, in the phrase of one critic of the biographical turn, "fine, meaningless detail" (Fieldhouse, 1996). But theory without full and open engagement with lived experience, and a capacity to be troubled, even shaken by it – so as to change the way we think – can freeze life and people into conceptual boxes and academic game playing.

Another element in a future agenda may be concerned with developing conversations about the practice of research itself: ranging from how we – researcher and researched – relate to each other through to the analysis of texts and how to communicate our findings. The absence of the researcher in some accounts has been noted, and there are also different approaches to generating and analysing narrative material. For some researchers, building on the work of Schutz and others (Schutze, 1992), the approach entails an invitation for people to tell a life story, with the researcher relatively anonymous in the process. Group analysis may then be brought to bear, to establish themes in a systematic way, which can then provide a clear focus for subsequent interviews. Alternatively, as suggested, the emphasis may be on line-by-line interactions in the immediacy of the interview, and how the narrative may change in the light of changing relationships. A more feminist approach emphasises collaboration, at all stages, in generating and interpreting stories dialogically, and, arguably, in less objectifying ways. There is a need for conversation where differences of approach and values can be interrogated.

Whatever the future might be, European biographical research in adult and lifelong learning is in rude health and expanding as more researchers across Europe engage in this family of research. It is not surprising that some adult educators are enthusiastic about biographical methods as biographical work complements the values, ideology and practices of adult education, old style. Like adult education itself, research can place the voice of the individual and or group as central and offers a humanistic, emancipatory and democratic way of

working with people. The benefits of using biographical methods are enormous for educators and learners alike. We are now more able to understand more fully the processes and experiences of learning in diverse settings and comprehend the role of learning in a person's life as a whole, set within a historical, social and cultural imagination. As adult educators we need to listen and learn from learners' voices – beyond consumerist rhetoric – in order to improve policy and challenge institutional practices. When starting in the research field for the first time it is important and essential to take this stance and it is also what makes research interesting, challenging, exciting and relevant in an uncertain, anxiety-ridden, complex world, yet one redolent with new possibilities too.

Getting Started

For students and new researchers it is important to consider where you stand in relation to the different theoretical and disciplinary influences as well as the varying practices of research. Maybe the starting point is to engage in some research itself, and to ground understanding in lived experience rather than overly abstract speculation. It is partly a matter of finding out and learning what is the best approach for you and the possibilities for this can vary, according to whether you are researching for a PhD or are part of a research team. At the two extremes, one approach is to learn how to undertake biographical research experientially. In other words learn by just going out into the field and doing it.

At the other end of the spectrum, people may prefer to read some of the literature about the theory of this kind of work, and to attend workshops/conferences. (These are not mutually exclusive of course). If you are a PhD student you may feel that this is a lonely learning experience, despite support from your supervisor. Others may start in an environment where they are part of a research team, some of whom may have experience of this type of research. Being part of a research team will enable you to work collaboratively and discuss the research, its findings, problems and issues, with colleagues. Biographical research, as we have argued, is a collage consisting of many approaches, analytical methods and tools. As we have observed, it is rooted in what can be distinct intellectual, cultural and institutional traditions and a researcher's choice of methodology is partly shaped by this.

Whatever biographical path you take, research is fundamentally about learning – specifically a process of lifelong learning. The word research derives from the French word *recherche*, to seek. As a researcher you need to seek, through experience, how others learn, reflexively, and to observe what biographical resources are available, even in the most distressing situations. Maybe, you need to seek some answers inside yourself. Many contributors to this book argue that the self can be a source of data as well as providing the

means to understand and empathise with other learners. The self and subjectivity, in conventional academic research, have tended to be dismissed as either a source of bias or an irrelevance, rather than as a major and essential resource. But such auto/biographical aspirations, like life history more generally, ask a lot of researchers, including developing self-knowledge and awareness. In seeking to understand the other and her history, we need to understand our own histories and ourselves. We need others alongside us to assist in the task: one that can be exciting as well as puzzling, liberating as well as sobering, profound as well as messy.

Finally, as Mike Rustin (2000) has written, if you have been excited by this collection, and would like to make a start with life history or biographical research, do have a go. Start simply, with someone you know: maybe a grandparent or friend. The focus might be on a transition – into retirement, a new job, etc. – or it may be wider in scope, encompassing a whole learning life history. But do make a start, and think, constantly, about what you are doing and feeling, and whether it works, and if so on what terms. Think too about your own history and how your stories may interact with those of the other. You may engage in the process with the literature of narrative theory, psychosocial understanding, and or a more explicit political and emancipatory perspective. Whatever the starting point, you will soon be asking questions of what it means to interview someone about a life, or about what is validity and meaning in research. You will be living the life of a researcher and a lifelong learner: challenging and messy at times but – if we choose to make it so and work openly and respectfully with others – deeply life enhancing, rewarding and of fundamental importance.

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