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## ABSTRACT

This document argues that the new reality of work, which reintegrates learning and learning potential in a qualitative change of the work process itself, has made it necessary to theorize the subjective side of work and study and understand learning within a comprehensive context of the subjective experience. The following are among the specific topics considered: (1) changes in work and human resources (including the post-Fordist turn of the industrialized countries, the extremely rapid transformation of skill needs, new criteria of social inclusion, and the new human resource development agenda); (2) the subjective importance of work; (3) the concept of identity; (4) the basic theoretical problem of linking the two independent dynamics of social history and life history; (5) recent efforts to develop a conceptual model of competence; (6) recent explorations of the concept of identity; (7) contradiction and ambivalence; (8) experience and learning; and (9) learning and culture and the concept of collective learning. Collective learning is differentiated from organizational learning. It is concluded that new work identities will likely include expectations for learning and experience in work processes and that work will likely be included in a more reflexive shaping of life in general. (Contains 20 references.) (MN)

Henning Salling Olesen

# Experience and Learning

- *Theorizing the Subjective Side of Work*

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*Experience and Learning – Theorizing the Subjective Side of Work*  
by Henning Salling Olesen

Paper no. 10 from the Life History Project

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## **EXPERIENCE AND LEARNING – THEORIZING THE SUBJECTIVE SIDE OF WORK**

*Background paper for keynote lecture at the conference  
'Researching Work and Learning'  
Leeds September 1999*

It is hardly a coincidence that 'Work' and 'Learning', connected by the logical operator 'and', define a research field at this time. Wisely the relation between the constituents of the field and the scope of the research field are left open to enable a multitude of approaches and ideas. There is a strong impulse to define such a field from real history developments, but there is also a need to rethink the relation between these essential human activities.

'Work' and 'learning' were separated and inter-related in a specific way by capitalist modernization: Work became societally defined as an entirely instrumental action, consuming human labour that must be educated beforehand. In everyday life consciousness as well as in academic thought this separation has been reproduced as a clear split. Learning and education has been conceived as 'upbringing' or emphatically as a political and cultural education without explicit relation to work. Consequently critical work research and radical political thought as well has had its conceptual difficulties in relating the ideas about enlightenment, social change and liberation of labour with the understanding of work process and workers as collective agents. The provision of specific skills and qualification have been institutionalized and thought of as a sub-instrumental production for human labour. The most humanist enlightenment and the most instrumentalistic skill share the abstraction from everyday social practice.

On this background it is easy to understand that the new reality of work, which reintegrates learning and learning potential in a qualitative change of the work process itself, gives rise to great expectations but also uncertainty in work science(s) as well as in education: We have to rethink the basic rationales of fields that have been largely organized around the 'improvement' of either process – or giving reasons for these basic rationales respectively. Every small practical activity seems to ask or answer questions of real historical change: Is it the end of capitalism, as some seem to assume, when they give up traditional class positions and orientations? Or

is it the end of modernity, as seems to be the point of post modernist criticism as well as the celebration of new individualism? Or both? –

To many workers and most(?) middle managers – and to many teachers, indeed – this shift is a threat – to us it may seem an exciting opening of space. However, much of the discourse around the shifts in work life and/or the need for (life long) learning seem to talk about consequences of a development from above – not really a matter of workers' own understanding and action. Can 'research into work and learning' contribute something to this?

My main argument in this paper will be that we need to theorize the subjective side of work, and to study and understand learning within a comprehensive context of the subjective experience. Societal conditions and everyday life in the perspective of individual life history as well as collective interpretive patterns. This paper present some dimensions and approaches to this interdisciplinary enterprise.

### **Changing Work and Human Resources**

The first and most direct condition of this theme is the **post-fordist turn** of the industrialized countries. There is a general agreement on the observation that the 'industrial society' is going through a fundamental change, with consequences for all domains of social life and culture. The Post-industrial Society is one label, the end of Work Society another – this transformation has many names, each one expressing a specific theoretical and political interpretation of the basic societal structures and dynamics. Most of them are reifications of the genesis, and thus also the political aspects, of the development. The study of technology and work has been assigned an oracular role as indicator of possibilities and ongoing changes of – or conservation of Capitalism.

You could begin with the optimistic question of Kern/Schumann in 1984: *Ende der Arbeitsteilung?* Even within a qualification(skill) concept informed by industrial sociology Kern and Schumann by empirical evidence made plausible that the human potentials of labour were becoming decisive, demanded by capitalist reorganization of industrial development. The subordination of labour to work process implied not only the more gene-

ralized skills and knowledge, but the demand for subjective qualities more than anything else. Even industrial workers must be cooperative, responsible, creative and autonomous.

Due to the transformation of production technologies, the restructuring of company structures, information and communication technology and economic internationalization human resources on a broad scale have become crucial for the capitalist economy. In spite of quite different paths and stages of modernization and sectoral development all the growth in the 'modern sectors' is now concentrating in the **services**, especially human services and business services.

It means an extremely rapid transformation of **skills needs**, with several substantial changes within one work life cycle of the individual and on the other side qualitatively new skills. Both circumstances are assigning new importance to education and training – the first fact primarily in continuing education and training, the second one for the whole educational system. For the individual this relation – together with others – open up the normal biography of 'one life – one vocation', and gives rise to many twisted biographies with learning phases throughout life.

It also has defined new criteria of social inclusion. At the same time as **wage labour** is becoming the prevailing mode of reproduction, leaving the informal economies and self supply systems behind – although still with some exceptions in parts of Europe – (lack of) work competences and cultural skills has become an increasingly important reason for social exclusion – especially for adult non-skilled workers, and ethnic/cultural minorities.

The question about how we might influence the societal development itself, or shape the effects of changes, is not even mentioned. The projection of hopes and doubts on to 'objective trends', to which we are only witnesses and victims, also leaves out that work is in itself a constitutive field of experience and identity.

The interpretation of subjective dynamics in work and their relation to socio-economic structural dynamics, and the learning potentials related to



work, has a democratic perspective. (One might say this is one of the reasons why this crossroad field is so fascinating).

In the discourse of human resource development learning is integrated in ideas like 'organizational learning' and 'workplace based learning', which refer to an organization culture framework. Most often these concepts link learning to more or less narrow management strategies, which are able to and willing to establish compromises with more or less narrow individual concepts of the social interests of workers/employees. The consequence is 'divide-et-impere' and the cultivation of corporate spirit. Apart from the political consequences which I will take up shortly, this is a somewhat ambiguous development. Workplace identification and corporate spirit may very well support learning processes that would otherwise – e.g. in a traditional educational setting – not be possible. In so far we also find examples where unskilled workers, sceptic to education, become active learners within a workplace embedded process. But in so far as work qualification is rooted in collective habitual experiences and in collective consciousness connected with workers' collective and a craft or professional identity, they are excluded from the learning process.

Even from a managerial point of view this may present a problem in change processes in craft based industries (resistance of workers, loss of habitual and tacit knowledge) and in professions (resistance, dequalification, loss of quality standards). However, this is not really theoretically reflected: In the very extensive discussion and practice of organization development, human resource development and organization learning you find very primitive or not existing ideas about the relation between the collective and organizational processes, and the learning processes of individuals. In the consultant business and the human resource managers, personal development, career advisors etc you find some practical experience and rules-of-thumb, but little analytical interest and knowledge.

To the extent learning is promoted and taken over by corporate programmes and human resource managers in connection with workplaces, it may cause a devastation of professionalism on learning.

This takes us to the more important aspect, and more political, I think: What is the alternative view on learning? The reembedding of learning

into work life may be very restricted in the sense that only some aspects of learning are called for, and only some aspects of learners' potentials are activated. It may be a reinforcement of the general disaster of modernization: That the technical and instrumental development is pushed forwards once more, by an enhanced mobilization of human resources, but the other side, the civilizing and enlightening one is repressed. The hopes for an automatic humanization effect of the new types of work organization, and the consequent needs for learning need to be developed.

The 're-subjection' of work, however, is not just congruent with humanistic ideas of education and subjectivity – although some seem to assume so, with a relieved sighing. It is not a return from the industrial shaping of man in some generations to an original humanity. Basic humanity has just within the period of industrial development changed radically. Children's social, intellectual and emotional capacities are others than before, and the adult workers carry a history of collective experience – more or less consciously – as base of all their aspects of work identity. The re-subjection of work does not mean 'taking work back to its original subjective quality' – it means inviting/demanding and allowing new forms of cooperation and/or new types of autonomy, which can be developed in relation to the social and societal context of work and technology today.

So the new human resource development agenda implies the need for a *politicization of work*, remembering the Greek meaning of the word: Making it an object of discussion and cultural action. The perspectives in life-long learning depend on a collective experience building that can encompass and develop the potentials in new work qualities without losing sight of previous work identities.

However, we first need to construct a reasonable theoretical framework about the subjective side of work. The subjective meaning of work and of its unquestionable changes is included in the reification. The study of 'work identity' and 'work consciousness' is very much attached to the 'objective work process' or societal processes – and consequently has had its theoretical concepts informed by or even subordinated those of industrial sociology and (social) economy. A critical theory should take the subjective side of work out of this objectivistic shadow. Studies of adult learning and of work has a shared interest in this enterprise. In stead of regarding

work process and societal trends as *external conditions* to adult learning and adult education we need – without, of course, giving up the vital knowledges of work and labour market – to reconstruct work and labour market as *fields of experience and learning potential*.

In the discussion of the 70ties neo-Marxist inspiration at least in a Danish critical education research the concept of *qualification* was launched to relate education to the production of societal labour force (Andersen et al (1992), Salling Olesen (1996)). The term was coined in a double manner – as a term of critical/Marxian theory and as a term of empirical industrial sociology. Education produces a societally objectified exchangeable asset based on the use value of this labour in a capitalist (re)production, and from this follows a functional subordination of the learning processes to the necessities of producing the commodity labour.

The seemingly new quality of labour and its contradictory demand on human labour was called ‘general qualification’ – more or less equivalent to the German term key qualification, ‘Schlüsselqualifikation’ – I have the feeling that ‘Qualification’ is bound to a more limited meaning, and a technocratic flavour, in English – that is why I in most cases exchange this notion with ‘competence’ or ‘skill’ respectively, depending on context.

### **Symptomatic Observations against a Traditional Construction**

The democratic potential in the field is of course depending on assumptions about the subjective importance of work. One thesis is that the importance is remaining strong, but will be reformed with changes of work. An opposite one is that the importance of work will simple decrease. So the first questions are: Do socio-economic major trends (whichever they are) facilitate or even cause specific changes in attitudes and dispositions (which are then to be identified)? And how can the changes in work processes and the societal role of work become the take off for new learning processes.

There seems to be a general agreement, that work has been constitutive in socialization in at least the main classes in at least a referential version of capitalist modernization. A lot of industrial sociology and political science has studied the subjective dynamics of workers’ identities on the level of

political consciousness, working class activism, dissatisfaction etc – i.e. from a perspective inside wage labour, and with the background assumption that work is shaping individual identity and culture in a wider sense. Even the whole descriptive sociology assigns a decisive role of work in shaping social structures. A few important works directly address the historical genesis of the working class culture and identity production (Vester 1972, Weber 1920), linking it to the socio-economic development of capitalism (I'm not entering into the interesting discussion of causes and consequences). A few political theorists (beside Marx) have a transcendent perspective, asking about the genesis and possible end of work based culture and identity (f.i. Gramsci, Oskar Negt, André Gorz).

There is a rich literature concerned with working class culture, esp. in the British cultural studies tradition. It deals with the recognition of and inner life of the working class in the capitalist wage labour – more or less emphasizing the repressive aspects of wage labour (Young & Wilmott 1969, Williams 1967, Hoggart 1971). This working class culture is so to say the cultural and subjective side of wage labour life in capitalism, and accounts for the fact that life can on the one side be societally blocked and controlled by socio-economic repression, and at the same time be a rich, subjective and even dynamic life world. In this life world the traditional work identity is produced and reproduced – a laborious, very male self-consciousness of craft and hard labour (Willis 1978), a breadwinning perspective with its real telos in the family. Gender relations are clearly connected with a family division of labour, that may be regarded a matriarchy or an exploiting patriarchy (Walby 1995).

The picture is of course a construction – it may have been much more complicated and ambiguous than is now taken as point of departure – and the literature is also not that simplistic. However, behind this construction there seems to be a reality of a 'traditional work identity' that can be historically located in a totality of socio-economic structure, a life world, and a cultural reproduction. I guess it is not a coincidence that it has been preferably researched in Britain – the home of industrialism, and a society where dichotomized class cultures have been coercively preserved.

The concept of identity has been used to signify the subjective component of a structural nexus of the work society (mutually interrelated structures

and processes). Let us assume that it is only a preliminary and indicative concept, covering a contradictory and dynamic subjective process, coping with a contradictory and complex reality of the societal work.

Against this 'wall paper' we can assess the symptomatic value of some empirical evidence from different contexts, that a change in traditional work identities is in fact taking place. By the label 'Symptomatic' I also indicate that these observations deserve an interpretation that goes one step further to clarify their causal roots and breadth. What makes them interesting and challenging is, however, that they claim to show the subjective results of the objective societal trends – and also at least by the context in which they are presented – claim that these subjective changes will have societal impacts.

So different they are, they generally report verbal responses and behavioural facts that seem to indicate a decrease in the importance of work and/or a change of its subjective meaning. This observation of something new is being defined in relation to an assumed stable previous situation, in which work was a constitutive factor in socialization. And we still have to interpret the substance in the changes reported and their status/significance in relation to societal work, that is to say the dissolution or change in 'work identity'.

Having roughly outlined the perspective in which the symptoms are interesting I shall comment on a few different empirical pieces – not trying to give a fair presentation of each of them, and also not commenting the methodological problems in this type of trend analysis.

Birgitte Simonsen (1993) reports from a study of changes in socialization under the headline 'Society without housewives'. It is an interview study on youth (between 14 and 18), intending to pick up the effects among youth cohorts who have lived in a period where the mothers were (practically) all active in the labour market. The interviews of course include themes like their future work and family. It seems characteristic that work plays a minor role: It is not the issue with which their imagination of their future is concerned. Work seems self evident to 'be there' for both sexes without visible difference, but it is not essential – it could also 'not be there'. Work is not related to a bread winning perspective, a 'necessity'.

The study concludes that a significant change in the basic socialization to work is taking place. Especially for the girls the reproduction significance of work is disappearing, so especially they tend to articulate other expectations.

The context of interpretation offered is one of cultural liberation and loosening normativity – hence the special significance for the girls. One can of course ask what a conversation, taken on face value, reflects? Is it the youth moratorium, and thus likely to change by life course phases? How much are short cycle reversible socio-economic circumstances reflected? These young people have grown up in early 70ties in prosperous society with social security, and before the mass unemployment again established the experience of employment as a differentiating factor. We cannot know from empirical data alone. The use of youth as trend indicators, and also the interpretation of Birgitte Simonsen's observations, can easily become a similar projection of hopes and doubts about the future as observed with work research.

Martin Baethge and others, who made a major study on youth and work, explicitly took its point of departure in the debate on the end of 'work society' – the issue was to find out to which extent and how work is (still) an essential orientation framework for youth. To minimize the impact of the youth moratorium they were very concerned about the experience background of the interviewees. They deliberately chose individuals who already had a personal work experience. The interviews were open conversations with a large sample of youth which were afterwards coded according to basic orientations in their life conceptions. First was examined for the overall orientation, the type and degree of significance of work, identifying four types: Work-life oriented (31%), Work-life/Family-balance (30%), Family oriented (23%) and Leisure oriented (16%). Further they differentiated according to the type of expectation directed to future work.

One main conclusion was that work seems to play an important role for a majority among both sexes – somewhat different from Birgitte Simonsen's – but with some interesting details, that are more in accordance with Simonsen's findings. About the distribution of predominant expectations to work, Baethge e.a. summed up in a group of 'meaning- and subjectrelated expectations' (73%) and a group of 'material and reproductionori-

ented' (27%). They found that class, gender and education background differentiated these expectations. Though this coding covers the individual interrelations between class, gender, education and work expectation it gives rise to the assumption that these young people already met and will meet their workplace with high expectations – and that the workplaces will have difficulties in satisfying them.

Baethge argues that these changes represent a trend on a societal level, not just a youth phase picture. By relating the expressed orientations to irreversible societal trends in education, social class composition and vocations it seems to support a further development of the new orientations.

The conclusion is that work is still essential, but the relation between work and subjective development seems to be turned upside down: The young people see and evaluate work from the point of view of their possibilities of self-realization or self-development. This view seems to synthesize the appearingly decreasing orientation to the breadwinning aspect of work, as found by some research, incl. Simonsen, with the new expectations to work.

The questioning of the role of work is not only raised on the individual level, but also on the level of defining collective orientations and milieus.

A quite basic challenge to the assumption that work is constituting social relations and cultural identity comes from a study of everyday life behaviour and orientations in cultural and aesthetic domains (Gerhard Schulze (1992)). He finds, that work and vocation is no longer the constituting factor for social orientations and identities – like in more or less Marxist 'class'-concept – instead has come what he calls 'life style'. Individuals define themselves by tastes, habits and cultural activities, producing a life style as the valid self-expression. The study seems fairly representative for a metropolitan population (München), and is based on a huge questionnaire material. The life styles are constructed statistically through cluster analysis. So no doubt they represent cultural patterns. Schulze's study has been received not only as an evidence of everyday life and cultural patterns, but also as evidence of a liberation of the individual self shaping from material structures and commitments – thus also from work. Work also has a part in lifestyle, but for most individuals the role of work is to be

one out of several arenas, where you can act in order to create a piece of or express a life style.

It seems evident that socio-economic development implies modifications of the traditional class structures. Within a more or less action theoretical sociology you can see this reshaping of milieus and collective (class) cultures as a resulting or a mediating trend, linking socio-economic transitions with the changes in individual work orientations. F.i. a major study (Vester et al 1993) try to map these changes, and construct a revised picture of social milieus. One could regard this as a sociological account of the societal aggregate trend.

### **Theoretical Approaches**

The basic theoretical problem here is to establish theoretically, and afterwards to link two independent dynamics – say: social history and life history. As I pointed out before there is a tendency in work life research to examine subjective phenomena as attachments to the sociological, technological and economical conception of work. The inner and independent dynamics of subjective development is mostly not accounted for – or if it is: then in entirely psychological concepts, which do not conceptually integrate societal contextual factors – here especially **work**. We are interested in the role of work in two respects: As a part of reality with which you cope, and as a contributor to the socialization process, that produced the subject now coping with this reality.

The everyday language assumes that the subjective relation to reality, including work, takes the form of a peaceful integration in a hierarchy of identities, where work identity is but one (though important). The concept of identity assumes a successful accordance between a coherent individual and a social reality which is at least from the point of view of the individual, integral. This is of course in many respects an ideological and false perception. Especially for adult education it removes the potential for understanding the dynamics of learning as a result of the dynamic and conflictual interaction with reality, performed by a subject with its own inner dynamics and conflicts.



In the empirical examples presented above there were at least two core concepts of the subjectivity: Life Concept (translated from German 'Lebenskonzept') and Life Style (Lebensstil). Both are operational concepts, developed in the context of a large empirical investigation, and the theoretical ambition may be correspondingly put to the background.

'Life Style' may be seen as a descriptive concept, summarizing the inner coherence of a great number of behaviours, views, and choices. By choosing the concept of 'style' in stead of a concept connotating the structural determination or social history or similar, the approach rather joins a postmodern conception of culture and practices, leaving out the questions about 'society' and 'subject': You are the person you choose to be by shaping a bundle of practices. The framing conception 'Erlebnisgesellschaft' in the title of Schulze's book, is an untranslatable concept of a social space defined by experiences. The relation to work is the fact that work is reduced to be one out of several, and for the majority, according to Schulze, inferior fields of experience, where a life style is being staged. It is not the same as a 'life world' because it represents a deliberate choice.

'Lebenskonzept', used by Baethge at al, is a concept of a regulatory principle, with which the individual produces plans and prospects on the base of previous experiences and available options. It seems to be perceived as a conscious idea, related to real experience. It is not assumed that the interview-persons will actually act like their plans, but it is assumed to be an indicator of the temporary identity process as it is expressed in verbal responses on the past experience as well as the future perspective. Baethge et al somehow assume a 'subject-object-dialectic', and they construct the subject as it appears in the conscious experience.

In a recent study on *general qualification* (Andersen 1993, Olesen 1994) we developed a conceptual model of competence and competence building as basically subjective capacities and processes. This model emphasizes the inner coherences and conflicts in the subjective acquisition and transforming of capacities in relation to work (wage labour) as well as to life in general. The model construction as such is so to say a depiction of the structure of wage labour – a human being, having to be qualified in relation to the actual form of societal work, and at the same time an able person, who can reproduce him/herself. In the root of this model of the wage

labour subjective capacity we placed the concept 'identity'. The basic assumption is that competence and competence building are capacities and learning processes, that are being integrated by a subjective identity, which links the individual subjectivity to societal processes in general, and holds it together in itself. However, we were very ambivalent with this concept, because it has many meanings, and generally carries the connotation of a 'successful' and static adaptation between social role assignments and individual self. So we had to underline the dynamic and conflictual character of this integrative ability or force. The concept was used to indicate some dimensions to be taken into account. When I speak now of 'work identity' I just emphasize the assumption that within this specific social epoch and position identity is ramified, and work is being of essential importance.

### The Identity Concept

Neither of these approaches offer the appropriate concept of an *independent* subjective dynamic relating to work (also with the possibility of not relating) and assigning the subjective meaning to work as such and specific work experiences. So here is a theoretical challenge – that can most certainly benefit from the interference with the interpretations and concepts already mentioned.

I will explore a little further this very problematic and yet unavoidable key concept, the concept of *identity*. In a way, of course, it is a continuation of the theoretical modelling in previous research, by exploring the somewhat ambivalent grounding of the model.

Why speak about 'work identity' when it seems awkward to our interest? – Mainly exactly because it is *ideological in a Marxist sense*: It delimits the right problem in a wrong way that is produced by real human practice. So a critical elaboration of it may serve a theory building purpose.

The best – though not unproblematic – point of departure I found in Ute Volmerg's proposal for a social psychology of work (or may be '...of Labour?') based on a synthesis of Marxist concepts of capitalism and psychoanalytic theory of socialization. The key concept in Volmerg's theoretical approach is the concept of 'identity'. It goes directly for a theoretical synthesis of a framework for empirical interpretation, and it has at least

in Denmark also been broadly used in empirical research on labour processes.

On the one side Ute Volmerg develops a conception of basic socialization as a production of identity. On the other side she examines with this, how capitalist wage labour in its societal and concrete material forms disturbs and threatens this identity. In relation to work the identity once produced becomes a psychic ballast, that can be mobilized against pressures from wage labour in adulthood.

The concrete quality of Wage labour processes is analyzed in three dimensions defined by the producers relation to his product (Disposition), relation to other producers (Cooperation) and the relation to him-/herself as human labour (Qualification) – but not directly with the relation to the means of production (machinery, tools), which seems puzzling. Volmerg relates this analysis of labour process forms and characteristics to a basic psychoanalytic model of subjective reactions against pressure, defined in the classic concepts of defence mechanisms. Volmerg herself only refers to (traditional) industrial work, which exposes the poverty and constraints of work. At first you could say that this goes ‘too well’ with a reductionist Marxism. However, industrial work in fordist capitalism is also in real life a type of ‘benchmark’ for a historical understanding of work processes as well as for the reproduction of labour (cf above) – from which we will have to go deeper into the contradictions and qualitative developments in work.

The identity concept refers to Erikson’s cultural psychology theory of the identity. However Volmerg makes important critical points:

First, she criticizes Erikson for assuming that the mediation between drive and societal conditions succeeds – that the individual is not exposed to insoluble strains. Instead of this optimistic (American) assumption, Volmerg assumes a contradictory socialization and sees the social reality as a source of psychic strains. She thus reserves it for the empirical analyse to examine, whether and when industrial work transcends the range of possible adaptation, or – in her own empirical cases – the identity is able to defend itself against the strains – using the defence mechanisms, and with the consequent forming influence on work behaviour and consciousness.

Second, the cultural theorist Erikson falls back on biological black box-explanation on the genesis of it all – how the ability of the individual to develop through crises is innately present, before society comes in and becomes the lucid condition of socialization.

As an alternative frame of understanding Volmerg refers to Lorenzer's materialist, though not biologically reductive, theory of socialization (Lorenzer, 1972): The biological development and the (necessary) social interaction around the needs of the child gradually produces the individual subjectivity. The Mother-Child-Dyad is the first 'common subject' for this production of patterns of practice. Later, through the gradual separation of the child from the mother, the interaction becomes the production process of the *interaction patterns* of the child and acquisition of language. Or: Through the separation and the interaction with physical and social reality the child gradually build up its individual subjectivity. Subjectivity in this theory is a societally produced, culturally mediated way of coping, which is specific for each individual. Contradictions of societal structure are built into a systematically contradictory, though individual, subjectivity. In opposition to Erikson's cultural concept of society, leaning on Lorenzer's very basic definition of the material character of the social, Volmerg sees the societal work as the basic identity building factor, in the mediated form in which it appears in the interaction of the individual child with its primary relatives/relation persons. When the individual later interact with and in work, he/she draws on interaction patterns produced in the early socialization.

So we have at least an outline of a psychoanalytic psychology of work, which specifies human labour as a produced subject, and work as a societal reality. I have some reservations against the theory, which go together with the limitations in the definition of the work processes mentioned above. Work and its subjective quality is simply too one-dimensionally linked to a 'frozen' picture of industrial work and wage labour.

With Lorenzer Volmerg assumes that socialization is incorporating all societal contradictions. But the establishment of 'identity' seems to be seen as a 'psychological food package', a resource which enables each individual to resist and stand strains in industrial work. While Volmerg criticizes Erikson for separating the individual and society, she herself in practice

sees the (early) socialization as building this food package, and fails to examine whether work might later contribute to an identity production. Her focus in the study of work experience is on the identity threats exerted by industrial work.

It must not necessarily be quite wrong. It is a consequence of capitalist societal structure, that each individual must be fully produced, “ready-for-use”, when entering the labour market. And industrial work in practical terms is often identity threatening in its form. So the picture has a truth. However, critical theory should not (only) be a fixative which elucidates and preserves this epochal picture of the relation work identity/industrial work. It must conceive how individual subjects and societal work is produced by each others, and detect the historical genesis and changeability of this interaction. Identity is a delimitation of a field of interaction and conflict. Societal displacements and shifts on the one side, and individual life histories, with their experiences of society, are different registers and rhythms. But identity must be conceived as a field for an ongoing production of subjectivity.

### **Contradiction and Ambivalence**

Lorenzer’s theory of socialization see individual psychological development as an acquisition of an individual variant of society and culture, a concrete mediation of societal structures and contradictions in subjective orientations and meanings – in this perspective ‘identity’ makes sense as an individual ability to (re)produce and differentiate this subjective experience in relating to the actual reality and its new phenomena. In this context you could see the work subjectivity as an ongoing elaboration and modification of the individual way of interpreting the world, coping with contradictions – instead of seeing identity as a finished platform from which you can fight against the enemies in the social milieu can be fought. It is essential that the subjective meanings acquired are links between a real life course event, the individual’s (bodily and emotional) relation to it, and collective/cultural meanings attached to it. Language is essential – the relation between discursive language, symbols and individual experiences form the dynamic potential for experience and learning throughout life, and are them selves reorganized.

Ute Volmerg does elucidate also the active, subjective shaping of the work reality in concrete work processes, but mainly under the perspective that it shows the active maintenance of the identity by the Ego, i.e. as an appearance of (proactive) defence mechanisms. This analysis has little sensitivity to possible identity production in the work experience – it seems more healthy not to work.

Other and later works based on the connection of psychoanalytic and Marxist theory are much more differentiated in the analysis of the interaction between societal contradictions and subjective conflicts and meanings (Becker-Schmidt et al 1984, Morgenroth 1990). Analyzing the relation of unemployed people to work Christine Morgenroth focuses distinctly on the loss of work in the sense of an object relation theory. The absent work seems to acquire the psychological status of a love object you have lost. But its subjective quality is ambivalent, connected with the contradictory societal status of work: On the one side the experience of being liberated from a work that was in fact not very good, on the other side the sudden exposition of its meaning within social identity. Regina Becker-Schmidt et al researched the subjective relation to work of female industrial workers – especially the double work as housewives and workers in industrial jobs with lousy conditions and very limited space for subjective action. This analysis assigns work a much more complex and multiple meaning, without in any way to idealize the industrial work. On the one side it analyzes the concrete and societal contradictions in work, focusing on the experience of time. On the other side it searches traces of subjective conflicts of meaning – ambitendencies and ambivalences – in the way of handling these conditions of every day life. Objective contradictions are mediated through their subjective meaning. Ambitendency and ambivalence are rooted in objective contradictions.

The theoretical point in these modifications is – beside the analytical differentiation – that it opens up the concepts to the complexity and changeability of real history. On the one side a life history dimension – subjective meanings must be interpreted as possessions through life history, that are structured by initial socialization, but are also dynamic potentials throughout life – or in this context: Learning potentials. On the other side to study the objective dynamic in its own right – an open examination of the new developments of work, and the subjective appreciation of objective trends.

If we go back to the critical comments to Volmerg's work process analyses, they left out the identity producing and hence also learning potential of the work process – which seemed plausible because of the poverty of this work. In Volmerg's cases we see an identity interpretation of a work relation which is similar to the instrumentalism thesis of Industrial Sociology. However, e.g. Becker-Schmidt et al show the subjective meaning for the workers of even lousy work. Alheit/Dausien have in a broader context shown the central role of work in (auto)biographies of workers (1985). The question – related to transformations of work – is of course: How is the contribution of work to identity influenced by more fundamental changes in the quality of work?

The preliminary answer must be: Work is one of the essential activities in which the work capacity and the capacities in general of the individual is produced, enhanced and developed. Each of the subjectively meaningful experiences in work has aspects of threat, aspects of consolidation, and aspects of learning. The identity process comprehends them all.

This should – and could with the opening inspired by Becker-Schmidt et al – however be correlated with the question of the potential developments of work processes and societal work in general. If we want to find out the part of the workers and of learning in shaping the objective work process – say societal alternatives at large – we have to connect the identity concept with the learning potential. The 'General Qualification' model mentioned above is intending to do this – connecting on the one side the competence needs set by societal, technological developments as such and on the other side the subjective capacity building which is united by an identity process. The dimensions of work processes developed by Ute Volmerg, that characterize the very limiting qualities of industrial work, could of course also be used to characterize the changes in work taking place after the post-fordist turn, the growth in service sectors, and the development of new product qualities. But we need a theory which can search for and contain a learning aspect as well as an active and shaping involvement in work.

So we need to include a more anticipating aspect in the concept of identity. The concept of *self regulation* could be such a complementary or comprehending perspective. The development of new types of work could be ex-

amined in the perspective of their potentials for learning, and the subjective involvement in the perspective of enhanced self regulation. *Self regulation* may have a voluntaristic connotation, or it may be perceived as a regulation within and controlled by a capitalist structure. The intention on the contrary was to emphasize the utopian and dynamic perspective involved in a learning process. We could see the defence mechanisms observed by Ute Volmerg as very limited versions of self regulation in a specific and extremely blocked version of work, related historically to the traditional fordist industry. And then we would immediately look for the (potential) learning aspect related to them – f.i. the building of informal collective experience, if nothing else. New types of work have new potentials, but there is of course no automatique in this learning process. The consequence is rather a politization of work.

Negt and Kluge (1981) have offered a link back to a critical acquisition of Marxist theory with the concept of Political Economy of Labour. They analyze comprehensively the evolutionary and civilisation history of the development of human labour as a collective learning process, which is the real core element in economy and society. And they position this theoretical outline as a critical theory of societal development complementary to the Marxian concept Political Economy of Capital. I have elaborated a little on this in (Salling Olesen 1999).

### **Experience and Learning**

The discussion of the identity and self regulation concepts in relation to work is just as important as is work subjectively – it deals with the most basic subjective dynamic that links individual and societal order. So this is also the foundation of theorizing learning in relation to work (and in general). The task in continuation is to specify the implications for the understanding of learning processes in the interaction between conditions and changes in everyday life work and its societal implications, the bodily and intellectual life history of the learning subject, and culturally coded societal knowledge (discourses, theories) – altogether with the basic understanding of subjective dynamics introduced by the identity discussion.

As a point of departure I would suggest the concept of **experience**. It is a notion referring to at the same time the everyday experiencing process of



reality, to the cumulative dimension of life history experience, and to the crystallization of collective cultural experience. All three levels represent experience, and all are seen as internally defined through each others. With Lorenzer' s theory of the development of subjective meaning we have a connector between the cultural mediation of competences – mediated by language and other abstracting media – and the personal experience which is constituting the dynamics of the identity process. The potential in this for learning theory is, though it is very abstract, very strong in the key questions about different types of knowledges and learning.

The strength and weakness of the notion is that it is very plausible – in line with a spontaneous understanding of learning as embedded in everyday life, of relevance to the learner. So it needs an elaboration

I refer to a concept of experience and a concept of everyday life consciousness as introduced in (Salling Olesen, 1989): “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” (p6-7). It is a subject-object-dialectic, where previous experience form the preconditions for the coming, and where consciousness is built in practical interaction, incorporating all its meanings for the experiencing subject(s). To recognize a present situation is a cognitive as well as emotional process, because you are always already involved in it. To learn a new practice is to change yourself.

In much managerial practice there is nowadays a strong belief in the practically situated learning, partly on the background of the failures of instruction in institutions and teaching of more or less abstracted curricula. And industrial research tend to lean against this managerial practice, suggesting development processes of work in order to facilitate learning of new skills and work identities. This contextuality makes it very "realistic" – as far as it recognizes that knowledge is interwoven with a pragmatic context. Situational factors are of course in general decisive for learning processes – possibility of implementation of new insights are essential to learning, and absence of implementation possibility are prohibitive. Everyday life knowledge and practical learning is pragmatic and tend to support a possible action paradigm in the relevant context. This type of con-

sciousness and the action paradigms related to it (routines) are likely to be quite conservative and “closed”.

This pragmatic or interactionist idea about knowledge and learning is a piece of way in line with the concept of learning here suggested – but only a piece of way. The concept of “tacit knowledge”, that has gained much power in industrial sociology, recognizes the cognitive structure of knowledge defining a concept or a phenomenon by its “meaning” in a context, i.e. its practical side. Likewise learning is generally seen as the acquisition of a social practice in a defined setting.

In continuation of the (psychoanalytically informed) understanding of subjective dynamics I suggest to see concrete learning processes as mediated by people’s life history development –at the same time as pointing to the historical (cultural) dimension of experience. I call this situative consciousness “everyday life consciousness”, with a concept (*Altagsbewusstsein*) borrowed from Leithäuser and others (Leithäuser, 1976). Leithäuser gives a theoretical framework for understanding the subjective dynamic of this consciousness: In a life situation flooded with impulses and demands, individual and collective mechanisms of consciousness building preserve the individual from fears, pains and ambivalences. The ways in which are informed by individual life history as well as by collective conditions and habitual solutions. So the everyday life consciousness is more than just a routine, it is a defence mechanism. Everyday life experience – which is often the meaning of ‘experience’ are always embedded in a more comprehensive picture of the situation, of emotions connected with this situation, perception of one self and ideas about possible alternative practices and identities.

Every day life practice and experience is a part of a subjective life history. The interpretation of observations and problems is a part of an active, psychic and cultural acquisition which define the situation in a practicable way – i.e. through active, partly collective defence mechanisms. However, in the harmonizing and conflict avoiding mechanisms of the consciousness building are also the embedded a deeply rooted ‘awareness’ of problems put aside, tasks not fulfilled, ‘unlived lives’ from ones own life history, painful experiences from the past – all mixed up and interwoven with triv-

ial aspects and incidents, technical circumstances and the practical routines of professions and workplaces.

This is the context of learning. It is obvious that learning can not be regarded a cognitive phenomenon only. Hopefully it is also clear that the cognitive action is in integrated aspect of the consciousness building, even when it *deliberately avoid* learning. New phenomena are generally reduced into well known as a basic mechanism of recognition and complexity reduction – and learning basically related to observation and systematization of deviations – be they new phenomena or new contextual factors

The same reality and the same knowledges may have an entirely different meaning to different people, they are embedded in an experience which is not necessarily entirely accessible to conscious elaboration, but which is never the less active in the learning process. The best possible conclusion to draw from this is that learning is unforeseeable and not easily controlled.

The objective structure and quality of work process is by no means less important in the light of this experience concept – on the contrary. Only you cannot see the interaction between learning subject and objective context in a simple way. Or at least the simplicity has to be doubled (and then redoubled).

The situational embeddedness of learning in social practices has an objective and a subjective side. The recognition of a situation relates it subjectively to previous experiences also in the sense of emotional qualities and identity components. To recognize novelties of that situation is the same as to differentiate it in a double manner: From other similar objective situations, and from the situative images from life history. Both differentiations are cognitive as well as emotional – but they involve different positions of the subject in relation to the situations. It seems obvious, that people of a generally defensive personality have greater difficulties in certain aspects of learning, or that certain collective theories and assumptions, that are explicit and entirely cognitive in their form, may be connected with life history images more or less individual-like analyzed in some of the organization psychology (Menzies-Lyth), but it is essential that also collective defence mechanisms, that are even built into an organisation, are also subjec-

tive experiences with ambivalences – potentials for learning. The strongest and most important learning processes may be expected to take off from collectively codified ‘everyday life consciousness’.

### **Learning and Culture – Collective Learning**

It must be emphasized that we are not dealing with an individual learning concept. Meanings are cultural – only they are mediated by individual life histories – and studying the learning process is a piece of cultural research – a study of the reproduction and renewal of culture, in fact. In so far as culture is not just defined by the artefacts and products of cultural activity, then learning is the essential cultural activity, because it at the same time deals with the transfer of meanings and the reinterpretation or assigning of new meanings by new members.

Learning in dynamic environments – like work places in change – means at the same time confronting new aspects of life conditions – more or less radical – with interpretations and habits related to previous life conditions – in a subjectively mediated way.

This accounts also for the ordinary implication of learning: Transfer of already existing knowledge and skill. Knowledge and theory are culturally produced ways of understanding and communicating reality. I shall not go far into the implications for formal teaching – they are in many respects similar to the ones implied in discourse analysis approaches – only my own critical theory approach would be extremely concerned with the historical contextualisation of discourses. Skills are culturally produced and socially embedded ways of doing things, which are being confirmed, modified and assigned new meanings in the process of learning.

One aspect seems to be of special importance when dealing with work related learning: The existence of collective cultures. In any social organization collective subjects may emerge – ‘groups’ in social psychology – that will form a shared consciousness and synergetics. In industrial work life they may attach to the working class consciousness, in other settings to professional or institutional normativity.

The classical 'Workers' collective' in the sense of industrial sociology is an informal counter-organization. It represents, together with other working class cultural orientations an explicit and partly organized regulation, which to the individual worker is partly an aspect of objective reality in the work place, but at the same time it is a subjective expression and experience. It is in a way a good illustration of the subject-object-dialectic: It is a defensive social organization, which exerts substantial social control, including sometimes a restriction on learning processes of the members. In situations of work process changes or management introduced experiments the workers' collective may apply the suspicion of possible corruption. This is, however, part of a collective experience, which may challenge any immediate observation or attraction. So it is, in principle, not only a restriction, but also a potential for learning. As an 'institutional' social phenomenon it maintains certain aspects of collective experience, in symbolic form and in normative regulation. In this sense it is may partly be analysed as a 'discourse', which is competing with other discourses about the definition of the space of thought and communication – but it is also a piece of self regulation by the working subjects in their relation to a changing work reality. This also indicates why 'Collective learning' is not the same as 'organizational learning', though a 'learning organization' may benefit from and need collective subjects and collective experiences. Collective learning involves an aspect of self regulation. From this point research into learning in organizations might merge with critical ethnography approaches to organization theory.

### **Final Remark**

Work is a field of experience. It always was, and we must see even industrial work that way. But it seems likely that work will by its processual qualities allow for more multiple and open experience processes. It seems likely that new work identities will include expectations for learning and experience in work processes, and that work will be included in a more reflexive shaping of life in general. Where this will take us depend not only on objective trends but also on learning processes and actions by the protagonists, the working people.

This enables a new role for academic work. A critical research into work life with a view to democratization should not provide new paradigms of

progressive political action, and even less deliver expert fairy tales about trends taking place by themselves. Far more we could concentrate our efforts on critical examination of the ways of thinking and learning in dialogue with the field.

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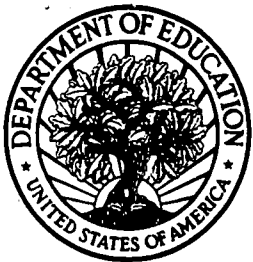
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*Experience and Learning – Theorizing the Subjective Side of Work*



The Life History Project at Roskilde University is a long term research project, dealing with the importance of life history and everyday life for participation and learning in adult education. The project combines current European theoretical discourse on work, gender, adulthood and learning with a broad scope of empirical experience. The project is mainly funded by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities.

This paper formed the background for a keynote lecture at the conference *Researching Work and Learning* at Leeds University September 1999. Within an overall life history approach to work subjectivity the paper discusses notions of *identity*, *ambivalence* and *experience* as framework of researching learning in the context of the subjectivity of work. The paper explores ways of theorizing the subjective side of work across the persistent division between 'objectivistic' approaches to the social and 'psychological' approaches to subjectivity – departing from prevailing sociological conceptions of learning within work related research as well as empirical indicators of work subjectivity.

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