

Analysing work and life course learning under capitalism using a mind in political economy approach

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As life course research has long recognized, work and careers are what Pearlin (1988; p.259) describes as “durable arrangements” that serve to “organize experience over time.” However, understanding (a) the specific impacts of the alienations and contradictions of work and society under capitalism as well as (b) the analytic details of how the processes of learning are involved in the relationship of work experience and life course remain less well understood. An approach referred to as Mind in Political Economy is explained. It is based on a synthesis of several socio-cultural learning theories which allows the effective use of the concept of dramatic perezhivanie. This approach is then applied to a study of workplace learning in the context of a chemical production plant in Canada with a focus on the life history of one subject. It concludes that, based upon evidence of the realization of dramatic perezhivanie in relation to the contradictory object-motives of occupational autonomy/control as well as labour autonomy/control more generally, work-life learning in activity affected the quality of work experiences, the nature of development across employment history, and had carry-over effects beyond work. Moreover, it is shown that work-life learning could play a role in retrieving, reconstructing and making use of early life experience iteratively in the course of

biographical meaning-making through the creation and refinement of biographical artefacts across the life course by a process of double stimulation.

Keywords: *life course, work and occupation, cultural historical activity theory, epistemic culture, perezhivanie, double stimulation*

Introduction

According to at least four decades of life course researchers, experiences of employment have continued to play a prominent role in defining the broader patterns of the trajectories, transitions and turning points that make up the substance of the life course. Work and careers are “durable arrangements” that serve to “organize experience over time” (Pearlin, 1988, p. 259), directly shaping a broader sense of personal “mastery” (Pearlin, Nguyen, Schieman and Milkie, 2007) and even a sense of “regret” in later life (Schieman, Pearlin and Nguyen, 2005). As Mortimer and Shanahan (2003) argued, both subjective and objective turning points in the life course are disproportionately dependent upon changes in work and occupation. And, the “organized experience” of work and occupation offers, according to Moen (2016), a “basis for how we see the world around us, how we think about it and act toward it” (p. 262).

Implicated here are the legacy and carry-over effects of experiences at work. Central to these effects is the structural fact that, as Heinz (2003) puts it in his assessment of longitudinal studies of the life course and employment: “[n]egotiating a career confronts the biographical actor [...] with the problem that work organizations are mainly interested in processing, using, and regulating its members” (p.196). Such inherent problems, he goes on to say, regularly influence the life course by providing “limited opportunity for forming biographical meaning” (p. 192). It can be expected that such a limit, in turn, shapes the realization of learning and agency in the life course.

This paper is premised upon the types of conclusions summarized above, with additional attention to Heinz regarding the relationship between the inherent problems of work and biographical meaning. It starts, then, with the notion that researching the relationship between the experiences of work and the life course would benefit from a more

detailed interpretation of the inherent constraints of work. And so, in this paper, these constraints are explored as matters of alienation and de-alienation which revolve around what are known as the contradictions of power and control within capitalist political economy, culture and society (Marx, 1844 /1978). A set of classic, landmark empirical studies by Kohn (e.g., 1976) examined the matter in just this way:

[...] the conditions of work determinative of occupational self-direction—closeness of supervision, routinization, and substantive complexity—bear meaningfully on three major types of alienation—powerlessness, self-estrangement, and normlessness. [...] There is carry over from occupational experience to alienation in non-occupational realms, and his carry-over is of the logically simplest type (see Breer and Locke 1965)—the lessons of the job are directly generalized to non-occupational realities. (Kohn, 1976, p. 127)

These are the starting points of this paper. In it I focus on life course learning and its relationship to work through the integration of a combination of key concepts—activity, occupation and dramatic perezhivanie—under the rubric of what I will be referring to as a “mind in political economy” (MPE) approach. I explore how certain types of experiences within paid work can (a) play a powerful role at work over the course of an employment history, (b) can result in carry-over effects beyond work-life, and, can even (c) shape the recovery, reconstruction and use of past experiences in the course of which increasingly coherent biographical meaning can emerge, all of which places the notion of “legacy” effects in a more complex light. As has just been seen above, certain aspects of these dynamics are reasonably well understood, particularly in studies of the life course. Other aspects, such as those associated with understanding the main contradictions of work specific to capitalism on the one hand, and the in-situ activities and details of the processes of adult learning revolving around these contradictions on the other (i.e., the substantive dynamics that constitute the “lessons of the job”) are much less so.

Thus, the aim is to advocate for an approach that may prove helpful in expanding understanding of how particular developmental experiences are likely crucial in explaining the relationship across early life and

schooling, work experiences and employment history, and life course development. To do this, I have organised the discussion into two major sections.

In the first, I describe the MPE approach. It is based on a synthesis of selected socio-cultural theories of learning that lays the basis for analysis. Oriented toward the primary contradictions of capitalist political economy, this specific approach is designed to support a more detailed analysis of two specific constellations of in situ activity—one rooted in the contradictions of the forces and the other the relations of production—which, I claim, reflect the limitations facing the biographical actor with greater clarity than is normally seen in studies of the life course. However, I also explain why the key to understanding the potentially transformative dynamics associated with each constellation of in situ activity is found through the application of the concept of dramatic perezhivanie; a concept developed to analyze the relationship of early life experiences, biographical personhood and in situ activity.

The second section provides an application of the approach. It takes the form of a re-imagining of empirical material from an earlier study; a study specifically chosen for its inclusion of work-life history data but also because it posed questions regarding the nature of work and the life course that, at the time of original publication, I simply could not answer. Specifically, I present a case study of work and learning in a chemical plant in Canada, at the centre of which is a life history analysis of a particular worker. Provided are information and analysis regarding his current work-life, employment history as well as early life experiences. His story is a type of success. And, I claim this success is dependent on how, for him, work, life course and learning come to involve sets of mediating occupational and trade unionism supports.

A 'mind in political economy' approach

This paper undertakes its analysis under a rubric that, elsewhere (Sawchuk, 2013), I have named a “mind in political economy” (MPE) approach. It integrates selected aspects of socio-cultural learning theory in order to shed light on the powerful relationships between political economy, paid work and the life course. It is designed to more thoroughly appreciate the dynamics of learning specific to the fundamentally alienating tendencies of life under capitalist work, culture

and society through which forms of de-alienation and resistance can also be better understood. Still too widely ignored or otherwise minimized in studies of work and the life course, a means of analytically attending to the many faces of human alienation at work and beyond, in detail, I argue, remains a necessity not only for its aspirational sentiment but for its concrete value in empirical analysis.

Specifically, this approach draws heavily from certain canonical and non-canonical traditions (Stetsenko and Sawchuk, 2008) of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The many sub-traditions of CHAT's treatment of the mind contribute powerful tools—developed, quite literally, over more than a century—for understanding adult learning. Primers in these CHAT traditions are widely available and especially applicable to understandings of the MPE approach, more detailed historical (e.g., Leontiev, 1978) and contemporary sources (e.g., Engeström, 1987) are recommended.

However, as a summary, I point to the most relevant of core principles. In this approach, the basic, minimal meaningful unit of analysis of learning is *in situ* activity—that unit which expresses all the fundamental, concurrent, and mutually necessary features of real, living and changing human practice. *In situ* activity can be understood as a circumscribed set of interactive social, material and historical relationships. I say “circumscribed” because all relations and mediations of *in situ* activity are understood as organised by what is known as an object-motive—the governing forms of purpose(s) and meaning(s) of an activity, typically un-self-consciously appreciated by participants. Activity is further composed of the relations between self-conscious goal-directed actions as well un-self-conscious operations (practice adaptive to specific symbolic and material context). The circulatory system of activity, however, is tool/artifact mediation, i.e., through mediating tools/artefacts subjects affect the world, and vice versa. This is CHAT's theorization of the relation of subject and object.

Driving adaptations and transformations *vis-à-vis* *in situ* activity are forms of contradiction. Contradiction refers not simply to tensions, problems, or conflicts as such. Rather, drawing on a Marxist/Hegelian definition, it refers to a structurally distinctive relationship that is both mutually constituting and mutually undermining of its elements. In turn, the means through which such contradictory relations are

partially (or more thoroughly) resolved is conceptualized as a process of double stimulation (Engeström and Sannino, 2010; Sannino, 2015); a key concept originating in the work of Vygotsky that explains people's confrontation with and resolution of a contradiction through the substitution (or creation) of an alternative mediating artefact in activity, i.e.,

Instead of merely giving the subject a task to solve, Vygotsky gave the subject both a demanding task (first stimulus) and a 'neutral' or ambiguous external artifact (second stimulus) the subject could fill with meaning and turn into a new mediating sign that would enhance his or her actions and potentially lead to reframing of the task. (Engeström and Sannino, 2010, p. 5)

As will be seen in the analysis to come, attention to changes in modes of participation in particular constellations of in situ activity, as understood in terms of double stimulation dynamics and the emergence of new 'biographical artefacts', will be important to the exploration of the iterative accomplishments in work and life history as a whole.

For an MPE approach, this set of core principles of CHAT must be supplemented in several ways. One of these involves the additional capacity to interrogate human agency and questions of social justice and political economic conflict (themes that still much CHAT research has struggled to consistently articulate). From an MPE perspective, this is an essential feature of explorations of in situ activity and learning, at work and across the life course. In the analysis that follows, I will show how conflict about occupational autonomy and trade unionism plays a role in this sense. Conceptually, however, here I am referring to an intensive theorization of the primary contradiction of activity (to do with alienation and the relationship of use-value, exchange-value, and valorization). Supplementing analysis in this regard then, is Stetsenko's (2014, 2017) theorization of activity which emphasizes engagement with the phenomena of social transformations aimed at greater social justice. According to Stetsenko, a Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) perspective allows us to explore the personal-individual and collective—or what she calls collectividual—orientations in terms of their distinctive relationship to the construction and existence of contested object-motives in activity.

A second supplement to the core principles I outlined above involves a

means of attending to the power of autonomous occupational culture and knowledge. For Marxist-inspired researchers broadly speaking, occupations are often viewed with scepticism as a source of obfuscation of class and power analysis as well as a feature undermining working-class solidarity and consciousness (e.g., Wright, 1980). And, on an entirely different basis, so too do many CHAT analyses of work minimize the conflictual class relations and the distinct forms of power and control that workers may exercise vis-a-vis occupational knowledge in favour of multi-occupational object-motives associated with organizational need and work systems as a whole. In an MPE approach, occupations are understood to have significant progressive relevance in understanding in situ work activity including its effect on the life course. In other words, it is posited that occupations (rather than only work systems or organizations as a whole) are a consequential feature of activity and agency in their own right. Because of this, there is a need to integrate insights from a socio-cultural analytic tradition of occupational research that focuses on Epistemic Practice (EP). Its unique contribution is that, as Nerland argues, EP offers unique capacities for understanding how culturally shared or collective knowledge provides occupations with a unique “integrative power” due to their ability to construct “collective identities and commitments” (2008, p. 52). Moreover, it is through this analytic lens that we may better understand how groups of workers may (or may not) instantiate the (epistemic) practices of “collectivity and control” at work (Nerland and Karseth, 2015, p. 11), for (see Kohn 1976 above) it is around questions of the experience of collectivity and control that broader effects on the life course revolve.

The integration of the above-mentioned socio-cultural traditions represents the foundation of the MPE approach. However, I claim that the realization of human agency in life course learning, at work and elsewhere, must also be understood as a deeply personal, dramatic lived experience; one based on shifts in personhood powered by a realization of deep, emotional engagement. Thus, the type of foundation I have just described is uniquely suited to the incorporation and use of a concept drawn from a founding contribution to CHAT in the earliest (and again in the much later) work of Lev Vygotsky. This concept is called *perezhivanie*. Likely the closest thing that the broader Vygotskian and the more specific CHAT traditions of research have at hand for a

conceptualization of learning, personality and biography over the life course—it is defined as the meeting point of context and a thoroughly historical, socialized and uniquely biographical personhood (Fleer, González Rey and Veresov, 2017).

More important still, for the argument of this paper, are the distinctive moments of *perezhivanie*, which are associated with the learning of transformative—or we might say, political economic—human agency, and with it, the learning of new transformative personhood as understood through the concept of dramatic *perezhivanie*.

Dramatic perezhivanie refers to the contradictory nature of human development—there is no development without conflict and drama. Those are refracted through dramatic perezhivanie (Veresov, 2019). Dramatic perezhivanie contains the potential to become a turning point in a [person’s] development, it represents a short-term ‘microsocial situation of development’ and corresponds to the main characteristics of the macrosocial situation of development [...]. (Sukhikh, Veresov and Veraksa, 2022, p. 3)

It is not happenstance that the notion of drama, and indeed a theory of drama (with Vygotsky, very much influenced by Tolstoy and especially Stanislavsky), is implicated here. This implication is not merely metaphoric, but a matter of symbolically and materially mediated in situ activity, contestation of object-motives, shifts in modes of participation, double stimulation dynamics and so on. As Smagorinsky (2011) explains: “Vygotsky sees personality, with its psychological foundation, and art, with its dramatic origins, as interrelated: The development of personality is fundamentally dramatic and the phenomenon of art is at its heart psychological, suggesting the necessity of both in the development of consciousness” (p. 335). Put another way, the realization of dramatic *perezhivanie* requires developmental situations—a dramatic scenery—with both personal and contextual potential for transformation. It is in encountering such situations that there is the potential for the re-construction of an alternative personally-refracted “sense” (Leontiev, 1978) of one’s life experiences, accomplished during in situ activity which, under certain circumstances, may become increasingly endemic to and definitive of the life course. Thus, in this approach dramatic scenery is defined by the appearance of features of

in-situ activity such as the following: (a) a conscious and/or unconscious apprehension of the notion of a trajectory of personal change (according to theorizations of drama: involving the construction of an archetypical character arc) linked with (b) a conscious and/or unconscious apprehension of contradiction (according to theorization of drama: the construction of protagonism/antagonism leading to a notion of conflict, rising action and the possibility of resolution, i.e., a first, second and third act structure). Taken together, these features are indicators, I argue, of the potential for a reconfiguration of modes of participation in a in situ activity involving the production of what Smagorinsky (2011, p. 337) calls “meta-experiences” which may result in the creation of the types of consequential ‘biographical’ artefacts that can be associated with various carry-over and legacy effects in the life course.

An MPE approach, then, can make very specific use of dramatic *perezhivanie* in the analysis of work and changes in the life course, biography and personhood over time. In the analysis below, I claim there is evidence of two key forms of dramatic scenery, reflecting primary contradictions under capitalism, which hold distinctly important potential for realizing forms of dramatic *perezhivanie* that may shape the life course. These define specific constellations of activity that revolve around contradictions of capitalist forces of production (explored here in terms of the autonomy of occupational knowledge and practice), and that revolve around the contradictions of capitalist relations of production (explored here in terms of conflict over the autonomy of labour in labour relations more generally). Indeed, the analysis I will present in a moment suggests that examined either together or separately, these experiences represent unique moments of activity when a multiplicity of contentious and potentially actionable object-motives revolving around class, alienation, and the possibilities of de-alienation surface most definitively.

Below I seek to demonstrate the value of this type of MPE approach through application. I argue it can be seen that the details of experiences at work, and its organization, matter in and of themselves, but likewise they shape the life course and biographical meaning-making, within and beyond work, both backward and forward in time.

Research design and methodology

The following empirical illustration is meant to ground a sense of the ideas introduced in the first portion of the paper through an analytical re-imagining of materials from research analyzed and published earlier. As mentioned at the close of the introduction, this material was selected largely because it posed questions that I simply could not answer at the time. Missing were the analytic means of interrogating extended features of work, learning, biography and the life course. Specifically, my analytical re-imagining is based on a funded research project, led by D.W. Livingstone, and reported in a monograph entitled *Hidden Knowledge: Organized Labour in the Information Age* (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004) which, going forward, I will simply refer to as HK. As reported at length in HK, the research was approved by the ethics board of the University of Toronto and was based on a five-year qualitative study of workers and workplaces in Canada. It utilized work-life history interviewing along with work-site visits in the context of a multi-case study (5) research design. The focus of the discussion below, however, deals with only one of these sites: a chemical production plant. A total of 20 workers were interviewed at this site. These work-life interviews with each worker were typically completed over two sessions, each session averaging 1 to 2 hours in length. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and originally coded for analysis organized around overarching themes of organized and informal learning at the workplace. In this subsequent review of the original data, additional themes were coded according to the principal elements of the MPE approach.

While there are points of analysis gleaned from the chemical plant data set as a whole, for this article the MPE analysis primarily revolves around only one worker whom I refer to as “John Carsons” (a pseudonym). The approach to the analysis below parallels that reported in González Rey and Martínez’s (2017) study of dramatic *perezhivanie*, obesity and the life course which is also based upon the study of a single subject, with findings and analysis presented by way of a set of descriptive vignettes punctuated by direct quotation.

Findings and analysis

Beginning with unions, occupations and learning at a chemical plant

I begin with the overall labour relations context as well as general insights about work and learning dynamics at the plant, before initiating analysis of the work life history of John Carsons. As reported in HK, this study provided a great deal of evidence and analysis of work-based learning activities. The evidence included information regarding the impacts of (a) an energized and proactive local trade union culture operating in parallel with (b) certain areas of highly autonomous occupational culture.

Buoyed by unusually high levels of educational support provided at the union's national level, the militant local union culture at the chemical plant was linked to charismatic and experienced local leadership. Not coincidentally, this leadership group emerged following a dramatic strike by the workers less than a decade before the beginning of the study. In re-imagining the original analysis, it now seems unproblematic to conclude that elements of dramatic sceneries, affording agency in learning lives, based on a dramatic framing of oppositional labour relations, were plentiful. That is, the experience of the labour strike consistently informed virtually all the interviews with workers. What is clear now and un-remarked upon in the original analysis is that these accounts were consistently framed with an array of archetypical protagonists and antagonists as well as tragedy or triumph. There were passionate explanations of worker rights, the problem of managerial control as well as details concerning what could have been done differently, contrasted with celebratory explanations of what was achieved through the strike in terms of a general sense of solidarity amongst workers (despite the strike being broken and workers being forced to return to the collective bargaining table). There is more than enough evidence, in other words, of the potential, not infrequently achieved, of a "sense" (Leontiev, 1978) of agency—both realized and potential—in learning lives associated with dramatic scenery related directly to the broader aura of labour union action.

Beyond the drama and developmental potential inherent to labour relations conflict as such, equally important were experiences of over-credentialization/under-employment in batch production which

made up the majority of operations at the plant. Here, accounts in the interviews of work activity being rigidly controlled and supervised, with relatively low levels of worker engagement were typically seen in the data. Side-by-side with these units, however, was what was called a “high-production” department which was seen by both workers and management at the time as an opportunity to demonstrate what increased worker autonomy and control at work could do for the company’s quality product as well as its financial prospects. The side-by-side nature of these distinct sets of in situ work activity produces for us a naturally occurring experimental design of a type; a comparative assessment that can help us better understand the profound contribution of occupational autonomy, as well as trade unionism, on in situ activity and broader dynamics of lifelong and life-wide learning.

For a better understanding of this and more, we can now turn to the central figure in the discussion, John Carsons, a man who had worked in both the batch and high-performance production units. In these terms, it can be said that, for the batch production units, as John himself commented, “The work is simple. Maybe too simple” or as he also called it, “idiot-proofed.” Like others, John said this lack of worker autonomy generally led to problems for both the company and the worker, i.e., issues of low quality and productivity as well as disciplinary problems and substance abuse.

However, for the high-performance department, the organisation of in situ work activity featured persistent opportunities for the use of skills, learning and judgement in the course of work. Even beginning with John’s initial description of it below, there is a detectable romance and heroism of knowledge and knowing, further laced with a sense of oppositional drama of triumph (of hard-won experiential knowledge of workers versus formally recognized knowledge of company engineers, and so on).

Everyday is learning in my department. I changed the set-up for the de-bugging. All the "professionals" [i.e., engineers; placed dismissively in air-quotes by John] were out there, but nobody questioned how they were going to de-bug the machinery when in production. It's really about the autonomy of the department ... They're too focused in their area [compared to] when you've had years and years of experience.

Now, in the form of a slightly lengthier vignette developed based on the work life history interviews with John, less is left to the imagination. In terms of a theory of in situ activity, John's needs have met with two object-motives capable of energizing action: one associated with the relations of production (via trade unionism) and the other associated worker knowledge understood as an element of the forces of production (via epistemic culture of autonomous occupations).

After a lengthy and varied employment history, John would eventually take the first of several jobs in the chemical industry. Working for a few different companies over the subsequent 12 years, John described applying his learning abilities and "learned to survive" in workplaces where company's, quite literally, "used to try to get away with murder." While working in the chemical industry John described developing asthma and came to fear for his future health. He describes continuing to learn the lesson of the need for "street-smarts," along with a strong union, first taught to him in earlier work-life on the shipping boats in the great lakes of North America.

At the present chemical factory, John started at low-skill jobs (e.g., batch production unit, removing labels from cans). But he describes riding the corporate wave of enthusiasm for developing a more "self-directed workforce" with more "team-based work," and he ended up in a newly created "high-performance," advanced production department of the plant. With extensive training opportunities in quality processes, health and safety, and company support for on-the-job training initiatives, John describes great enthusiasm for learning opportunities, as well as a confidence to affect positive change in production processes across the department. Importantly, John says, the workers in his unit "call their own shots. [...] We get a dollar more an hour, but the main attraction is we get real autonomy."

John excitedly recounts a recent experience in which the team has developed its own "paste library" (a catalogue of quality tests on incoming materials) to monitor changes in the supplier quality. He talks with pride about how his team had corrected company engineers on machine set-ups.

Thus, in an analysis of data as it relates to in situ work activity and object-motives, I argue the side-by-side existence of both lower skill and lower autonomy batch processing on the one hand, and the high-performance department on the other, helps us understand the significance of John's own experiences. The object-motive associated with batch production is governed by a strict separation of design and control on the one hand, and execution on the other which, beginning with Braverman (1974), has been associated with 'de-skilling,' disempowerment of labour and alienation. By contrast, the governing object-motive of high-performance department work is occupationally epistemic in nature. As evidenced by autonomous work of de-bugging machines while in operation or, more dramatically, in the workers' independent creation of a 'paste library' of supplier material—much in situ activity is organized by the creation and expansion of autonomous occupational skill, knowledge and judgement.

As summarized at the outset, the insights from researchers of the life course, with special attention to Kohn (1976) specifically, would suggest that either set of work experiences discussed above would have carry-over effects beyond the workplace. Whether or not and how such is the case (and how early life experience may also be involved) are issues I turn to now.

Carry-over and legacy effects, early life and dramatic perezhivanie in work and the life course

According to Coelho-Lima, Varela and Bendassolli (2021):
“[i]nformation on the individuals' life path, their previous experiences, and their motivations for choices, on the one hand, and their current living conditions on the other, are fundamental to understanding perezhivanie—dramas concluded and their effects on individuals” (p. 165). Thus, now I reach beyond John's current work as well as further back in time with another vignette of John's life history. In it, we obtain a glimpse at the broader and deeper context, and specifically, I explore possible evidence of dramatic scenery occasioned across his employment history as well as in his early life.

Born into a fishing community in the Canadian east coast, with poor employment prospects it wasn't long before John Carson's father moved his family to Canada's largest city, Toronto. There

they settled into an attic apartment in a working-class district of Regent Park; a neighbourhood full of east-coast Canadians like themselves as well as new Canadians, mostly Italian and Portuguese immigrants at the time. A former British Navy military man, John's father was a stern disciplinarian and a hard drinker, both of which weighed heavily on the household. To escape, John spent a lot of time "running the streets," and as he describes going through high school, he remembered distinctly how many of his friends ended up in trouble with the law.

John would, however, successfully complete high school with a genuine fondness for, he said, "of all things, chemistry." However, that same year his father suffered a debilitating heart attack and was permanently disabled. With no financial support in the household, John describes how he was forced to abandon his plan for further school to search for paid work. Thus, by the time he was 17 years old, he spoke of "his most important lesson", namely that he had to find a way to get out "to survive": "I said there's no way I'm going to be living like this. I'm going to turn my life around, but I've got to do the turning around." He describes how his father's drinking contributed to his sense of the need to take control of his life: "The one thing you have that makes you equal to everybody else is your willpower. If you don't have your willpower, you got nothing."

Sending home paycheques regularly, John travelled the long length of Canada working in a variety of jobs through his twenties and thirties: as a miner, a labourer, later, as a simple scullion on the giant shipping boats in Ontario. It was on the lakes that John says he got his first taste of trade unionism, and he describes learning avidly about the history of the Seafarers International Union. It was on the lake boats that John describes learning the way he likes to learn best: by working side by side with experienced seamen, watching and doing:

You have to learn things by doing it, you can have the book beside you, but you have to get your tools and do it. I tend to do good in school settings but I don't retain it. Informal stuff, when

you're actually learning at your own pace and learning things that you actually want to learn, you tend to retain, once you see something it tends to stay there, but the whole thing is you got to be interested, and you've got to be able to use it.

It seems clear that the lessons John described learning in his work life cross the boundaries between home and work. At home, John is constantly learning about new things. He has taught himself and does his own electrical and plumbing work for home renovations; he attends sessions at the local building supply centre on how to do home projects (he had just built an enormous outdoor deck and patio in his backyard with the help of some friends from work); and, he's actively learning about the stock market. He teaches himself about "micro and macro-economics." In the future, John says he wants to write poetry about his experiences. He plans to attend a local college course in the Spring.

Worth noting is the fact that the coherence of accounts of the life course is indicative of achievements of biographical meaning. Thus, even drawing upon the most basic elements of life history research interpretation (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000), based on the coherence of John's descriptions across his early learning life, employment history including the details of in situ activity in his present work at the chemical factory as well as his reports of interests and plans outside of work, there are insights to be gleaned. Although a lack of detail in the original HK data makes a full analysis of in situ activity in early life unavailable, it does seem to suggest that forms of consciousness and aspects of personality [as well as what psychologists speak of as 'hot' and 'cold' executive function, e.g., Sukhikh et al. (2022)] were shaped by early life experiences. My claim, however, is that there are also clues that lessons from youth have a more complex relationship to work-life and the life course than might be apparent at first blush and that this is not merely an effect of the life history interview situation itself (or even the tendency for people to reinterpret their past based on their present in general).

An important part of this claim involves the relationship of John's narrative with his realization of biographical meaning. This is important given that, as we learned earlier, limited autonomy and complexity

as well as barriers to the development and use of knowledge, skill and judgement within the typical capitalist labour process tend to undermine the basic capacity for biographical meaning-making more broadly (Kohn, 1976; Heinz, 2003).

While early developmental experiences matter in themselves, I argue that they likely would not have been reconstructed in John's narrative so coherently — demonstrating biographical meaning-making — were it not for a string of specific work-life activities. To understand the matter better, what is needed is a more dialectical appreciation of the past as having developmental potential and the subsequent moments of life playing a crucial role in its realization, in this case through artefact creation, i.e., that process described earlier as double stimulation. There is in this sense a creation of a special mediating artefact; one rooted distinctly in dramatic *perezhivanie*; and through this, one uniquely capable of generating meta-experiences that re-synthesize and make new uses of the past to allow its potential—even that found in harsh conditions, as in the case of John's early life—to develop. Thus, further to the evidence of broader carry-over effects beyond work currently, the relationship of John's early life experiences and his subsequent work-life should be understood as a deeply and ongoingly iterated series of realizations of dramatic *perezhivanie*, likely experienced as a young person and according to the evidence more assuredly experienced as a working adult.

Specifically, the evidence suggests that, for John, a string of in situ employment activities—regularly and likely increasingly punctuated ever more coherently by experiences of dramatic *perezhivanie*—nurtured an emergent narrative. A created and then iteratively refined form of biographical artefact contributed a powerful mediating effect in his mode of participation in certain in situ activities which, in turn, generated a broader and more far-reaching trajectory of development. The data suggest this is likely the case when he was a scullion on the lake boats as well as when he arrived at the chemical factory (where a link to his father's work life history in the British navy can be noted, and more importantly so too is it relevant that he developed asthma which may have played a role in recovering further aspects of his early life survival narrative as well).

Most importantly are the following points. John encountered

opportunities for (a) occupational autonomy as well as (b) more generalized labour autonomy associated with militant trade unionism, each offering an agentic and de-alienating alternative to the contradictory object-motives of work. Each context, in other words, afforded him a parallel and mutually supportive set of dramatic sceneries. Features of dramatic scenery that I have put forward (e.g., personal sense-making regarding archetypical character arcs as well as contradiction, rising action, and a vision of resolution) were made increasingly apprehendable to John vis-à-vis the mediations of an iteratively developing biographical artefact within in situ activities. Such affordances, I argue, can be associated with what I have called “object-work” (Sawchuk, 2013, p.292): a reconfiguration of object-motives capable of launching new forms of action as well as new iterations of personhood through experiences of dramatic perezhivanie.

Conclusions

People frame and interpret their experiences through interdependent emotional and cognitive means, which in turn are related to the setting of new experiences. The phenomenon of meta-experience—that is, how one experiences one’s experiences—provides the means through which people render their socially and culturally situated activity into meaningful texts of events. [Thus, Vygotsky’s] relation of imagination, emotion, and cognition suggests that people’s capacity to project a trajectory for themselves is culturally mediated. It is important to understand, then, the kinds of mediation that provide both the emotional foundation and cultural sense of propriety for their trajectories, and the sorts of mediation that potentially limit conceptions of trajectory. (Smagorinsky, 2011, pp. 337, 339; emphasis added)

In his discussion of the dynamics of perezhivanie, Smagorinsky’s explanation of “limits” is relevant in as much as John’s learning and life course demonstrates biographically iterative processes of overcoming them. Even more relevant may be Smagorinsky’s reference to “meta-experience” which, as I mentioned above, suggests the notion of biographical meaning vis-a-vis the construction of a type of consequential and durable mediating biographical artifact.

Thus, while recognizing the need for caution against overgeneralization, this article has offered an alternative approach to understanding life course learning and its relationship to work. This approach was drawn on to posit and then (a) explore the role of the alienating features of the primary contradictions of capitalist work revolving around the relations of production and the forces of production, by (b) using a robust and specific system of analysis of human learning itself. It helps fill holes in the literature in these two ways. In applying this approach, it could be seen that certain constellations of in situ activity affected the quality of work experiences, and the nature of development across employment history, and had carry-over and legacy effects beyond work. And, in the last segment of the analysis, I also argued that the character of work-life learning experiences plays a role in retrieving, reconstructing, and making use of early life experience in the development of biographical meaning in situ.

The primary contradictions facing workers, understood here as alienating structures of work, I argue offer defining opportunities for sustaining constellations of in situ activity, but only if these constellations, at some point, benefit from the realization of a certain organization of symbolic and material mediations, allowing the engagement in "object-work" (Sawchuk, 2013). These opportunities also have a relationship with the subject's early life growing up in the context of poverty and parental alcoholism in 1960s Toronto (Canada). I claim that John Carson's agentive history of experiences of work and occupation, dependent upon the realization of dramatic *perezhivanie*, came to function, over time, as an increasingly governing feature of his past as well as present and future. In other words, in John's case, employment history played a significantly powerful role in defining the life course. An accumulation of specific types of learning experiences not only produced legacy effects and carried over to the quality of his non-occupational learning life, but they also helped to refine and elaborate a particular sense of biographical meaning iteratively, connecting his past and present in new ways, which in turn suggests positive possibilities in the future of his life course.

Invaluable as they are, current research on the relations across work, learning and the life course need analytic tools more capable of deepening and further specifying the nature of the overarching dynamics they have otherwise often correctly identified. Based in part

on the types of insights offered here, in response I am advocating for the adoption of an MPE approach that forefronts the constraints on and opportunities for meaning-making in the life course as matters of alienation and de-alienation rooted in the contradictions of power and control within capitalist political economy, culture and society.

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