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Published in:

European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults

DOI:

[10.3384/rela.2000-7426.201011](https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.201011)

Publication date:

2010

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):

Weber, K. (2010). Aggression, Recognition and Qualification: On the Social Psychology of Adult Education in Everyday Life. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 1(1-2), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.201011>

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Aggression, Recognition and Qualification

On the Social Psychology of Adult Education in Everyday Life

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Abstract:

The article analyses the emotional aspects of a professional training process in the light of the participants' experienced societal status. A detailed text analysis of interviews with a group of social pedagogue staff in Danish Youth clubs focuses on a particular vulnerability and their aggressive perception of other students with social problems, and interprets it partly as a reaction on the paradoxical situation adults in continuing education, and partly in the perspective of their experience of not being recognized as a profession. The last section of the article further explains the deep hermeneutic text analysis applied, which combines psychoanalytical concepts of socialisation with a language game approach.

Keywords

Professional identity, recognition, emotional aspects of adult learning, pedagogue, social work

Individuals appear to meet general pressure for engaging in lifelong learning with very different feelings. In the political discourses this fact is mostly perceived as a “problem of reaching those who are negative and react with resistance”, often assuming that they do not know their own interests, where as obedient willingness to engage is appreciated. In Denmark there appears to be considerable enthusiasm for adult education and training, especially amongst women. Often, men will refuse to participate, particularly if the activity in question is not training which is directly relevant for work or employment. However, when looking into individual motivation, a more mixed and complex picture appears. This is of crucial interest for understanding the dynamics of learning.

In this article I shall focus on populations whose subjective motivations for participating in adult education and training were certainly explicitly ambivalent both cognitively and emotionally. We shall see that these ambivalences were constituted by perceptions and experiences that were deeply personal and individual, yet collective and historically significant.

Employment requires Education

In several empirical projects my colleagues and I have dealt with adult learners who were exposed to an employment related pressure to engage in formally qualifying educational programmes. We have studied the subjective dimensions of such learning processes.¹ The empirical populations are exemplary objects of the current function of adult education which is to not only supply the qualifications allegedly needed in the jobs available, but to furthermore constitute the space where fundamental changes of work identity and general future orientation may develop. In this article I will bring an example from a group interview by a mixed gender group of adults working as pedagogical/social workers in youth clubs - but not possessing any formal qualifications within social pedagogy and certain institutions for

people with specific developmental or social needs). The present group completed a two year part time programme especially designed to match their job, which they kept during the entire period of training, but which they would lose if they did not complete the training. The youth clubs are institutions for leisure activities of young people, very much meant to “keep them away from the street”. They offer a free space, protected from parents and authorities, engaged adults, a place to be, leisure activities more or less organized, music etc. They are publicly funded (municipal) institutions, but they have a tradition from civil society organisation back in the middle of the previous century, mainly initiated by labour movement, and they have traditionally been employing people with a social and organisational experience rather than a formal pedagogical and social education as “club pedagogues”. There is still a strong tradition to see informal, personal and social experiences as the core qualification for this work. While the institutions have become a more formal element in social work, the club pedagogues have also received some training, but typically as in-service training, or courses after they have been employed.

The empirical research materials in the following analysis are text transcriptions produced in thematized group discussions by a group of such employees who are joining a relatively comprehensive and systematic course. In the first place I undertook an evaluation study of some of these courses, together with a research assistant², and the interviews were part of the material underpinning the evaluation, which was reported (in Danish) at the time to the stakeholders in the education programme. The following analysis is an attempt to come deeper into the subjective dimensions of learning for professional work.

The method used can be described as a deep hermeneutic interpretation of thematized group discussions. An already existing “natural” group is invited to participate in a discussion of a theme defined by the researchers which is supposed to fuel an interaction and discussion which reveals core aspects of experience and concern in the group. The interaction is audio-

recorded, and the method builds on in-depth analysis of the transcribed interaction in a group of researchers, in this case within the life history project. The point of departure is the observation of ambiguous, surprising or obviously conflictual aspects of meaning in the interaction provided, and the analysis seeks to provide interpretations of these subjective phenomena in the wider social and societal context, at the same time as extending them to the whole text. This article also intends to exemplify the procedure of analysis by carrying out a step by step commented interpretation. At the end of the article I will give some further background for this method. I will also refer to a similar population in what could be viewed as a similar situation, which, for reasons of space, can not be discussed in detail here. Some of the results from this analysis have been published elsewhere (Weber and Salling Olesen 2002).

The subjective journeys of the skilled painter or welder, and the shifts of life perspective of the hairdresser towards becoming a social worker, are considerable. As such, the explicit ambiguities voiced in the group discussions could be anticipated. The discussion group - and their colleagues - had good reasons to be concerned about their future employment, income and social status. They are explicitly dependent on the specific economic organization, designed to keep them on track, of their programme. The agreed agenda, which was that of subjectively relevant and societally necessary qualification for the job, was repeatedly overlaid or interrupted by an instrumental attitude. Much fussing and complaining in the text can be attributed to the laborious psychological processes of harmonizing what is basically a compulsion to participate with a self-identity as an autonomous adults. Here, one must manage the competing motivations of infantilisation and boredom versus the obviously interesting - at least occasionally! - substance of the educational discourse and the subjective need to attribute some kind of meaning to the perspective of doing this job for a considerable number of years, if not for the rest of one's life.

The fact that the educational programme was subject to evaluation may have accentuated the perception of this implicit motivational conflict. The participants did not think of themselves as contributors to educational evaluations or to any other major political problems. In any event, the message to research subjects³ is always a double one: in the context the research subjects are the most important people on earth, the chosen, those receiving attention; at the same time they might be substituted by somebody else, because the research agenda is oriented to a general understanding of subjectivity in this type of situation. The methodological implications of this double bind is a research field in itself. Likewise the different modes of text production, the informing group interview (cf. e.g. Kvale 1996) and the thematized group discussion (cf. Cohn 1976, Mangold 1960, Leithäuser & Volmerg 1985) represent separate fields of interest. In the present context, however, only the fact that the texts are group produced, and the fact that they comprise culturally significant outbursts of aggression, are looked into.

The subjective conflict outlined is interesting and its analysis can yield considerable inspiration to improvement or renewal of educational settings. The focus of this particular analysis is on a number of “uncouth” outbursts of aggression, on collectively agreed statements about others that were surprising and disquieting even in the relaxed and permissible context of research interviewing and discussion. It might be argued that such outbursts belong to ordinary human communication and that they should be condoned. Every text production comprises irrelevancies, and is it not the function of the researcher to sort this out, to get the discussion back on the track, to condense the objective and impartial? In my approach this is not necessarily so! This is a question for the interpretation. The organization of the thematic group discussion building on existing social organization aims at bringing out the explicit as well as the implicit substance and the legitimate as well as the illegitimate psychological energies immanent in the social setting. The presupposition is that “thinking is

a highly emotional affair” (Becker-Schmidt 1987). Factual and functional attitudes and opinions are products of multidimensional subjective processes that are cognitive, social, emotional as well as physical - and the group processes contribute to the exposition of this complexity. The irrational, even the idiosyncratic, surplus is an invaluable spur to interpretation. This is a point highly relevant for our conceptions of learning, e.g. in that it approaches the everyday situation in education where teachers and administrators often face diffuse complaints (cf. Weber 2001). I shall return to this point as part of my elaboration of a theoretical framework once I have presented the text example and my provisional analyses.

The Misfits in the Classrooms - on the Perception of Passive Classmates

The following dialogue took place during the group interview on possible improvements to the education for social work in youth clubs. The interviewer is the research assistant Uffe Lund, and the passage is selected and translated from the background material in the Danish evaluation report (see note 2) pp. 57 ff.

It is just one example - and a fairly moderate and well argued one - of participants talking derogatorily about their fellow students. The textual reproduction does not display the speed of the talk or the vibrating anger of the group that could be felt, nor does it catch the vehemence of the initial statement by Anna - on the factual surface she is simply stating:

Anna: “There is one thing about the club education, though, and that is that when you start, that is on the first day, and people introduce themselves ... and it happens both here and on other courses ... you often hear that people are subject to rehabilitation [i.e. being supported by labour market authorities because of physical or social handicaps KW]. And it is maybe 15 or 20%, that represent, in a class, that actually is that. It’s not as if there’s any wrong in that, mind you, and I do agree that it’s a fine thing to be social and to help a lot of people, but I do have a feeling that if you can’t become anything else, or if you are unable to keep the job you once have, then you can always become a Club Pedagogue [Danish: Klubpædagog, the name of the unskilled social workers in youth clubs KW]. And I can’t help feeling that the education sort of falls down a bit because of that”

Kenneth: “Not just those that have a bad back, but if they have problems that cannot be combined with our profession, then I think it’s wrong. And there is much debate

about it around, actually!

Des: “Yes, but that is because people are so different here, and because their background is so mixed. And of course there are some that are not so used to these here things. To formulate things verbally or in writing, that is - you can feel that, it’s all very different, and the teachers must pay attention to the differences. And sometimes you feel that it’s ... a bit heavy ... there must be space for all”

Anna: “And I absolutely do agree that there must, and I would not think it wrong if it were only a few, but it’s many (...) And there’s nobody around to look after people who maybe have a hard time. But I do think that the general level sort of drops because of that (...)”

Kenneth: “But they are allowed in along the same lines as everybody”

Peter (interrupting): “No, no, I don’t think so. There is a lot of people who do not have enough points, but who get in because of their background. It is basically a downgrading of our trade”

Anna: “That’s my point. That’s what I’m getting at. I think that the education is degraded”

Kenneth: “You get a world of problems later on, when you get out, when you have problems with yourself, and then have to work with other people who have problems. That’s where it is bound to go totally wrong”

Val: “I don’t think it’s acceptable. I don’t think we should just live with it, for I consider our way of working an important part of the life of young people. We are there to help them, and to guide them, and to instruct them, and it simply cannot be right that there are some people who have problems themselves, and who cannot tackle their own problems, and then to go in and work with children and youngsters (...) And for anybody to just come in from the street, apply for a club job, and the get it, because we need staff. That’s dangerous, I feel”

Kenneth: “I agree. It cannot be right that any number of nut-cases can get into this. It’s not that they are dyslectic, it’s not that. (...) You can get a diploma here even if you have a severe alcohol problem. There are people here who have really grave problems with themselves ... with alcohol or with other things ... and it’s them that a lot of people want out”

Peter: “But don’t people sort that out for themselves?”

Val: “No, I’m not sure, because there are some who’d say that: I need to hang on to this because I need the 10.000 kroner every month. And there’s no other way to get it”

Facts and Fiction

If we look, firstly, at the factual content of the passage, of the presentation of the educational

context, a number of lines are arresting: The fact that some participants are subject to rehabilitation is verifiably true, but the registered number is exaggerated. Another stated fact is that some people are allowed in especially because they are handicapped, which is not formally possible. A third is that any 'nutcase' can get in from the street and that you can get a diploma in spite of alcoholism, intimations that are basically unfounded. The verifications of these facts with the administrative authorities of the college is solid. The identification of factual faults or inconsistencies in the communication is not motivated by any drive to "correct" things, but is a means to identify the energy and motivations present in the group. Of course evaluators and researchers should not communicate gossip and rumour as such, but in this approach gossip and rumour communicates something important besides their factual irregularities. So we take it on face value, we test it against the reality that we know something of, but which we may also learn about.

On the whole the college is given little credit: it has few resources, it lets people in against rules, it accepts general dissipation, and hands out diplomas at random! This contrasts heavily with the explicit satisfaction with the education evident in other parts of the text.

So the impact of the passage is that the group - as opposed to the college - is concerned with a potential dilemma well known in education, namely how far a given education should accept participants that need special attention for social and health reasons, and that it is so concerned that some exaggeration is needed to convince the interviewer. The group is aware of this dilemma. Several lines meet with envisaged contradictions that they are discriminating people who do not deserve it, i.e. the bad backs and the dyslectics. The concern is on behalf of the status of the education, of the profession, and of the children and youngsters in the clubs. Skilled and professional labour is actually in great demand in the Danish health and social sector. It is an acknowledged fact that there are "too many unskilled pedagogues" at work not only in clubs, but also in day care. This is due to the educational policies of the liberal

government in the 80's, which restricted access to human service training and education considerably. That is why Danish municipalities demand that they complete the education programme that is the subject of our interview. Furthermore the club sector by tradition recruits non-professional staff, and so it is vulnerable to general stigmatisation when staff problems occur - which invariably they do, as Kenneth confirms. So the important point here is not so much that the group points to a problem, but that in the public and administrative eye they are themselves the very population that is problematic - in the sense that they are not formally qualified for their societally important work of socialisation and integration.

Whether the individual participant suffers from a bad back or is recovering from drug abuse, whether he or she is in education - and working in the youth club - because he or she fell out of university, because the building industries are down or hairdressing is not much of a business these days - these facts are immaterial and intangible - both in the public eye, in the bureaucratic sense and as far as the educational measures are concerned. And contrary to the assumption implied in the discussion of the group there is no documented covariance between rehabilitation, dyslexia, alcoholism and having problems with oneself. In fact some of the texts in this project could support the opposite thesis: A number of the rehabilitating colleagues appear lively, intelligent and well motivated participants with a realistic attitude to their handicap. Whereas some of the university drop outs could be said to signal problems of self esteem, and some of the skilled workers to manage the shift from production to social work less than well. But these are mere assumptions, associations in the research team, who have obviously been severely provoked by the group's unanimous problem identification. It is inherent in our approach not to censor such associations, but to register them, and to confront them with the text. You can say that at first we serve as a screen on to which the allegations of the group are projected. And next we react, and serve as a complementary mirror. Neither the construction of the group nor the associations of the research team are "true" in the literal

sense, but they each constitute possible perceptions and dimensions of experience.

The concluding line - Val's accusation that the rehabilitating colleagues are strictly instrumentally, economically, motivated - is also strange. It is generally agreed that more or less everybody in this education is dependent on upholding their income while they qualify. The education is designed for such people, for adults, with adult lives and obligations. The characterization of the club pedagogue's task - as "helping, guiding and instructing" (Val) - is noticeable: It is true that working with the young is societally important, and that youth need reliable adults! But social advisors, school teachers and other professional groups would smile, to say the least, at the club pedagogue's ambitious self-understanding. Youth clubs do work with fringe groups, but much everyday life in youth clubs comprise a number of relaxed leisurely activities. Furthermore in the Danish context the references to the work as "profession" (Kenneth) and "our trade" (Peter) is peculiar. They signal a well defined line of work, social recognition and standards of quality - in short: professionalism. Not even the professional educations of 3½ or 4 years' duration - such as those of pedagogue, nurse or school teacher - can claim proper professional identity in the strict sociological sense, and when they try current modernization quickly get the better of them with further demands of flexibility and employability (Weber 2001a, Salling Olesen 2000b). Actually the culturally established profile of the "club pedagogues" is that of the informal, comradely and loyal companion - undisturbed by professional distance, defying control and disciplinary dimensions of the job. This collective understanding of the sector is confirmed throughout the present project, and although it may be said to make a virtue of out necessity, it appears well founded in the subjective experience of the staff. If this syndrome is perhaps also nurtured by subjective and objective inferiority, it is at least a popular one ... but it is remarkably absent in this passage. Here we meet professional concern only.

One interesting feature of the dialogue is the way factual corrections are turned around and

used to opposite ends: The group denies the fact that the rehabilitating colleagues are allowed in along the general rules (as suggested by Kenneth) and it refutes the possibility that they might themselves be capable of assessing their competence (as imagined by Peter). Both attempts at modifying Anna's initial definition of the problem are used to further degrade the colleagues.

Finally the group builds a consistent argument that people who "have problems with themselves", i.e. who are psychologically unstable, should not work in the caring professions, concluding that they only in it for the money, anyway. The preoccupation with the psychological resources is a valid and recurrent debate all over the social and health sectors, and it does possess its own relevance in this short-term educational programme. But there is little, if any, reason that this general problem should arise in the context of the discussion. It seems that when the text is confronted with the reality it refers to, the text has little reliability of information. On the other hand the group is remarkably at ease with itself, it is in relative agreement - it is obviously sharing an important experience with us (the researchers).

Communicative dimensions

The next step of interpretation focuses on the communicative dimensions. How does the group go about it? Which features in their way of talking and which figures of speech convey the message to us? As mentioned above, the lines are spoken rapidly, with a high level of dedication, and there is a generally positive and corroborative atmosphere. People are eager and responding, almost echoing, and the energy grows steadily throughout the quoted passage.

As it turns out Anna's opening statement sets a theme, and also launches a pattern of formulation that are kept up by the group during the paragraph. Anna repeats a lot. She uses a number of parallel, slightly droning sentences, as well as literal repetitions. She expresses

emotions, even if allegedly she doesn't want to, thus calling for explication of this conflict between emotion and rational argument. The theme is that of the others, developed as a definition of intruders. The imagery of intrusion is supplemented by that of the education falling down, and the general framework of right and wrong is introduced.

The intrusion is defined by the "wrong" presence of the others. Their getting into the introduction is echoed all through: they make the space heavy, they are allowed in wrongly by the system, they go in the work, and they get into this, until at last they are wanted out - of the education, to prevent them from getting out in the workplaces.

Anna's perception is that the education "falls down a bit" as if the education might bring her down. This is no error of translation, she actually uses this slightly awkward, very concrete image. Combined with the inevitability of the feeling the fear of being forced down or falling is frightening. "A bit" is a paradoxical colloquialism, literally modifying, but substantially augmenting. It is echoed in the space getting "a bit heavy" (Des), and in the "sort of" dropping level (Anna herself). Finally the image is qualified in the "downgrading of our trade" (Peter) and the "degrading of the education" (Anna herself).

The theme of right and wrong is paradoxical from the outset: Anna distinguishes in the peculiar way that something is wrong (the number of participants in rehabilitation), which there's "nothing wrong in" because it's social and helpful and (therefore) right. It is within this paradoxical framework that she must modify her statement, she "can't help" feeling, despite herself. In her second remark Anna reiterates both structure and content of the first: She confirms her original "nothing wrong", assessing that "absolutely" must there be space for all - only not for all, because there are too many. She accelerates the discomfort by denying her own reassurance of the right, that she thinks wrong, you cannot do that much right, too much right makes wrong, and she substantiates her point by alluding to the (too small) resources of the college, again ending up in a down falling image, this time of the

education dropping. The wrong is first substantiated by Kenneth, modified (into difference) by Des, enhanced by Kenneth (into totally wrong), civilized as well as dramatized (into not acceptable as well as downright dangerous) by Val, and confirmed (it cannot be right) by Kenneth, who also elaborates qualitatively as well as quantitatively on the danger: the intruders are ‘nut-cases’, they come in any number, their problems are severe and really grave, and the problem is alcohol as well as other things, intimidating drug problems. The culmination of the definition of the wrong is the explication of the attitude of the others. They are dishonest, they are in the education on pretence.

Do Not Degrade Us!

Criss-crossing these consistent figures is the emotional presence of the “we” of the (insider) group as called upon by Anna’s anxiety, in opposition to the others, who represent the explicit danger of the club-pedagogues being considered of no value (“if you can’t become anything else”) - a fear well-founded in the current hierarchies of the social and health labour market, a much wider problem with no direct connection to a possible number of misfits in the education. This is made explicit again when Anna - happily: “That’s my point! That’s what I’m getting at!” - answers to Peter’s “they are let in”, where she also changes the “downgrading of the trade” to the “degrading of the education”. She is herself part of the education, she is indeed within it in the very interview situation, so if the education is degraded, she is herself degraded. The unconscious thematic collusion of the group is: We do not want to be degraded. And at this point the more vicious attacks on the others (Kenneth’s remark and Val’s denunciation of their morals) have become legitimate. And the somewhat pompous sketch of our own importance in “helping, guiding and instructing” falls into place.

So the real danger is one facing the group itself, and the unconscious danger is that the degradation might be justified. After all “problems with oneself” and a fair amount of daily

alcohol intake are not uncommon - neither with the population in general or with the low-skilled segment with an unstable labour market position that the group represents. Although in the interview situation the individuals come out as winners, there is no reason that they should not be as ambivalent facing the challenges of their job of social work as anybody else, and their labour market carriers are probably as mixed. The life history of the group was not focussed on in the interviews. But we know what they are doing: Anna's task in the leisure centre is in the kitchen, where she bakes with the school children every afternoon; Kenneth dropped out of technical college and has made a career of working in the national organization of youth clubs, thus so far making further education unnecessary; Des is an immigrant with ten years of unskilled social work behind him, specialising in computer games and music; Peter is young and has no education or labour market experience other than that in the social project he is employed in; Val has an education as a teacher of textile work, i.e. she is working beneath her status, but indeed she does run the sewing workshop in her workplace. In structural terms the group represents one layer or level in a Chinese box, where income and cultural status form the objective foundation of individual and collective inferiority, substantiated by the imagined shortcomings of other professional groups. Thus traditional dichotomies like school-teachers vs. pedagogues, pedagogues vs. unskilled staff, unskilled staff vs. unemployed, etc. are well known. Of course they have their objective foundation in different status of the societal tasks, of income and status, but they are often voiced with more vigour than the objective differences would vouch.

As a result of the secondary analysis of the group discussions we have gained two results which are less directly relevant to the original evaluation project, but never the less important for understanding professional competences. First, it takes very little to bring out an intolerant and aggressive attitude towards people with social problems in the club pedagogues to be in direct opposition to the consciously intended result of the education. Second, club

pedagogues-to-be are in serious need of recognition. These observations can be said to seriously question the general suitability of the unskilled social workers to their jobs. But they also indicate that the educational setting and the position of being a student may contribute to these two states of mind.

Individuals, Texts and Group Dynamics

The individuals who spoke the lines quoted were brought together in their special capacities as participants in an educational setting that was being explored and evaluated. They brought into the research setting not only their shared experience of the educations, but also the general experience of their everyday life and their respective life histories. This is not a question of statistical reliability, although by age and labour market position the populations may well mirror their social strata. Within the context of the club education the groups have been composed with a view to comprising the most characteristic empirical profiles - gender-wise and by educational background. Our populations are plausible examples of unskilled adults in education (for a discussion of validity in qualitative research see Kvale 1991, Altheide & Johnson 1998). In this respect they are representative of the unskilled populations that in current years are more or less willingly training or retraining for the changing and increasingly qualifications demanding labour market. Their labour market experience is a mixed bag: this segment of the labour force is the one to immediately feel ups and downs of trades and the general economy. Participants' experience comprises a number of contradictory motivations. The jobs they seek are much wanted, if not for their content then for the income. The road to get there is, however, paved with a number of imposed regressions, the structural position of being a pupil perhaps being the most basic and at the same time the most challenging.

So the general background of experience is contradictory: jobs wanted, training unwanted,

followed by training accepted, and infantile position unwanted. At an individual level, with each adult man or woman it is of course much more complex. Some adults actually want the training, but not the job. Class and gender form different foundations for handling the dilemma. But in a strategy of theorizing the motivational conflicts one has to simplify, in this case by stating a common structural dilemma. We are not surprised that there is an explicit need to let out some steam of aggression, for these adult pupils have surely had a number of reasons to be angry along their ways, and have not been offered appropriate arenas for voicing their experience and putting it into words.

The group communication will implicitly and sometimes explicitly appeal to each participant to search emotionally and cognitively for the shared experience of the group. The underlying references here are the tradition from Pollock onwards, the group therapy (Foulkes) and communication in groups (Bion). Of course the experience of the research setting is immediately shared, as is the implicit subjective pressure to contribute. The interview situation bears some structural resemblance to the teaching, which holds its own kind of pressure, and the teaching in its turn refers to the work situation, which holds another kind of pressure. It may even be argued that the interplay between these levels of experience of pressure is in itself anxiety provoking and will produce regressive resistance. So if there is anxiety around it is sure to be exposed, and as we have seen in the texts, it does, and it is managed by means of collective rationalization. The analysis might at this point be extended in terms of exposing institutionalised defence mechanisms, cf. e.g. Menzies-Lyth.

So voicing shared experience referring to any of these levels invariably brings about qualities of perception that cannot be understood in terms of the factual events referred to only. The challenges of social work and dealing with patients have long ago activated emotions, strategies of action and understandings from other phases of the life course, from family settings as well as from other workplaces. In the communication a gradual and

intuitive selection of experience suitable in the group takes place, and emotional qualities and intellectual insights are attributed to the common production of meaning. This does not happen randomly, but not in a purely rational manner either. Contributions are formed in a subjective navigation between the reservoirs of individual experience and the theme perceived developing in the group. In this respect the research setting actually reproduces a characteristic of every day life communication, where the attitudes and emotions of people are often not articulate until they are offered a communicative arena, until they are voiced in a social situation. The group thus develops its own explicit meaning, drawing on dimensions of experience, and indeed formulations, from the individual participants, who in their turn have contributed, not what they are, who they are, or what they think, but what this setting and communication allowed them to feel, remember and articulate - and avoid. The meaning developed by the group is not simply the sum of the attitudes and opinions of the participants, nor are the participants victims of external group dynamics. The group produces a unique and original text that communicates shared experience, not exhaustingly so, but relevant and carefully voiced dimensions of experience.

Recognition, Aggression and Educational Results

The present empirical population has produced texts that explicitly and implicitly voice the need for personal and professional recognition by superiors and by society. It has also “texted” a professional concern - for the well-being of psychiatric patients and for the reputation of the education for social pedagogic work in youth clubs - thus legitimizing not only the demand for recognition, but also the apparent emotional state of readiness to perceive degradation and humiliation. In this case, the group verbalized its message in a roundabout manner by abusing a specific population of others, indeed they collectively constructed the rehabilitating colleagues: not only as less able but as morally corrupt as well. We have found

a similar position in the interpretation of another group (Weber and Salling Olesen 2002). In that case, a group of unemployed men being retrained for social work in a psychiatric ward directed strong aggressions against a group of female teaching nurses. The images produced and confirmed each correspond depressingly well with cultural clichés active in popular or populist political rhetoric and in everyday folklore. As recognizable figures, they serve to simplify and thus make bearable the complex and multitudinous experience of everyday life, and as organizers of subjective collective energy they contribute powerfully to corrupting political civilization and gender equality. It is safe to say that the attitudes texted above are not the intended outcome of the respective training programmes. They have certainly nothing to do neither with the formal curriculum nor with the intended communication of workplace culture or general political implications of being public sector social service staff. They even disavow the professional ethos that they serve to establish in the texts.

So have these educational processes been counterproductive? Is the educational outcome that poor? And are the individuals so politically blind (labelling socially deprived groups) and so male chauvinist? Hopefully not. My exposition of the regressive images in the collective unconscious of the groups is on the one hand a research produced artefact that - on the other hand - exposes a potential of subjective energies, organized within the framework of the consciousness of everyday life (Leithäuser 1977). A general cultural disposition to employ reductive schemes of understanding in complex and challenging situations is reproduced. The interpretation has focussed on the frightening aspects of the collective subjectivity - with good reason, I should think - but the texts themselves comprise reference to the contradictions reacted to. There is a framework of ambition of being and doing “right” in the club pedagogues’ discussion – a professional ambition - and beside the defensive aspects of the aggression of the men in the psychiatric hospital we also found sound observations of a routinized and (too?) highly gendered workplace culture. So the scapegoat figures of

munching women and morally corrupt colleagues are also inversions of a general humanist and/or professional ethic - the claim that education and social work should be for the benefit of the users - children, youngsters, patients, etc. In fact random elements of such ethics are employed to construct the villainous images. And in contemporary institutionalised and bureaucratic public sector contexts such ambitions, however fragmented, are far from irrelevant.

My general line of arguments has been that the interplay between an experienced lack of recognition at different levels is decisive in producing the resultant defensive reactions. That is where the experience at classroom level does come into it.

The classroom experience is a double agenda of having to accept to be a pupil in spite of being an adult, employed person and a curriculum of welfare state legislation, psychology, pedagogy, cultural studies, etc. in line with the self understanding of being a competent professional, though in abstract and general terms. Although teachers probably strive to meet the subjective experience of the work they are qualifying people for, they work within a set of rules describing the context of the education in terms of subjects and disciplines, which the students must acquire, not as experienced problems,.

In educational terms the analysis thus points to the relevance of problem-oriented curricula, and to the need of explicitly reflecting the background experience and the subjective motivations of participants within the framework of education. It also reminds us that teachers should respect that subjective motivations are only one version of the multitudinous sensations and perceptions that adults possess. e.g. aggression may be an integral part of regressive defences as well as progressive orientations.

Finally, as stated at the outset of this paper, a number of the mixed and functionally inappropriate motivations are in fact embodiments of the economic and societal paradoxes

that constitute everyday life in and around education: adult pupils and men in women's jobs, are empirical evidence of contradictory demands of modernization, rationalization and labour market development, and a rational appropriation process will reflect such paradoxes.

Some Remarks on the Methodology

The general framework of my interpretation is that of a psychoanalytically oriented social psychology, that acknowledges preconscious and unconscious dimensions and dynamics in everyday life communication. It also appreciates participants' life history experience, the everyday life experience and the interplay between these subjective reservoirs.

In contrast to the well known clinical psychoanalysis, this approach is concerned with general cultural patterns of subjectivity, where a potential of politics of repression as well as of liberation is stored. Of course collective subjectivity is constituted by the interaction of individuals, and by the collusion of individual drives and dispositions. It might, for example, be productive to see the aggression of the men in the hospital as collectively re-iterated scenes of primary socialization, where identifications with mother and father respectively comprised not only "becoming like", but also counter-positioning, fights and ambivalent possession. For the men are under regressive pressure, they are infantilised and denied their status (and identity) as men. It is likewise interesting to consider the discriminating and rigid appropriation of "right" by the club pedagogues as an identification with a mighty if abstract aggressor in momentary need of more specific, tangible and realistic ideals. Such deepening of the current analysis is possible, but it might create the impression that I was aiming at a redefinition of the educational setting into a form of collective therapy. Although I am sure that educational settings are often the arenas of subjective liberation, including liberation from inner compulsions, the therapeutic fallacy (Alheit 1994) is not mine. The primary socialization of participants is only relevant in this context insofar as it is activated and

becomes decisive in the interaction, in the production of the meaning of everyday culture, including that of education and professional collective consciousness. In that context the energies and search processes of participants must be respected. They must find their own - devious - ways (cf. Weber 1995).

Learning and socialization is always a progressive-regressive process, and it always activates the inner resources of the learner. So the focus of the educationally relevant analysis is on the interaction with reality and on how it is voiced.

A social psychology that draws on the tradition of psychoanalysis in the analysis of learning and consciousness faces the theoretical challenge of understanding subjective energies not as natural instincts or fateful drives, but as energies organizing reality. This is in line with the general ambition to redefine psychoanalysis as an interactionist, social theory of the psyche. The German social psychologist Alfred Lorenzer defines drives as a product of primary and secondary socialization with a view to societal and interactional logics meeting with the individual, shaping subjectivity but also being changed by the specific ways in which these logics are appropriated (Lorenzer 1970, 1972). The concepts of ambivalence as defined by the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi: inner ambivalence stems from the contradictory qualities of reality, not from the confrontation of libido and thanatos (Ferenczi 1972), as well as the whole tradition of object relations theory (e.g. Winnicott 1987) point to the same concern for the outside world. With Lorenzer, however, it is an explicit point that unconscious processes themselves are not individual reactions on social repression, but societally produced cultural meanings. Life history is thus an ongoing process of socialization, not just an adaptation of individuals to reality, but a dynamic continuation of society and culture as such: subjectivity is society in a specific historical and social mediation of individual sensation - bodily, emotional, cognitive perceptions - with language as the primary medium. His approach has been successfully developed into a psychoanalytically oriented understanding of

culture in general, comprising not only literature and media analyses, but also understandings of architecture, physical space in general, etc. (Lorenzer 1986).

Theorizing everyday life is a well established tradition in cultural studies and sociology, and the very concepts of every day life is developed into a theory of late modern consciousness by Thomas Leithäuser, who sees the different sections of everyday life as arenas of experience, adapting to necessities, repressing socially illegitimate sensations and reactions as well as developing wishes and ambitions. Leithäuser's concept of consciousness of everyday life points to the fact that attitudes and opinions may be understood as pragmatic and situated, individual or collective s–ubjectivity. It thereby questions the established concept of identity, as well as indeed the validity of any positivist registration of attitudes. Together with Birgit Volmerg and the Institute of Psychology and Social Research in Bremen the approach has produced a number of empirical studies, comprising workplace experience and experience in public space (Volmerg et. al. 1986, 1994, Leithäuser 1999).

Integrating a Marxian analysis of society - the separation of private and public sphere and the logics of production and reproduction - with psychoanalytical social psychology and biography, Regina Becker-Schmidt has produced a number of analyses of women's experience in work and family life. Becker-Schmidt applies Ferenczi's concept of ambivalence as well as concepts of identification processes to the field of girls' and women's lives, and she contributes substantially to a gender-specific and historically sensitive understanding of socialization (e.g. 1995, 1998 and 2000).

The brief account of the approaches hardly does them justice, but they each served as inspiration to the analysis presented above. The theorizing of learning settings gains by a societal dimension that can see actions and attitudes, not as individual fallacies or shortcomings, but as valid reactions to complex and partly invisible logics. Before concluding this paper I shall elaborate the underlying understanding of our media of communication:

language.

Language Games and Interaction-Forms

Language as an integral dimension of interaction and bodily experience has been theorized by Alfred Lorenzer, who sees the dynamics of subjectivity - of inner nature - and societal structure as authentically experienced bodily interactions, established as interaction-forms.

They constitute the basic socialization, and they are progressively differentiated and refined as language is introduced. Only language also serves to render some interaction-forms acceptable, while others remain as bodily perceptions, pre-verbal - but none the less psychologically active. The basic epitome of the interaction-form is the mother and child, the dyad - not only because this stage in socialization holds importance, but also because it serves to illustrate the dialectic of refinement and deprivation that socialization is about. No verbalization, no establishment of symbolic interaction, takes place without leaving something behind, organizing perceptions, leaving some out and “forgetting” them systematically. Pre-verbal interaction forms melt into the symbolic ones as interaction-forms and language relate. Lorenzer sees this process as a potential for later reflected experiments (in the psychoanalytic sense: “Probehandlungen”) of action and expression.

Lorenzer’s ambition is to theorize language, interaction and bodily experience in the context of their mutual societal settings and functions. The concept of language game, which stems originally from Wittgenstein, situates language practically and societally. The language game is a complex unity of the actual use of language, its practical functions and the general understanding of its life world. It mediates subjective and objective structures, and its genesis is indeed the constitution of the relation between individual and society. Language and consciousness are integral parts of societal praxis, and language games are accordingly the medium of subjective structuring of reality. In this sense individual subjectivity is societal

from the outset.

In an intact language game the agents share pre-verbal interaction-forms as well as its specific verbalization, in language becoming a symbolic interaction-form - in short: that agents understand each other and empathically share explicit and implicit meanings.

Lorenzer introduces the concept of disturbed language to understand the process of the “re-division” of language games. Once accomplished competencies of symbolization - putting subjective structures to language - may, in specific situations, that recalls and activates inner conflict, cease to work. The capacity of expressing subjective experience is lost facing the confrontation of contradictory and irreconcilable interaction-forms. Pre-verbal interaction forms that have never been integrated into the language games at all may well be part of such conflict, although they are systematically left over to the unconscious. In such cases, language is unfounded in experience, the words stand stripped of authentic meaning. Lorenzer uses the concept of sign about this language with no foundation in interaction-forms. Accomplished symbolic interactions may also be broken up for psychodynamic and/or societal reasons, the word stripped of its symbolic meaning, but still representing dynamic inner scenes - which, in their turn, may be activated without access to relevant means of communication.

Language games will not only echo interest and power relations in the social situation, they will also develop meanings of their own, register and comprise factual as well as implicit cultural and psychological meaning. They are dialectical unities of the use of language, everyday life as it is in fact lived practically, and the attitudes, opinions and ideologies it develops and makes use of. In the research situation we have “only” the words, but if we look at the communications in terms of a language game we have also a symbolic life world.

In the language game subjective structures are mediated with reality, with social and societal structures. When the appropriation of reality demands emotional or cognitive accommodation, the language becomes vague. This in turn, gives the communication of everyday life its well

known specific quality of implicit congeniality and of indefinite allusions that comprise a variety of different sensations and recollections. To each individual, words and concepts possess an aura of implicit meanings founded in earlier experience, and in interaction and communication these meanings are sorted out and established as new collective formulations, that merge with the general cultural reservoir, confirming and changing culture. In this process factual information and authentic experience may find words - become symbolized - but as we have seen they may also be censored, withdrawn, only to sink back into the pre-verbal consciousness of individuals and institutions.

The club pedagogues certainly go through a process of negotiating and sorting out the relevant phrases before their implicit aggressions are finally focussed on the “danger” and dubious morals of the rehabilitating colleagues. They are bringing together vague anxieties stemming from number of different settings. On this background we may look at the text as a frozen version of specific interaction. We may look at the referential level, which is immediately understood because words refer to recognizable objects and situations, and where the cultural connotations are shared. As I have shown even this level raises a number of questions: the text possesses a referential value that is unknown to the interviewer or discussion leader, and which he, in his turn, tries to come to terms with. Of course the interviewer may simply get new information, but in the texts above, we are given to wonder, because the information we get does not agree with our existing knowledge of the field: We are cognitively as well as emotionally aroused. We think we know, for instance, that the administrators of the club education are not reckless, and we are disturbed by the prospect of alcoholics in social work. We react on behalf of the general cultural framework: this cannot or should not be so. Of course the individual characteristics of the researcher come into this process, both in the face to face interaction and in the interpretation. So we should reflect our idiosyncrasies and, our loyalties as well as our theoretical perspective in terms of transference

and counter-transference (for a discussion see e.g. Hunt 1989, Andersen 2001).

So we move on to other potential sources of information in the text, to the communicative dimension and to be empathic on the communicative level as well: How does the mode of communication add or detract from the phrases, and which figures of rhetoric are employed? By confronting these levels of reading, answering the research question: how do they talk about what? In this process new structures of subjective meaning, embracing implicit meanings as well as explicit ones, are formed, and we approach a motivational and perhaps an experiential, perceptual understanding.

Such understanding might inspire adult education, and particularly professional education and training, to some abstaining from directing the learning processes towards specific curricular goals, and to a critical reflection of the relation between teaching and learning in general. People learn what they want to learn, and their desires are complex and ambivalent. Their ambitions of being recognized themselves well as changing the world for the better are much easier developed if they are allowed to - and supported in - sorting out their ambiguities and reflecting on them.

Notes

¹ The empirical material produced within the research context of the “Life History Project”, a project on the subjective interplay between adult education, every day life and life history (Weber 1997c, 1999b, Andersen 2000, Salling Olesen 2001, Weber & Salling Olesen 2002), which included a large number of empirical studies by a number of authors. Case analyses in English in Weber 1996, 1998, 1999a, 2007,2009 and Salling Olesen 2004, 2007a

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had completed the evaluation report (Lund and Weber, 2001) and given feed back to participants and the union.

³ The concept of “research subjects” referring to the population of informants and participants stem from Hollway & Jefferson 2000. It signals the perception of the people involved as dynamic and autonomous subjects, opposed to the status of objects under positivist scrutiny.

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