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Olesen, Henning Salling

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TRACING INVISIBLE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS IN WORK AND LEARNING

Henning Salling Olesen
Roskilde University, Denmark

Tracing the Invisible Social Dimension in Work and Learning

This paper will introduce and argue for a psycho-societal approach to empirical research in researching work and learning which combines a materialist theory of socialization with an interpretation methodology based in hermeneutic experiences from psychoanalysis. Its theoretical focus is on subjectivity. By the term "approach" is indicated the intrinsic connection between the theorizing of an empirical object and the reflection of the research process and the epistemic subject. The practical methodology is an interpretation procedure based in texts or field observation and seeks to understand collective unconscious meaning in text, and the following text refers to interpretation examples from empirical research in professional learning and identification processes.

My notion of subjectivity combines a social reinterpretation of the core insights in classical psychoanalysis—the unconscious, the drives—with a theory of language acquisition. The “invisible” aspect of work related learning is in the socialized but unconscious interaction experience which is embodied and remains virulent in practical learning (and work processes as well). The understanding of this invisible socialization is significant both for understanding the relation between discursive knowledge and social practice, and it is significant in relation to identification and ambivalences in relation to work and learning.

This is not easily contained in a conference paper, so my paper will consist of some introductory remarks and a reference to a thematic issue of the open access Journal *Forum for Qualitative Social Science*, in which I have together with a number of German, British and Danish colleagues provided an introduction to the theory of socialization and the methodology, with a number of empirical interpretation examples. The issue is presented by some text excerpts and a list of content.

The Subjective Dimensions of Work Life

Since the foundation of the Researching Work and Learning conference I have felt a shortcoming in the theorizing of the subjective aspects of work life. Learning has mostly been seen as an individual process of agency, constructiveness and meaning making in a social context of work, which is mainly defined in functional terms, and gets its dynamic from outside – from management, from technology, from societal factors. The consequence is a failure to theorize the potential political and structural effects of learning, and a detachment of learning in work life from social life in a broader context as well as from political dimensions of work life. In a keynote at the first RWL in Leeds 1999 (further elaborated and published in Olesen/Weber, 2001) I tried to map out these subjective dimensions. Recent critical discussions about the wider societal changes in the significance of work – e.g. Sennet’s “Corrosion of Character” – may illustrate the importance of this challenge – the fact that work is a life sphere which is the foundation for but also a reflection of people’s lives as a whole in a wider social and political sense.

In the meantime more social concepts of learning from organization theory and different versions of practice theory broadly located in the Cultural history theory have almost established a new mainstream. Learning has been conceived as a social participation and at least by the reference to the foundational cultural history theory it has also been linked to overall societal development – and probably in principle assigned a creative role in social history. In relation to traditional learning theories this is a very important advance, but I also think it is no coincidence that it has swept the table in practically engaged workplace research. It is easy to apply and the social nature of learning is in accord with the direct observation of the workplace context.

However, to me the analysis of learning as participation in social practices or in social communities often appears hermetic or circular, mostly limiting the perspective to an already established social setting in which individuals make their way and make their meaning of it. Two questions seem left behind: The societal dimensions defining the practical environment, and the subjective mediation of culture in the individual life history of the human agent. Such generalizing characterization may be unfair to these approaches – but I'm not intending an evaluation, I just try to identify within a well known context the types of questions that have led me to look elsewhere.

Generally I think we can state that the political aspects of work and learning research – both in the sense of immediate engagements in trade unions and wider community and social justice engagements have had a surprisingly marginal position in the discussions in our “research community”. So before immersing into my more specific methodological discussion I would like to draw up the wider political and societal context.

Subjectivity in Marxist Theory

I have always been fascinated by the concept of ‘Political Economy of Labor’ or ‘Political Economy of Working People’¹ which was not first launched but convincingly elaborated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their great book *Geschichte und Eigensinn*(1981 – approximately translated into “History and Autonomy” or ‘...Self reliance” – referring to work). I see this concept as a potential framework of re-interpreting the ideas of subjectivity and learning within a Marxian theory – with implications for political as well as for social science thinking. This re-interpretation would potentially link the utopian idea of a society beyond capitalist organization with the interpretation of subjectivity in everyday life in capitalism.

The concept met a long felt need in relation to the theoretical interpretation of Marxism in my student generation around 1970, and in the entire continental European neo Marxism. In the reception of the analysis of capital and capitalism by Marx there was always an intellectual irritation about the relation of this theoretical insight to political practice and to ideas about socialism – Marxism must encompass an endogenous understanding of understanding of potentials and conditions for political agency and societal change. But it also contributed a political void – given that the actual “realized socialism” in the Soviet Union was obviously based on elitism and the social democrats had sacked Marxism and believed in a more equal distribution of an ever growing capitalist cake. In Denmark and other Nordic countries the fact of a social welfare state of a relatively benign nature was unquestionable and the role of the labor movement in building a welfare society was also unquestionable. The politics of work life was somehow relegated to a limited defense of payments.

I was involved in trade unions' education from early 1970'es and practically attempting to mediate between different experience horizons. So to me Negt & Kluge provided a decisive development in Marxian theory. They gave a logical complement to Marx' theory as developed in Grundrisse and Das Kapital, and synthesized in new version of historical materialism as a history of civilization, which promises a way out of the determinism of Capital analysis and avoids the mechanical quality of historical materialism which was developed especially by Friedrich Engels and the communist political theory. The notion of Political Economy of working People faces the basic question which also remains today: How can we in the middle of the flexible and comprehensive ability of capital to subordinate all materiality and all subjectivity see any *material dynamic* which can produce substantial change? Utopian perspectives must take their point of departure in the constitution of capitalism itself in order to be realistic – taken for granted that capitalism is the constitutive organization of our society.

Oskar Negt had in the 1960'es provided his important critique of the political education in the labor movement, and his alternative vision of “exemplary learning” (Negt 1963). His point was that instead of stuffing people with theory of capitalism and socialist principles – which obviously failed – the labor education should rather take its point in departure in the experiences of everyday life. He wrote this in a time where there was a rebellion among industrial workers against the prize paid for the economic prosperity in terms of work intensity and environment risks – and against the lack of practical democracy in the labor movement itself. His points might appear less hopeful in other periods with no rebellions, and generally the societal preconditions for mobilization of a class consciousness in the sense of traditional labor movement – communist and social democrat alike, in spite of fundamental differences – were disappearing. Today it has become obvious that a theory of class consciousness which is extrapolating from industrial labor is obsolete. But it does not negate Negt's argument, that political education must depart from concrete everyday experiences.

In *Geschichte und Eigensinn* the scope was much broader: a civilization history of subjectivity, constituted in the reproduction by work – not in the narrow capitalist sense of paid work or in the historical limited form of industrial work – but the living engagement with the environment in all its forms. Within this notion capitalism is an organizing relation and the life mode of wage labor an important but not universal historical form of subjectivity. You can read a brief introduction to this enormous work in English in Salling Olesen, 1999 – or listen to the online introduction copy of my introduction to Negt's thinking at RWL 6 (2009)

But the point is that the idea of a political economy of working people is a utopian concept, an inspiration which can at best help to direct our attention and form questions for empirical study. In the Frankfurt school Marxist tradition the aim of critique is to reveal the historical and changeable nature of social reality, and discover the invisible potentials. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the intellectual work and the dialectic of knowing and learning. The decisive contribution of Negt & Kluge's book is that it provides the framework for a historical and material interpretation of subjectivity as a product of capitalist civilization and a potential source for a new social order. And this is where it comes together with the theorizing of learning. Negt's critique of labor education points to the connection between the experience of everyday life and the development of societal

insights – analytical understanding of societal structure as well as what he with Wright Mills named sociological imagination – the ability to imagine an alternative reality. So the challenge is to theorize the ways in which this material production of subjectivity and how it can be empirically researched – being social but also invisible.

A Methodology for Discovering the Invisible

I want to very briefly introduce a proposal for a methodology which can trace the invisible subjective dimensions of Work and Learning. For many years we have in my research group in Roskilde worked with life history approaches to understand learning, participation in education and (work) identity processes, e.g. in studying professional learning processes, in studying learning motivation, in studying competences and formal qualifications etc. In some cases we have used life stories as material, in other cases we have just tried to understand embodied societal and cultural dimensions in individual identity processes and social interaction in everyday life – including work organizations. Our life history research has drawn on several sources of inspiration – but one of the most important has been a German methodology of researching the consciousness of everyday life (Salling Olesen 1989; Leithäuser 1976). It is based on synthesis between Frankfurt school critical theory and psychoanalysis, originally developed by Alfred Lorenzer, and with a phenomenologically inspired attention to the experience of profane everyday life. In the latest 10 years or so we have established an international research group of German, British and Danish scholars working with similar psycho-societal approaches to everyday life. The shared concern has been methodological and theoretical but our mode of operation has been to work together on empirical interpretations of everyday life material – for the Danish participants primarily work related learning and identity processes. The joint work has revealed very deep language and cultural trenches even within similar approaches, and for this reason we finally managed to produce an introduction in English to this research experience in the form of a thematic issue of the open access online journal *“Forum for Qualitative Social Research”* (Salling Olesen, ed., 2012), – including a quite detailed introduction to the theoretical and methodological contributions of Alfred Lorenzer, from which I will bring a couple of appetizing bits in the following, and then supply the overview of the journal and the link to the online publication.

The article is a guided tour to Alfred LORENZER’s proposal for an “in-depth hermeneutic” cultural analysis methodology which was launched in an environment with an almost complete split between social sciences and psychology/psychoanalysis. It presents the background in his materialist socialization theory, which combines a social reinterpretation of the core insights in classical psychoanalysis – the unconscious, the drives - with a theory of language acquisition. His methodology is based on a transformation of the “scenic understanding” from a clinical to a text interpretation, which seeks to understand collective unconscious meaning in text, and is presented with an illustration of the interpretation procedure from social research. [Later in the issue, not quoted here] follows a brief systematic account of key concepts and ideas – interaction forms, engrams, experience, symbolization, language game, utopian imagination – with an outlook to the social theory connections to the Frankfurt School. The practical interpretation procedure in a LORENZER-based psycho-societal research is briefly summarized, emphasizing the role of the researcher subjects in discovering socially unconscious meaning in social interaction. Finally an outlook to contemporary epistemological issues. LORENZER’s

approach to theorize and research the subject as a socially produced entity appears as a psycho-societal alternative to mainstream social constructivism.

When we have focused on LORENZER within a broad and multiple tradition of combining a Marxian analysis of society (Frankfurt School critical theory) and psycho-dynamic theorizing of the subject it has two interrelated reasons. One is that he has been particularly productive for the development of a methodology of empirical qualitative research. The other one is that his socialization theory by focusing on language at the same time as maintaining a clearly materialistic view on the body as well as on the socio-material structure of society has provided a key contribution to theoretical and epistemological issues of social science, that have become articulated much later. We shall come back to this at the end of this article.

Socialisation, Language, and Scenic Understanding.

Alfred LORENZER (1922-2002) came from the background of being a medical psychiatrist, trained in psychoanalysis on a Freudian background. As a doctor and psychoanalyst, he took an early interest in societal critique and cultural theory, taking to task the Frankfurt school of thought and its critical theory. Understanding subjective structure as influenced by societal conditions increasingly came to dominate his theoretical thoughts. As early as 1970, he criticized the psychoanalytical concept of 'symbol' (1970a), placed it in a linguistic science context (1970b) and subsequently expanded the application of it into socialization theory (1972), epistemology (1974) and cultural analysis (1986). The red thread of his contribution is to provide a ground for a social interpretation of the basic psychodynamic forces without giving up the radical insights in Freud's theory. The first step in this chain from psychoanalysis to societal theory was an interactionist theory of socialization (1972) in which he reconceptualized these psychodynamic forces which in classical psychoanalysis since Freud were seen as biological, result of natural drives. LORENZER established a dialectical theory according to which they were results of the social interaction, in the first place between infant and mother (caring person), and thereby also enabled an understanding of the unconscious - the most radical element in psychoanalysis - as a result of the symbolic interaction. The following works developed methodological ideas for an endogenous understanding of the subjective dimensions of social interaction and language - quite opposite to the direction Freud took in meta-psychological and cultural theory.

The point of departure in LORENZER's relevance to current theoretical, social and political issues is the Copernican turn of the Freudian theory which had been initiated by a number of psychoanalysts: In continuation of FREUD he analyses the development of the structure of personality as 'representing experiences of bodily interactions' (1972, p.17). But whereas Freud saw their impact in the psyche, as predominantly distortion, disturbance and blocking of (biological) drives in the subject LORENZER sees these social interactions and the bodily experiences of them as a dialectical *shaping* of the drives *into a subject*, and the resulting psychic dynamics as highly social phenomena. The individual sensual experiences of social relations and meanings in immediate interaction are connected with the wider social world in the form of symbols. The issues of psychotherapy, disturbances of the psychic development, were reinterpreted as disturbances of the possibility to symbolize individual sensual experiences in socially recognized language. LORENZER's

critical reinterpretation of the psychic disturbances are expressed in the early book titles "Kritik des psychoanalytischen Symbolbegriffs" (Critique of the Psychoanalytic Concept of Symbol) and "Sprachzerstörung und Rekonstruktion" (Language Destruction and Reconstruction) - both from 1970. On the one hand enabling a reinterpretation of the psychotherapeutic task, this critique on the other hand opens a new way of theorizing the psychodynamic aspects of societal relations. Symbolic/cultural meaning (for the individual) is seen as a complex mediation of social interaction and sensual experience, and has conscious as well as unconscious aspects. Later LORENZER developed further his key concept of "interaction forms" to understand the inner, pre-linguistic experiences of practices and relations. These interaction forms are connected with the socially recognized language to form symbolic interaction forms, and the developing of capacity for symbolic production can be seen as an integrated aspect of socialization. This understanding of the early socialization process enables LORENZER to see language, interaction and bodily (drive) processes in their wider societal context – and we can add an epistemological perspective: In the context of a constructivist social science it enables us to see how ideas about societal relations are embodied in the individual socialization. LORENZER's thoughts on the role of language in subject constitution build on the theorem of language games, which he took up from the works of Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN and developed further. Language is anchored in concrete social practice in a dialectic unit of language use, everyday life practice and view of the world (WEBER 2010). Language games are thus defined as the interface at which subjective and objective structures interact. The question of the constitution of language games is, therefore, also one which addresses the constitution of the relationship between individual and society. Looked at in this way, language and awareness are inseparably linked with social practice. If the constitution of language games is seen as integral to the development of subjective structures under objective conditions, then the individual subject can be understood and deciphered using its ex ante social reference.

LORENZER's contribution to the methodology gains a wider perspective by theorizing the genesis of the correspondence between unconscious dynamics in the subject and unconscious or unintended dimensions of societal and cultural processes. What is in the first place mainly a material theory of socialization – which unlike many other theories does not see the social shaping of the individual as assimilation to social structure – is in the second place a radical epistemology of societal dynamics. LORENZER's theory of language games and his meta-psychological and methodological notions are closely linked with the search for opportunities for epistemic reconstruction of suppressed social relationships, which are (societally) imprinted in the (many individual) psyches and in their interaction. LORENZER in brief draws the attention to the hermeneutic methodology of psychoanalytic understanding. The immediate inspiration is offered by an interpretation of interaction and cultural meaning in a way inspired by psychoanalytic interpretation, namely "scenic understanding" whose further methodological foundations and methodical implementation [is taken up later in the article, not quoted here]. LORENZER separates the methodological principles of psychoanalysis – simultaneous attention, free association and the concepts of transfer and counter-transfer – from the clinical context of doctor-patient relationships, and transfers them to social and cultural scientific practice. He thus emphasizes the methodological experience as opposed to direct transfers of theoretical models since, in his view, these cannot be transferred from one field to another.

The socialization theory was LORENZER's first distinguishing contribution. It builds the theoretical foundation for the development of a psycho-societal interpretation method with inspiration from the psycho-analytical interpretation of individuals. During the 1970's his work was widely cited and read both in Germany and abroad (notably the Scandinavian Countries) and today, his ideas continue to inform a vigorous tradition of cultural analysis and social research (LEITHÄUSER & VOLMERG 1988; LEITHÄUSER 1977; MORGENROTH 1990, 2010; BERESWILL 2008; LORENZER 1970, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1977, 1986, 2006; PROKOP, FRIESE & STACH 2009). A number of Scandinavian, especially Danish, researchers have published work directly referring to this tradition, or using the methods more or less in accord less in accordance with it, most of it published in Danish. For an overview see WEBER 1996, 2007, 2009, 2010; SALLING OLESEN 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2011; WEBER&SALLING OLESEN 2001, 2002. However, LORENZER is little known outside German speaking communities.

In-depth Hermeneutics

...

In the following we ... concentrate on the methodological impulse from cultural analysis in social research. In a late stage of his work, in the key text in "Kulturanalysen" (1986), he coins the (title) notion of "Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse", which focusses on the systematic reconstruction of unconscious meaning dimensions in analysis of literary texts.

....

The theoretical distinction of Psychoanalysis is the theory of the unconscious (FREUD, 1915). It is actually a more complicated theory about levels of (un)consciousness with grey zones and displacements, which in FREUDS's version is a precondition for the therapeutic process as well as for the interpretation of dreams. The first methodical issue is to gain access to this level, not with an individual therapeutic aim, but in order to understand its social meaning. The interpretation of texts, be they literary works, field notes or excerpts from interviews, also constitutes a multilayered scene. In the case in question, we reconstruct a dual scene in which various interaction dynamics overlay one another and create a new scene in which we as interpreters become involved relative to those dynamics. We find Lou's extreme over-reaction difficult to understand and tend to distance ourselves from it.

LORENZER goes on to say that literary texts contain a provocation which goes beyond individual and biographically specific reception patterns and points to societal, collective motives and meaning substance:

"The provocation lies in content in the text itself. As such, its impact goes beyond the individual, it is perhaps societal-collective (gesellschaftlich-kollektiv), possibly even spread over many epochs. The unconscious in literature under consideration, is a collective unconscious, although admittedly not in Jung's sense. It consists of praxis figures (Praxisfiguren), which - as it were - demand to enter consciousness, and contains forms of life (Lebensformen), whose access to general consciousness has been barred and whose value, in consequence, has not been openly tried out" (LORENZER 1986 p 28, our translation)

In interactionist (social) reinterpretations of psychoanalytical theory, including LORENZER's theory of socialization, the unconscious level is just as much as the

conscious a result of life history experience of social interaction. For the same reason the unconscious is assumed to contain a potential for social imagination which goes beyond the actual state of consciousness – either because it contains interaction experiences that have later been excluded from consciousness, or because it contains anticipating ideas of something “emerging” which has not yet been realized in social practice. Continuing the previous quotation LORENZER says:

“These not-yet-conscious (Noch-nicht-bewusst) praxis figures - as Bloch says - generate a utopian potential. It is the work of hermeneutics to reveal this utopian potential and, in so doing, to take a stand against petrified circumstances (versteinerte Verhältnisse). [...] Why do we prefer the term in-depth hermeneutics to characterize this approach? The answer is: because the practice of in-depth hermeneutics is the distinctive feature of psychoanalytical interpretation. ... The in-depth element of the hermeneutic approach is only to be found in psychoanalysis and underlines the central subject of psychoanalytical enquiry: the unconscious” (LORENZER, 1986 p.28).

LORENZER’s understanding of the critical and utopian potentials in the unconscious articulates an important dimension in the thinking of critical theory or Frankfurt school. The Frankfurt school generally sees theorizing and critique as a key to social imagination and utopian ideas. And since this thinking is based on materialist assumptions it means that imagination is endogenous, i.e. must be discovered and articulated from within societal reality, as it is condensed in ADORNO’s argument in the positivist dispute:

“But if theory is not to fall prey to the dogmatism over whose discovery scepticism - now elevated to a prohibition on thought - is always ready to rejoice, then theory may not rest here. It must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from outside into those which the objects has of itself, into what the object, left to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with what it is.” (ADORNO, 1976/1969, p. 69)

In HABERMAS’ thinking the term of “Ideology Critique” spells out the need to reveal endogenous potentials for societal change through a critical analysis of social realities themselves. Change does not come from above or from outside. But whereas HABERMAS first of all sees the key in deconstructing observation and reflection of “petrified social relations” and the societal institutions which make up the guises of power, social inequality and reified relations Alfred LORENZER looks for the potentials in socialized psyche, in the dynamics between the conscious and the unconscious. And this brings the argument back to the text:

“Does this imply that the unconscious is the sole aim of psychoanalytical interpretation and that every “manifest/apparent meaning”, every deliberately intended meaning of the text the author makes, has no significance? Indeed not, such an approach would not justify the title of a psychoanalytical literary and cultural analysis. This collection of analyses shows that the manifest meaning in no way can be seen as a ‘ladder’ , which can be put aside in the moment you have reached the goal ‘deep down there’(LORENZER,1986 p. 29, our translation)

LORENZER’s theoretical deliberations point to socially taboo, degenerate lifestyles and utopian moments of social practice which while being unconsciously maintained also emerge to influence [our] conscious, for example with the help of literary texts. Their

provocation, according to LORENZER, lies in the fact that they transport aspects of a collective unconscious which forces itself into the conscious.

Final Remark

So much by now about the inspiration from Lorenzer. What can only be briefly indicated in this paper is a carefully elaborated methodology for interpretation of subjective aspects of social interaction, which reveals conscious as well as unconscious meanings. We have renamed our approach to a psycho-societal approach in order to avoid the connotation that the methodology only aims at a psychodynamic level of meanings, and we have transferred the ideas to analyses of “profane” everyday life – including work life, learning, social work etc. It is essential, in conjunction with Lorenzer’s theory of socialization, that the unconscious levels of meaning are socially produced in the interplay between sensual life experiences of the individual and the entrance in/participation in cultural language games.

Needless to say this dynamic between sensual experiences and linguistically mediated social knowledge also enables a new and much more sophisticated view on the learning of practical competences which include a bodily engagement – either by practical actions or by the relational involvement. The “cartesian” paradigm of practice as applied abstract knowledge can be replaced by a more sophisticated concept of knowledge and learning which is embodied and embedded in social practice – a very important perspective in work and learning research.

In the first place my intention here was to offer an approach to subjectivity in work life and in learning processes which can connect the subjective processes of everyday life with the utopian imagination of societal change to a societal organization of work on the conditions of the working people – a political economy of working people.

The strictly materialist framework of Lorenzer’s theory accounts for the embodiment of collective/social unconscious insights and fantasies in the bodies and the social practices in a way which make them – at least temporarily and in certain situations – invisible – but yet remaining virulent in people’s learning and consciousness building.

I know there are lot of misunderstandings especially about the nature of psychoanalytic interpretation which cannot be discussed in a conference paper. For this reason I have attached the overview of the thematic issue of Forum for Qualitative Social Research – which is an excellent methodology journal – here in the hope that you will check the potentials of this approach by reading more about the theory, and also by studying some of the empirical examples, which are very profane work life related case studies.

Notes

¹ Negt and Kluge used the German expression "eine politische Ökonomie der Arbeitskraft" – Marx used similar expressions as counterpieces to the political economy of capital – e.g. 'political economy the working class' or '...of work'. I have earlier translated into Political Economy of Labor – but following Marx' logic as well as Negt's interpretation I think the best might be "a political Economy of living work'. This is both a translation problem and an issue of understanding Marx' multilayered intellectual idea – delivering a critique of (i.e. revealing) the political nature of the economy which was organized by capital – and his notion of capital as a relation between "dead labor" and "living work".

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