
Learning and Experience: A Psycho-Societal Approach

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Abstract This chapter introduces a psycho-societal approach to theorizing learning, combining a materialist theory of socialization with a hermeneutic interpretation methodology. The term ‘approach’ indicates the intrinsic connection between theory, empirical research process, and epistemic subject. Learning is theorized as a dynamic subjective experience of (socially situated) realities, relying on individual subjectivity as well as subjective aspects of social interaction. This psycho-societal theory of subjective experiences conceptualizes individual psychic development as interactional experience of societal relations, producing an inner psycho-dynamics as a conscious and unconscious individual resource in future life. The symbolization of immediate sensory experiences forms an individual life experience of social integration, and language use being the medium of collective, social experience (knowledge, culture). This life experience remains a (hidden) potential in all future experience building.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces a psycho-societal approach to theorizing learning, combining a materialist theory of socialization with a hermeneutic interpretation methodology. The term ‘approach’ indicates the intrinsic connection between the theory, the empirical research process, and the epistemic subject. This theory of learning was initially developed from a critique of the traditional pedagogical theory, based on a wider conception of experience building (Salling Olesen 1989, 2007c). We wanted to develop a methodology for understanding people’s learning motives—and resistances—in the context of their past, present, and future life experiences, in which the totality of their everyday life world

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and basic societal conditions are condensed. Learning is theorized as a dynamic subjective experience of (socially situated) realities, relying on individual subjectivity as well as subjective aspects of social interaction. Here, societal relations play a role not only 'from the outside', shaping the social situation and situating the object of experience, but also 'from the inside', by the societal production of the learner subject that has taken place throughout his/her life history.

This psycho-societal theory of subjective experiences is a material socialization theory—seeing individual psychic development as an interactional experience of societal relations and producing an inner psycho-dynamics as a conscious and unconscious individual resource, and this life experience remains a (hidden) potential in all future experience building. The symbolization of immediate sensory experiences forms an individual life experience of social integration, since language use is the medium of collective, social experience (knowledge and culture). Emotional and cognitive processes are closely interwoven, being aspects of subjective processing of cultural meaning and societal conditions. Their interweaving in the individual's life history enables us to study subjective aspects of symbolic activity and language use and their relation to lived experience.

Paradigmatically, this is a mediation or synthesis of critical theory of society and the symbol interpretational focus in psychoanalysis. In this chapter, the intention is to bring this back to the field of education and learning, and unfold the consequences for the understanding of learning processes of different kinds. The object of study is primarily learning in everyday life, with a secondary, derived perspective on intentional and formal educational activities. This framework will also have consequences for the understanding of knowledge—using a psycho-social reconfiguration of the notion of language games from Wittgenstein to theorize knowledge as embedded in socio-material practices. It will enable a knowledge sociology perspective on educational curricula and the subject organization of formal education. It will also involve perspectives for understanding identities related to knowledge and learning, such as the learning processes associated with specific social practices such as professional and craft work.

Drawing on important developments in contemporary learning theory, this chapter will establish an understanding of learning within the concept of experience, relating it to basic societal structures as well as to the individual everyday life history of learners. After this, a methodology for the empirical study of learning and experiences is presented, accompanied by theoretical insights from a materialist socialization theory which enables an understanding of the dialectic relation between individual sensory experiences and cultural symbolization in the form of language. The individual learning process is related to cultural processes of critique and articulation by the notion of 'ideology critique' in critical theory and its search for utopian potentials in everyday social life. The final section returns to learning in a more narrow sense, using examples to argue that the methodology and theory presented will enable a new and deeper understanding of learning processes.

LEARNING AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PROCESS

Theorizing learning has previously been the business of schools and the discipline of education. Educational thinking has dealt with issues ranging from the philosophy and rationales of education to the very technical issues of efficient teaching and teacher training, but its horizon has been defined by formal or non-formal education and training. The implicit or explicit theory of learning has assumed a learning outcome, practically confined to individuals, as the result of teaching transmitting certain knowledge, skills, and even attitudes or values. Most learning research has accordingly been instrumentalised by the perspectives of this cumulative, transfer-oriented idea of learning. Development psychology, instructional psychology, educational management, and theories of curriculum have been prevailing theoretical frameworks—and when widening the scope of attention to students' 'reality' or past experiences, mostly used as a *tool* for more efficient education and training.

In recent years, learning research has developed beyond this psychological and educational framework. A shift in societal thinking on the importance of learning and human resource development has been labelled 'lifelong learning' in policy agendas, pointing to the need and the opportunity for learning in all phases and spheres of life. Several other more or less independent developments have drawn attention to learning processes in diverse settings, far away from formal or non-formal education and training. Furthermore, an entirely new situation of access to knowledge and communication technologies and the introduction of different forms of blended and remote learning formats have drawn attention to 'learning without teaching'. We might speak of an emerging 'Copernican turn', redefining the very object of research by seeing learning as an aspect of social processes which are structured by something entirely different. This shift has been particularly clear in relation to adults' learning, directly interfering with work-related education and training, but it can also be expected to affect school and academic education.

Industry's increasing interest in human resources has boosted interest in broader theories of learning and subjectivity. Policy-driven thinking is looking for the potentials and the needs for learning in every aspect of everyday life, speaking of human resources, competence, or specific skills. Correspondingly, learning research now includes studies involving many of these learning environments—work life, everyday life interaction, cultural practices, social work, and medical practice—and looking at learning as an aspect of these domains of social life. In this way, learning research transcends the fundamental scheme of education in which institutions/teachers intentionally nurture the learning processes. Theories of education and training will now need to understand learning within education in relation to learning and experiences in people's lives as a whole.

Many of the new learning studies lean on the logics of various fields of practice and are mostly also under-theorized. They often remain 'ideological' in the sense that they deal with truly important and novel issues in a very abstract

way, when discussing learning in general, in contexts of ‘organization’, ‘tools’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘practices’, not to mention ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’, without further specification. A critical theory of learning should lead to more fundamental theorizing than just re-describing social environments with new learning categories, or establishing metaphorical ‘floating signifiers’. It should maintain a focus on understanding the learning processes themselves, but also reflect the societal dynamics and interests involved in this redefinition of the research horizon. It should also enable a critical awareness of the limitations on human development and autonomy that these societal dynamics may entail and work out ideas about richer, better, and more democratic learning practices.

However, there are also substantially theorizing trends in learning research informed by these developments. I shall briefly comment on some of the most important trends.

One development is to conceptualize learning in the context of social practice. Inspired by anthropological thinking about cultural transmission, we may see learning as the gradual inclusion in a community of practice, i.e. a group of people whose shared practice also forms a cultural framework and meaning making (Lave and Wenger 1991). This development has been very important as a critical perspective on teaching. However, the early anthropological or cultural theories of learning have—rightly, I think—been criticized for a conservative bias, because they tend to mould the learning process in the forms of the established practice or organization under consideration, often a workplace. While the subjective meaning of the immediate workplace context is obvious, the fact that ‘work’ is a societal life condition for most learners, and the meanings and conflicts following from this, receive little attention. The societal outlook is rather narrow. Wenger (1998) seems to go beyond this problem by generalizing the notion of community of practice, so that in his sense, it is not necessarily a specific social context. In his model, learning is connected with the trajectory of the learning individual within, across, and between a number of communities in which (s)he participates and negotiates meaning and identity. However, it remains very vague how community of practice applies to all the interesting—and conflicting—social affiliations of the worker in, and in relation to, the workplace: formal organization of a company, informal organization(s) at the workplace, professional affiliations, trade union, and family situation. In practical analytical applications of the concepts, however, there is a tendency to identify the community that enables the subjective meaning making as one specific organization, work process, or location. Wenger’s point of the trajectory across different communities of practice, and the potential conflicts between them, is often lost in application.

The vagueness may also become a virtue in a more systems’ theory-oriented approach of cultural learning theory, opening a perspective on general systems and broader historical transitions, as in Finnish researcher Yrjö Engeström’s activity theory. Locating learning processes in complex social relations such as networks and institutions is obviously inspiring for organization and management research, but it leaves little theoretical trace of the dialectic between

particular (individual) perspectives and soci(et)al forms of meaning making. Furthermore, it does not account for a wider societal context than the organizational totality of the functionality (or dysfunctionality) of systems—which was the important innovation anthropological or cultural theory brought into learning theory in the first place.

The anthropological inspiration has drawn attention to the implicit content of learning, but it does not provide good answers to some of the other important questions in relation to learning: what are the driving forces and dynamics of the process? In what way does the learner make meaning of and ‘negotiate’ his/her identity in existing social communities, and when can we say that this continuing modification of identity and meaning making has the quality of learning, not just of change? In fact, it may be questioned whether there is a theory of learning, or rather a relevant account of (parts of) the social context in which learning may take place. Creating a proper theory of learning requires theorizing the learner as a subject in its own right, and the processes that s/he is undergoing in the interaction with and inclusion in the cultural environment (the learner not necessarily being a person).

Psychological theorizing has its point of departure in the individual. Until now, it has seemed difficult to connect the attention to social context in learning theory with the concepts of the individual learner and learning potential available in learning psychology and cognitive science, which has been strongly influenced by the works of Jean Piaget. However, it has been attempted, and some contributions are more rewarding than others. Stephen Billett, in his book on workplace learning (Billett 2001), refers—critically, however—to the concepts of situated learning to frame the learning within the workplace, while also seeing learning as the result of problem solving in work processes in the analysis of concrete cases. The important insights, namely, the attention to the agency of the learner, and the socially embedded and material nature of learning, are eye opening in the context of the theme of promoting learning in the workplace. They emphasize the fact that workers are agents of learning enabled or enforced by the workplace, that workers are in fact learning all the time, and that there are endless possibilities to create workplaces that are more supportive and stimulating for workers’ learning.

However, in this approach, the workplace remains relatively abstracted from the wider societal environment. Learning is seen in particular cases as interplay between the concrete materiality of the work process and the worker. This abstraction may be connected to the strategic, practical development perspective, and it limits theorizing of the social context. However, I also see some limitations here in understanding the subjective aspects of learning.

Billett understands learning processes as the cognitive aspect of problem solving (and knowledge building). By distinguishing routine and non-routine work, he defines work situations in relation to the experience of the learner subject and, hence, their subjective status as problems to be solved, or not. However, this distinction also simplifies the possible meanings embedded in the materiality of the work processes. It seems likely that work ‘means more’ to the

worker, relative to his or her subjective experience, than contained in the dichotomy of routine or problem/challenge. The possible learning outcome (or lack of outcome) of the encounter between the worker and the task or the perceived problem depends on much more complicated relations between the worker and the work process, which again involves the life experiences of the worker and the specific nature of the work process.

Michael Eraut (1994) has analysed professional knowledge and competencies in terms of the ways of knowing and using knowledge in work situations. He provides interesting and distinctive discussions of theories of knowledge and knowledge use, and he relates them to the features of the work situation and the dependence on the tasks being performed. In this way, he provides a useful corrective to generalizing theories of knowledge and professions, and especially emphasizes the processual and contextual nature of knowledge use.

Indirectly, this is also a way of theorizing learning (similar to Billett's analyses) as ways in which knowledge is being used and how knowledge resources are modified in the problem-solving processes of work. However, this contribution to learning theory is restricted to (or at least strongly prioritizes) the cognitive dimension. Despite an obvious awareness of other dimensions, such as the learner's personal experiences and the specific nature of the work, they appear as ad hoc analytic observations and distinctions which are not theorized. Eraut's mission is different: to study the development of knowledge and competence. As I have argued elsewhere, however, this mission would gain strength by paying systematic attention to the dynamics of learning and to the subjective meaning of work and knowledge for the professional (Salling Olesen 2007a).

Contributions like those referred to in this section relocate the horizon of learning to real-life situations which are not defined as teaching or learning contexts. By emphasizing social situatedness and participation in practice, they widen the horizon for some strands of theorizing which have otherwise been confined to pedagogy, to the world of school and teaching. This applies on the one hand to cognitive constructionism, originating in, e.g., Piaget's learning and developmental psychology, and on the other hand to what was labelled 'experiential learning' (Dewey, Kolb) but was actually rather 'experience-based teaching'.

They are important contributions to a learning theory which is not confined to school or pedagogy. However, they share a tendency to operate with abstract learner subjects, individuals without history, both in the sense of a life history and in the sense of societal and cultural attributes, such as gender.

Such generalizing characterization may be unfair to these approaches. My point is not to judge or reject some of the most productive lines of thinking about learning. Rather, I want to point out that precisely, their broadening of the theoretical horizon from formal education to learning processes in general, a theory of learning as experience, raises some new theoretical challenges: first, the societal dimensions defining the practical environment, including the historical/cultural framework of knowledge and meaning making, and second,

the subjective mediation of culture in the individual life history of the human agent, and the subjective dynamics of learning processes.

I have until now dealt with these conceptual challenges by conceptualizing specific experiential learning processes within ‘grand theory’ frameworks from Marxism and psychoanalysis. In the next section, I will show how a theoretical concern with political education and consciousness via the focus on subjective dimensions of social life led to a new approach to learning. What I call here a psycho-societal approach first emerged as a methodological inspiration in work with life historical material, and then developed into a broader framework for theorizing learning processes, their cultural embeddedness, and their societal (political) implications.

LEARNING AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN CAPITALISM

I am not an educationalist or teacher by profession. My approach to learning theory came from outside, in the first place via a critique of political elitism and authoritarian traditions in communism, and the absence of socialist visions in the social democrat labour movement. As a student activist with a rural working-class background who was class conscious in a vague way, but unpolitical, I need to understand the absence of political agency against social injustice. I came across Oskar Negt’s critique of political education in the labour movement (Negt 1964)—but it might have also been Paolo Freire. Pointing out that the preconditions for mobilization of class consciousness in the sense of the traditional labour movements (communist and social democrat alike) were disappearing, Negt developed his alternative vision of ‘exemplary learning’. His point was that instead of stuffing people with theory about capitalism and socialist principles—which obviously had failed in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s—labour education should take everyday experiences of working class people as its point of departure. He was writing this book at a time when industrial workers were rebelling against the price paid for economic prosperity in terms of work intensity and environmental risks, and against the lack of practical democracy in the labour movement itself. His points might have appeared less hopeful in other periods when there were no rebellions, and when the concrete experiences were less overt. Today, it seems obvious that a theory of class consciousness extrapolated from the *traditional industrial* labour is obsolete, because the huge mass industry workplaces have diminished, and the working class is much more differentiated. However, Negt’s argument from this early book that political education must support learning from the concrete everyday experience of *being a worker* helped to unleash the notion of experience from its didactic context in ‘experiential learning’. Negt’s notion of experience is not just pieces of raw material for (intended) learning, but the subjective experience of a whole life situation—individual life experience and collective historical experience (Salling Olesen 1989; Negt 2001). However, it *also* points to everyday life experiences (in the plural) from working life, family, public

sphere, and mass media: the consciousness of social injustice, the feelings of alienation, repression, and humiliation as well as the self-confidence of being a capable worker, a provider, and able to maintain a decent life. All the contradictions of everyday life, changing from day to day and producing ambivalent feelings, are raw material being processed in the actual world view and awareness of possible agency; they are the basis of learning processes and conscious experience building. This notion of experience which originates in the philosophy of the Frankfurt School is one of the first foundations of learning theory which is not confined to educational settings and intentions. It borrows from contemporary interdisciplinary social research (Negt refers to the American sociologist C. Wright Mills regarding the need for sociological imagination [Mills 1959]), and from phenomenology (defining the life world as the immediate horizon), but it distinguishes itself from the micro perspective in two points. First, it refers to a Marxist framework of understanding the basic societal relations, primarily the socioeconomic reality of capitalism and wage labour which structures the life world of most people. The second point is the historical dimension which is aware of the ‘weight of the world’ (to quote a much later book title), the historical materiality of social reality, but also of its changeability, always searching for the latent utopian aspects in the everyday life world. The title, social imagination, concerned the connections between the specific micro-social life world and macro-societal totality (cf. Wright Mills), and this holistic understanding of reality is also the precondition for imagining a (different) future. One can align this idea for political learning processes with the idea of negative dialectic in the Frankfurt School critique of positivist social science. In this context, the cognitive dynamic in learning from experience is less elaborated. I shall return to this below, since it is a key point in the psycho-societal approach. However, for the theory of political learning, it is a decisive point that the potential for change is endogenous, and it is a potential in historically given materiality, not an exogenous theoretical input from a teacher or a political elite. Political agency must be based on life-world experiences. Utopian perspectives must be grounded in the constitution of capitalism itself to be realistic, considering that capitalism is the constitutive organization of our society, but such perspectives must have their footing in ‘living work’ and the imagination of working life beyond capitalist control. Negt later expressed this in a book title *Nur noch Utopien sind realistisch* (*Now only Utopias Are Realistic*) (Negt 2012).

In his later political philosophy, Negt has elaborated the political importance of work experiences (Negt 1984), and in *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Negt and Kluge 1981; Negt 2014), the scope was broadened into a civilization history of subjectivity. This book explores how human subjectivity is constituted in reproduction by work—in the evolutionary development of work capability and in the history of human civilizations. The horizon is not the narrow sense of paid work or in the historically limited form of industrial work but the living engagement with the environment in all its forms. Within this notion, capitalism is just one historical societal order, and the life mode of wage labour is

important but not a universal historical form of subjectivity (Salling Olesen 1999, 2009). In my opinion, Negt and Kluge provide a decisive development in Marxist theory. They give a logical complement to Marx's theory as developed in *Grundrisse* and *Das Kapital*, and they outline a new version of historical materialism as a history of human learning and work-based civilization (Salling Olesen 1997). Here we see the link to the theorizing of learning. With the notion of a political economy of labour,¹ they express the overarching political challenge for learning theory today: how can we, living in the middle of capitalism with its ability to flexibly subordinate all materiality and all subjectivity, see any *material dynamic* that can produce substantial change? Negt's and my own concept of experience entail this historical and material theorization of subjectivity as a framework for critical empirical study. In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, the aim of the critique is to reveal the historical and changeable nature of social reality, and to discover the invisible but latent potentials. By insisting on a principle of endogeneity, this critical tradition maintains a strictly materialist ontology while paying respect to the power of intellectual work and the dialectic between social reality and knowing and learning. Negt and Kluge provided a conceptual framework that embraces evolutionary as well as historical dimensions of the material production of subjectivity—a Marxist phylogenesis. For learning theory, however, the ontogenetic dimension, the development of subjectivity in an individual's life, is the immediate context in which learning processes may or may not take place. Negt's critique of labour education pointed out that the understanding of societal learning processes must start in the subjective experience of everyday life.

Transferring this insight into the wider field of learning research that is emerging with life-long learning implies a need to develop theories and methods that illuminate learning in the context of the learner subjects. The life-history approach was a first attempt to establish an empirical method for understanding the subjective experience process. As a point of departure, we worked with a societal understanding of subjectivity by means of the categories of wage labour and gender, which were obviously relevant. However, besides the obvious, we had to work with a methodology which could help us understand the unpredictability and contradictions in subjectivity. It is social but not immediately conscious in all its aspects. The next section points out some of the experiences of this development.

A METHODOLOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

For many years, the life-history research group at Roskilde University has explored life-history approaches to understanding learning and participation in education and (work) identity processes, for example, by studying professional learning processes, motivation for learning, competencies, and formal qualifications. The basic idea is to align with the subjective perspective, and to seek to understand learning within everyday life, which includes the meaning of

education and training for the individual subject. However, we also want to trace the dimension of the life experience of the individual subject as a result of the past life, assuming that learning is a highly differentiated experience. In some cases, we use life stories in the form of narrative interviews as our material; in others, we have merely attempted, in a life-history perspective, to understand subjective dimensions in other material documenting individual identity processes, and also in social interaction in everyday life, including work organizations, by means of interpreting interviews or interactions.

Our life-history research has had several sources of inspiration. From the beginning, we drew on the rich experience of biographical research in education, sociology, and other disciplines. I have described this methodological experience elsewhere (Salling Olesen 2016); here, I want to focus on another development which led to the psycho-societal approach. In the concept of life history, we want to integrate not only the conscious meaning making (*ex post*) of the subject, but also the life experiences formed by societal (objective) conditions that are significant for the life course (including education and training) and for learning in any life situation, without necessarily being conscious or assigned meaning by the individual subject. In the first place, we also work with a method from social psychology, thematic group discussion, which has been used in researching consciousness of everyday life (Leithäuser 1976). In this application, the method was inspired by a tradition of psychoanalytically informed cultural analysis, especially the work of Alfred Lorenzer, and also a phenomenologically informed attention to the experience of mundane everyday life. Lorenzer, in brief, draws on the hermeneutic methodology of psychoanalysis, namely, ‘scenic understanding’. He 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 interpretive practices.

Lorenzer (1922–2002) was a medical psychiatrist trained in Freudian psychoanalysis, but took an early interest in societal critique and cultural theory based on the Frankfurt School of critical theory. The understanding of subjective structure as influenced by societal conditions increasingly came to dominate his theoretical thinking. As early as 1970, he criticized the psychoanalytical concept of the ‘symbol’ (Lorenzer 1970b), placed it in a linguistic science context (Lorenzer 1970a), and subsequently logically expanded its application into socialization theory (Lorenzer 1972), epistemology (Lorenzer 1974), and cultural analysis (Lorenzer and König 1986). Lorenzer’s socialization theory enabled an understanding of the unconscious—the most radical element in psychoanalysis—as a result of symbolic interaction. In this way, Lorenzer followed a decisive development in psychoanalysis, interpreting psychodynamics as a result of social interaction experiences in the early period of life, first between an infant and its mother (caregiver), without giving up the radical insights of Freud’s theory.²

His proposal for an ‘in-depth hermeneutic’ cultural analysis methodology was launched in an environment with an almost complete split between social sciences

and psychology/psychoanalysis. His transformation of the 'scenic understanding' from clinical to text interpretation enables us to understand collective unconscious meaning in texts. The individual sensory 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 sensory experiences in socially recognized language, as 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 published in 1970. The works that followed developed methodological ideas for an endogenous understanding of the subjective dimensions of social interaction and language, in quite the opposite direction to that taken by Freud in his meta-psychological and cultural theory.

Lorenzer's development of scenic understanding in the interpretation of symbolic interaction and artefacts provides the foundation for a cultural dimension that is important for learning. In our life-history approach, we were directly inspired by in-depth hermeneutics, transferring this to our interpretation of subjective meaning in told narratives, group discussions, and also interaction observation protocols (field diaries). The great challenge and achievement in this development has been to draw experiences from some of the most fundamental theoretical and methodological discussions into very mundane research practice, such as learning in everyday life.³

THE CORE OF A NEW LEARNING THEORY: SOCIALIZATION, SENSORY EXPERIENCE, AND LANGUAGE GAMES

In this section, I shall give a brief account of those elements in Lorenzer's theories that are particularly important for learning theory. In order to understand the perspective for learning theory of the in-depth hermeneutic method, one must immerse oneself in the relation between immediate individual experience and social/cultural symbolization, i.e. language, and the establishment of this relation through life historical interaction.

Within a broad and multi-faceted tradition of Marxist analysis of society and psycho-dynamic theorizing of the subject, there are two interrelated reasons for focusing on Lorenzer in learning theory. One is that Lorenzer is particularly important for the development of a methodology of empirical research which in a creative way combines societal and psychodynamic dimensions in the interpretation of subjectivity. The other is that his socialization theory, with its focus on language while maintaining a clearly materialistic view of the body and the socio-material structure of society, provides a dynamic and material understanding of the relation between (societal) knowledge and (bodily, individual) sensory experience. The socialization theory is interesting in itself; it has been well known, since it appeared in the early 1970s, but it gains a new significance for learning theory when we adopt Lorenzer's cultural interpretation method.

Together, these two positive factors enable a study of the dynamics of experience and learning in mundane everyday life.

The socialization process establishes the mediation of individual sensory and emotional interaction experience and societal meanings through the learning of language. Symbolic/cultural meaning (for the individual) is seen as a complex mediation of social and sensory experience from interaction, with both conscious and unconscious aspects. Lorenzer developed the key concept of 'interaction forms' to understand the inner, pre-linguistic experiences of practices and relations. These interaction forms are later connected with the socially recognized language to form *symbolic interaction forms*, and the capacity for symbolic production, i.e. to connect language and sensory interaction, can be seen as an integrating result of socialization. This understanding of the early socialization process enabled Lorenzer to see language, interaction, and bodily (drive) processes in their wider societal context. Lorenzer's thoughts on the role of language in subject constitution build on the theory of language games, which he adopted from the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and developed further. Language is anchored in concrete social practices 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 (cultural) structures are entangled, and mediate the relationship between specific individuals and societal culture. Approached in this way, language and consciousness are inseparably linked with social practice. In the context of learning, this means that both the original links between interaction forms, social practice, and language, and the lifelong capacity to build new and revise such links are at the core of learning capacity.

The theory of a psychodynamic dimension of the relation between individual (sensory) experience, language, and social practice makes the theory particularly relevant for understanding learning in everyday life interaction where learning is not the main cause. The most elementary observation in theorizing learning in everyday life is that most often, it seems that no learning takes place. Everyday life is routine, ways of thinking are aligned with the practices, and deviations and disturbances are integrated easily. Cases where problems are recognized as problems and unresolved issues as novelties are exceptions. Thomas Leithäuser pointed out that this tendency to habitual consciousness is defended by an active collective effort. He called the capacity to wipe away painful and disturbing circumstances 'everyday life consciousness', and analysed the social and psychodynamic factors involved in this defensive consciousness (Leithäuser 1976). Yet, people do sometimes learn. However, it is not easy to discover why and when, even for the people themselves. In addition, more systematic intended learning processes appear unpredictable, influenced as they are by invisible forces that sometimes produce indifference or even resistance and sometimes an intense engagement and curiosity. Lorenzer's theory of socialization and language games enables us to understand the 'invisible' subjective dimensions in everyday life interactions and articulations. The focus is on the

specific individual mediation of societal conditions and historical circumstances, which is embodied in the individual subject and plays out in consciousness and emotional engagements throughout life—implying learning or absence of learning.

Besides theorizing learning, we can add an epistemological perspective: in the context of constructivist social science, it enables us to see how experiences of societal relations are embodied in individual socialization. In this way, we can realize that ‘discourses’ are not only linguistic or cultural phenomena, but material realities embodied in individual dispositions and in social practices, which are being processed by and/or give an impetus to discourse shifts. In the next section, I shall comment on this relation between learning and cultural development.

PSYCHO-SOCIETAL METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

The socialization theory with its emphasis on the forming of the relation between sensory experiences and language in social interaction was Lorenzer’s first distinguishing contribution to cultural scholarship. It builds a theoretical foundation for his second distinguishing contribution: the development of a psycho-societal interpretation method with inspiration from the psychoanalytical interpretation of individuals, which enables a focus on the societal and cultural dimensions of psychic dynamics—and vice versa: the psychic dimensions of social interaction and societal practice. In a late stage of his work, in the key text in *Kulturanalysen* (1986), he coins the notion (title) of ‘Tiefenhermeneutische Kulturanalyse’, which focuses on the systematic reconstruction of unconscious meaning dimensions in the analysis of literary texts. According to his cultural analysis, literary texts contain a provocation that goes beyond individual and biographically specific reception patterns and refers to societal, collective motives, and meaning substance, which are unconscious.

The methodological tool to access this level, not with an individual therapeutic aim, but in order to understand its social meaning, is inspired by the hermeneutic methodology of psychoanalysis.

The interpretation of language use, whether in literary works, field notes or excerpts from interviews, comprises a multi-layered scene of conscious and unconscious meaning. Just like the conscious level, the unconscious level is a result of life-history experience of social interaction. For the same reason, the unconscious is assumed to contain potential for social imagination that 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’ that has not yet been realized in social practice.

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 a simple 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's understanding of the critical and utopian potentials in the unconscious articulates an important dimension in the thinking of critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which generally sees theorizing and critique as a key to social imagination and utopian ideas. Since this thinking is based on materialist assumptions, it means that imagination is endogenous, i.e. it 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: 69).

In Habermas's thinking, the term '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 outside. However, whereas Habermas first sees the key in deconstructing observation and reflection of 'petrified social relations' and the societal institutions that make up the guises of power, social inequality, and reified relations, Lorenzer looks for the potentials in socialized psyche, in the dynamics between the conscious and the unconscious. This brings the argument back to the text (in its widest sense: the symbolic representation of social interaction).

Lorenzer's theoretical deliberations point to social taboo, degenerate lifestyles, and utopian moments of social practice that, while being unconsciously maintained, also emerge to influence (our) consciousness, as, for example, with the help of literary texts. Their provocation, according to Lorenzer, lies in the fact that they transport aspects of the collective unconscious, which forces itself into the conscious. In this way, he materializes utopian and critical thinking as a collective learning process. 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 that makes them invisible—at least temporarily and in certain situations—while remaining vigorous in people's learning and consciousness building.

This clearly points to a parallel between collective learning processes interpreting the social meaning of the unconscious, and the individual learning process which is a symbolic activity exploring and reconfiguring individual meaning making and positioning in social practice, where individual learning always has dimensions of social meaning and social practice. This is the

background for the work of the interdisciplinary and intercultural research on interpretation of the socially unconscious in material from different research fields (Salling Olesen 2012b).

PERSPECTIVES FOR LEARNING THEORY

This chapter has been devoted to some theoretical and methodological sources which together form the background of a psycho-societal approach to learning theory. This is an ongoing, interdisciplinary endeavour. We have transferred ideas from general social theory and in-depth hermeneutics to analyses of ‘mundane’ everyday life, including different areas of working life. We have renamed the approach a psycho-societal approach to avoid the connotation that the methodology aims only at a psychodynamic level of meanings, whereas the real advance is the concepts and methods to interpret psychic levels of subjectivity and interaction as social/societal. I believe that a psycho-societal approach may help address some of the questions left behind in the state-of-the-art learning theories highlighted in the beginning of the chapter, namely, social learning and constructivism: it may help us recognize the specificity of the individual learner subject while recognizing that (s)he is shaped by a social life experience. It may help connect specific societal environments with subjective engagements of learners in everyday life, providing a productive point of departure for understanding the interplay between embodied sensory experiences and symbolically mediated knowledge. It may also maintain a critical aspiration in the spirit of the Frankfurt School, namely, to link the idea of utopian potentials in a seemingly hermetic social system with the social nature of the unconscious. The element which makes all of these essentials for learning theory is the theorizing of life experience, linking sensory experience, symbolization and social practice, and the interpretation procedure of scenic understanding. In this sense, psycho-societal theorizing takes us back to see how societal conditions are subjectively processed in individual life history.

When, for example, in the name of lifelong learning, one takes a critical view of the possible practical applications of scholastic knowledge and attempts to credit skills acquired outside formal education, the connection between the cognitive, relatively abstract competence, and its experiential relation to a specific situation gains central importance. The understanding in the life history project of how unconscious dynamics remain active forces in consciousness and social interaction throughout life can be linked to the concrete life historical experiential contexts in which a particular competency is acquired, and thus provides a less abstract understanding of learning processes (or the absence of learning processes in the form of resistance or routine lack of sensitivity). In the context of courses of study with a practical professional aim, this connection between abstract knowledge and thinking and concrete experiences and contexts is crucial (Salling Olesen 2013, 2014).

Another illustration is related to identity processes. The simplest example concerns people for whom the educational experience is negative and

predominantly translated into opposition to education or a strongly instrumentalised attitude to it. In a sense, they seem unable to learn much, because their sensitivity to the relevance of knowledge and skills is blocked. Our immediate reaction must be just to take note of their choice. However, awareness of the contextual and experiential nature of this blocking, and especially ambivalences and marginalized learning experiences, will provide a more nuanced, solidary perspective on educational abstinence. We can come to understand not only learning careers but also the micro-engagements in particular learning challenges as moments of a processing of life experiences which are ambivalent and open in individually specific ways (Kondrup 2013).

Even more illustrative are the identity processes related to vocations and professions. Professions have generally been considered either from within—through their identity—forming professionalism and practice repertoire, legitimized by a ‘mission’ that was commonly altruistic, or from the outside, as societal categories defined by their special knowledge or competence, which, therefore, received (cf. functionalism) or fought for (cf. sociology of action) certain economic and social privileges. Neither of these perspectives, which both have a certain justification, include a sense of the professional as an individual human being who is incorporating professional knowledge and function in his/her subjectivity. This is an extremely interesting example often tangled sociality and subjectivity being concretely expressed in all the individually specific learning histories of people becoming doctors, engineers, etc., and in their continuous experience from everyday working life. A psycho-societal approach to interpreting individual professional careers or specific themes of professional experience enables an understanding of the reproduction of societal and labour divisions and the reproduction of expertise as learning processes that are far from linear and regularly successful. On the contrary, one realizes how professional expertise is shaped through and subordinated to subjective dynamics that may be ‘irrelevant’ individual dynamics or perhaps provide insight into a collective professional defence system or societal taboo (e.g., the denial of death). With the psycho-dynamic development of the language-game concept, we can gain a generic understanding of vocational or professional learning as subjective acquisition of culturally prescribed bodies of knowledge and practices. Not unlike a discourse concept, we can view such expertise as a language game embedded in social practices. However, where discourse analysis is concerned with how the historically established discourse acts as a compelling medium for thought and communication in a specific domain at a given historical moment, or rather thus establishes a domain, determination is unimportant in the language-game concept. With Lorenzer’s elaboration, we can consider reproduction in the language game as a relationship of exchange between the societal form of interaction (professional practice) and the individual process of sensory experience. We can also view the unfolding of the individual learning process and the collective formation of experience in professional practice as an ongoing development of professional knowledge taking place in exchanges with the corporeal perception of work challenges and the practitioner’s life experience. An empirical analysis of the subjective aspects of these processes can contribute to a

new theoretical framework for the analysis of vocational and professional development and education (Salling Olesen 2007a, 2012a).

These are just briefly sketched examples of many possible cases revealed by our research group. Using the concept of experience as the theoretical perspective on learning and education can help life-historical, empirical analyses of everyday life, work, and education towards a critical social scientific development in education and educational research. This is of significant interest in an epoch where lifelong learning, both within and outside formal education, is becoming the general framework of reference. It also seems clear that the understanding of learning processes as a subjective dimension in all social interactions will enable these methodological experiences to be applied to other areas of research.

It is essential for the application of the theory, in line with Lorenzer's theory of socialization, that the unconscious levels of meaning are socially produced in the interplay between the individual's sensory life experiences and the entrance into/participation in cultural language games. This dynamic between sensory experiences and linguistically mediated social knowledge enables a new, much more sophisticated view of the learning of practical competencies, which includes bodily engagement by either practical actions or by relational involvement. The 'Cartesian' paradigm of practice as applied abstract knowledge can be replaced with a more sophisticated concept of knowledge and learning embodied and embedded in social practice, which is a very important perspective in a range of research areas, including learning research.

NOTES

1. Negt and Kluge used the German expression 'eine politische Ökonomie der Arbeitskraft' and Marx used similar expressions as antitheses to the political economy of capital, e.g., 'political economy of the working class' or '...of work.' I have earlier translated them into 'political economy of labour'; following Marx' logic as well as Negt's interpretation, but I now think that the best translation 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 (that is, revealing) the political nature of the economy organized by capital and his notion of capital as a relation between 'dead labour' and 'living work'. See the introduction to the translation of Negt and Kluge (2014).
2. Like Freud, he analyzes the development of the structure of personality as 'representing experiences of bodily interactions' (Lorenzer 1972: 17). However, whereas Freud saw the impact of social relations on the psyche as predominantly distortion, disturbance and blocking of (biological) drives in the subject, Lorenzer approaches these social interactions and their bodily experiences as a dialectical *shaping* of the drives *into a subject*, and the resulting psychic dynamics as a highly social and cultural phenomenon. In the 1970s, Lorenzer's work was widely cited and read, both in Germany and abroad (notably Scandinavia), and today, his ideas continue to inform a vigorous tradition of cultural analysis and social research (Lorenzer 1970a,

1972, 1974, 1977, 2006; Leithäuser 1976; Lorenzer and König 1986; Leithäuser and Volmerg 1988; Morgenroth 1990, 2010; Bereswill 2008; Prokop et al. 2009). A number of Scandinavian, especially Danish, researchers have published work (mostly in Danish) directly referring to this tradition, or using the methods more or less in accordance with it (For an overview, see, Weber 1996, 2001, 2007, 2009, 2010; Weber and Salling Olesen 2002; Salling Olesen 2004, 2007a, b, 2011). However, Lorenzer is little known outside German-speaking communities.

3. An international research group of German, British, and Danish scholars working with psycho-societal approaches to everyday life was organized by Kirsten Weber of Roskilde University to create a forum for developing empirical research into learning, gender and work, informed by Marxism and psychoanalysis. The work format, sharing interpretation practices and examples, has also been based on the idea that critical social science will—as a basic principle—be concrete because utopian horizons and transforming agency are always based on specific historical situations and experiences. Together, we produced 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 2012b), including a rather detailed introduction to the theoretical and methodological contributions of Alfred Lorenzer.

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