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BIOGRAPHICITY AS A PROJECT. ON THE FOUNDATION OF A RESEARCH PROGRAMME ON LIFELONG LEARNING¹

ABSTRACT: The following considerations are a cautious attempt to answer the question of how modern biographies can be understood and which impact their real course has on social learning processes? Four conceptual modes of accesses discuss possible solutions: a “*time – diagnostic access*” (section 1), a “*phenomenological access*” (section 2), a “*comparative access*” (section 3) and an “*alternative theoretical access*” (section 4). The first thought relates to the observation that late modern life courses seem – unplanned – to be becoming a kind of “laboratory” in which we have to develop skills that have no “curriculum” for the time being. The second step will be to clarify the phenomenological originality of the concept “biography”. Does this concept really announce a new problem or is it just another label for questions that have long been known? The specific pedagogical applicability of the term will then be discussed. The large number of biography – oriented approaches, particularly in the educational sciences, is certainly not an indication of their indispensability, but it is also not necessarily the symptom of a mere fashion. Finally, in a pointed discussion of a polemic remark by Pierre Bourdieu, the outline of a programmatic framework concept will be presented.

KEYWORDS: biography, subject-object-dialectic, biographical approaches, “biographical illusion”, alternative perspectives, biographicity.

*Life can only be understood backwards.
In the meantime, it has to be lived forwards.*
Søren Kierkegaard

The “biographical question” as a challenge

Søren Kierkegaard’s ironic remark remains astonishingly relevant. It refers to a dilemma in which we find ourselves when, on the one hand, we have a scientific interest in biographical questions, but on the other hand we are under pressure to act in order to translate theoretical insights into pedagogical action perspectives as quickly as possible. Professional educational practitioners who believe that learning processes within the

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¹ This text, which is now regarded as a widely received “classic” of late modern educational science in the German-speaking academic landscape, is largely identical to the text of a small essay entitled “Biographizität als Projekt. Der “biographische Ansatz” in der Erwachsenenbildung” (Alheit, 1990). This also explains why the literature cited in the essay (apart from supplementary references in footnotes) does not go beyond 1990. However, the text is so noteworthy because it launches a research programme that has become internationally known through numerous empirical studies in the area of educational and cultural sciences and is explicitly linked to the concept of “biographicity”. This text – by the way available for many years in French, Spanish, Danish, Portuguese or Czech – appears here for the first time in English.

framework of a “biographical paradigm”² are meaningful will be faced with precisely this problem: new social science findings on the subject of “biography” have barely been processed, and the need for didactic “recipes” has arisen in practice, the time to understand life comes into conflict with the need to live it.

The subject of “biography” is certainly not foreign to educational science. It is part of the development process of humanities – based pedagogy (*cf.* Misch, 1949) and undoubtedly has a high affinity with the classic task, especially of adult education, of accompanying people in a lifelong learning process (*cf.* Alheit & Dausien, 2009). And yet, there are a number of signs that the use of the term biography, which has oscillated between fashion and trivialisation over the last three decades, contains more than these apparently familiar associations. Contemporary life courses have clearly become more complicated. The expected phases of life, the traditional life plans, have become confused. Certain indicators, which are also highly interesting from an educational point of view, can hardly be overlooked any more. First of all, dramatic shifts in the life budget in Western societies, but also in societies undergoing transformation, are striking. Not only is the youth phase taking up more and more space due to sometimes undesirably long “moratorium periods” (*cf.* Allerbeck & Hoag, 1985; Fuchs & Zinnecker, 1985; Zoll et al., 1989), the old age phase is also expanding. In 1940, for example, the average adult in the USA spent only 7% of his or her life in retirement. By the end of the 1970s, this figure had already risen to 25% (Torrey, 1982: 181; also Kohli, 1987: 124). Even very intimate individual time budgets have – statistically speaking – changed noticeably. Compared to the 19th century, the time spent on active parenthood has shrunk significantly, while the importance of the role of the child in the lifespan has increased unmistakably (Gee, 1987: 265). For the first time in history, individuals spend more time of their lives as the child of living parents than in the role of parent of children under 20. Talk of the “aging child” (*cf.* Watkins, Menken & Bongaarts, 1987: 346) is by no means absurd. The profile of adult status has obviously changed.

This tendency is reinforced by parallel developments. In addition to the time budget, the “blueprint of the normal biography” has also become disorganised. The institution of the “life course” (Kohli, 1985) established around a work biography is becoming increasingly diffuse. The problem-free sequence of “learning and preparation phase”, “activity phase” and “rest phase” only applies to a small number of predominantly male-life courses. The phase transitions have long since become social risk situations. New status passages are constantly emerging (*cf.* Heinz (ed.), 1991). The importance of the active work phase at the centre of the life course is beginning to decrease noticeably.

² The concept of paradigm is not used here in the strict sense of the “incommensurability thesis” of Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), but in a more general sense as a kind of “change of perspective”, as a shift in the direction of attention within the “scientific community”.

Not only is the time spent working in a life decreasing. The structure of the activity phase has also changed. Work phases are interrupted by new preparation phases or even by unemployment. Forced further training processes complement and overlay active employment. Adulthood is therefore no longer unconditionally associated with the activity type of male employment³. In this process, the focusing power of the Protestant work ethic, which according to Max Weber's diagnosis was one of the most effective orientation patterns of Western modernity (Weber, 1920), also seems to be waning. New "post-materialist" orientations are becoming visible (*cf.* Inglehart, 1989) – if you will: a certain "feminisation of the life course regime." And it cannot be ruled out that at least the social elites will in the foreseeable future interpret their life courses either as "educational" or "self-realisation biographies" and only peripherally as work or professional careers.

During this process, "careers in social space" almost inevitably lose their clarity (Bourdieu, 1990). Class, gender and generational positions still have the importance of "biographical resources" (Hoerning, 1989), but their prognostic value for the perspective of actual life courses seems to have declined significantly. Collective biographical patterns tend to be displaced by individual risk situations (*cf.* Beck, 1986). Longitudinal studies of female work biographies, for example, show a surprising degree of differentiation (Moen, 1985). Investigations in traditionally homogeneous social environments observe increasing erosion processes (Beck, 1983). Comparative studies within the same age cohorts find an increase in heterogeneous life courses, especially in old age (*cf.* Dannefer, 1988: 3-10).

It therefore seems to have become more problematic "to live a life". Outdated biographical designs are losing their accuracy. The biography itself has become a learning field in which transitions must be anticipated and mastered and personal identity may only be the result of difficult learning processes (*cf.* Gildemeister & Robert, 1986). Biographies are becoming more complicated, more individual, more "para-normal", but at the same time more colourful, more autonomous and more stubborn⁴. The life

³ It is certainly symptomatic that Kohli's "institutionalisation thesis" originally relies almost exclusively on social-historical material on male employment biographies (*cf.* Kohli, 1983). The idea that "modern" female biographies are structured in a specifically different way from the outset, that the historically young "biographicalisation process" may have reached the female part of the population much later than the male part, has a number of empirical findings on its side (*cf.* for example Dausien et al., 1990).

⁴ In this context, Jochen Kade's plausible objection that cultural modernisation processes deserve not only cultural pessimistic distancing, but also the appropriation of the possibilities hidden in them, is particularly helpful for adult education. However, Kade's assessment of the opportunities for adult education to intervene "as a driving force of individualisation" seems a bit too euphemistic (*cf.* Kade, 1989: 789-808). He greatly underestimates the influence of the macrosocial framework conditions. Evidence of this systematic omission in Kade's work is also his most recent study on "Self-education between 1984 and 2009" (Kade, 2023). In an almost aggressive ignorance of social science-oriented

course seems-unplanned-to be becoming a kind of “laboratory” in which we have to develop skills that have no “curriculum” for the time being.

There is no doubt that educational science is particularly challenged here. But how should it meet the challenge? The following considerations are a cautious attempt to answer this question. The intention is not to offer a solution, but rather a sensible differentiation of individual aspects of the complicated overall question. The first step will be to clarify the theoretical-strategic originality of the concept of “biography” (*section 2*). Does it really announce a new problem or is it just another label for questions that have long been known?⁵ The specific pedagogical applicability of the term will then be discussed. The large number of biography-oriented approaches, particularly in the educational sciences, is certainly not an indication of their indispensability (*cf.* Alheit, 1984a), but it is also not necessarily the symptom of a mere fashion (*section 3*). Finally, in a pointed discussion of a thesis by Pierre Bourdieu, the outline of a programmatic framework concept will be presented (*section 4*).

On the originality of the biography construct

Biography is undoubtedly not the trivial sequence of contingent life events, but a largely predetermined social orientation structure that must be updated by individuals. This includes aspects of temporalisation and chronologisation: biographies run through different phases, and these phases essentially follow the chronological age of life. They establish a kind of orientation pattern that can be described as a “normal biography.”

Now, this observation does not mean that all people live such standard biographies. On the contrary, there are good reasons to assume that characteristic deviations can be observed for certain social groups (*cf.* already Levy, 1977) and that even the standards themselves shift due to social changes (*cf.* Hagestad, 1990). However, the orientation function of the “normal life course” remains crucial (*cf.* Kohli, 1985; also Fischer & Kohli, 1987). Even when we experience drastic deviation and destandardisation, we have an idea of how our life course should-actually-work. We are dependent on a sequence grid with which we have to synchronise our actual life more or less successfully.

Of course, such important biographical norms cannot anticipate all the options that arise in a specific biography. There remains a wealth of alternative courses of action

biographical research – also and especially in pedagogy – he represents a theoretical position that Bettina Dausien convincingly criticised as a “half-reception” of sociological biography research (*cf.* Dausien, 2016).

⁵ However, it must be said that the following section does not provide a balanced comparison of the theoretical performance of the biography concept with competing constructs such as “identity,” “development,” or “socialisation”. The considerations in this part concentrate on the theoretical-strategic peculiarities of the “biography concept”.

that we as individuals have to decide on ourselves: Is a professional career the central perspective of our life or do we have other priorities? Do we want to live alone or start a family? Do we prefer a patriarchal-hierarchical or a partnership-based family model? Should we burden our future life planning with building a house or do we prefer to keep ourselves free of financial ties? Do we join a political party or do we prefer privacy? Do we insist on returning to work or do we concentrate our energy on family and children?

Biographies therefore contain both: structure and emergence, predetermined patterns and individually spontaneous design elements. The two essential problem aspects of every scientific interpretation of the social world are integrated here at the level of concrete action and not retrospectively through theoretical reconstruction: the “subject perspective” and the “object perspective”⁶. Therein lies undoubtedly a crucial theoretical-strategic significance of the concept of biography. And it seems sensible to describe this special “achievement” in more detail. The contingent efforts of the subject that are necessary to develop an individual biography seem to be dependent on *‘hidden structures’*.

Individuals have very concrete experiences, which in turn enable them to do and act meaningfully. But what does “having experiences” mean? Obviously, this is by no means a trivial process. We do not have every conceivable experience; and the experiences we have are “our own experiences”. That is, our concrete biography spatially and temporally limits the actually accumulated experiential knowledge – “spatially”, because the social space in which we have experiences is essentially determined (cf. Bourdieu, 1978), and “temporally”, because biographies are finite and remain fixed to a specific period in historical time.

The statement that we have our own experiences also has a deeper meaning. “Experience means ‘that one now knows it better than before’” (Fischer & Kohli, 1987: 32). But this can happen in two different ways: Either we find our previous biographical knowledge confirmed by the experiences we have, because we easily manage to integrate the biographically new into existing orientation patterns. This consolidates our implicit knowledge. We know it “better” than before (cf. Alheit & Hoerning, 1989). Or the new experience cannot be seamlessly integrated into the existing experiential resources. We are forced to revise our biographical knowledge. This process also leads to us knowing it “better” afterwards⁷.

⁶ Of course, this “basic dialectic” only represents a part of the dynamics that unfold in the social phenomenon of biography. The objective structural foils are more diverse than the term “object perspective” suggests. They refer to genetic-structural conditions within the subject as well as to social patterns that structure biographical processes (cf. Alheit, 2025: 81). The emergences are not simply spontaneous and random activities of individuals; they are also embedded in action and development contexts.

⁷ Of course, the revision never affects the entire edifice of biographical knowledge. The so-called “basic elements” of knowledge or “habitual knowledge” are more or less fixed components (cf. Schütz

Two aspects are theoretically interesting: we always make our experiences against the backdrop of existing knowledge structures. There is no “experience in itself”. Our experience is – as Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann (1979) say – “biographically articulated”. On the other hand, the structure of our biographical knowledge remains dependent on the present perspective. The emergence of current experience may revise structures that have grown. Thus, “biography” as a place of subjective experience in time is a fascinating example of the dialectic of social life: on the one hand, the term stands for the individual, but not in the least random, *structure* of implicit knowledge; on the other hand, it represents the *emergence* of living experience in the present, which may cast the biographical past in a new light and keeps the biographical future open.

The relative openness of the biographical future is represented by another term that at first also seems to exclusively touch on the emergence dimension of the biographical: the term *action* – as an activity endowed with subjective meaning and intentionality. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that such actions are not free of ambiguity. A certain action that we decide on and which we give a specific subjective meaning may turn out *post festum* to be an action that we did not actually intend. The situation of the action and the consequences of the action were not foreseeable. The result of the action contradicts our expectations. Interaction partners have assumed a completely different meaning to our actions than we ourselves. This means that in every concrete action there is – as it were – “more” meaning than an actor can intentionally associate with it. Every action potentially has a surplus of meaning. The subjective intention associated with it *in actu* is only one of various possibilities for giving meaning.

One conceivable explanation for this peculiarity of subjectively intended action is the assumption of a structure operating behind the concrete case. After all, we are by no means constantly required to carry out intentional actions with far-reaching biographical consequences. Over longer phases of our lives, other decision-makers – intra-family opponents, for example, or institutional protagonists – do what determines the next steps in our biography. It therefore seems plausible to assume that the decisive points at which we ourselves actively influence our biographical future cannot be separated from structural conditions, but have to do with a “logic” whose scope goes beyond the current scope of action. Using the example of biographical “trajectories” or “processes of change,” Fritz Schütze has convincingly shown empirically and theoretically that structures which virtually impose concrete actions can dominate biographies over longer phases (cf. Schütze, 1981; 1984). Martin Kohli (1981) counters Schütze’s considerations with a less dramatic variant with the construct of the “most likely path”, but also refers

& Luckmann, 1979: 178). Even forms of knowledge with a high “degree of familiarity” cannot simply be erased (cf. Schütz & Luckmann, 1979: 178).

to structures “behind” the everyday actors⁸. Using the example of biographical action, we also observe the ambiguity of biography between emergence and structure.

On the one hand, biographies can be interpreted as sequential orders of socially predetermined “patterns” that cannot be changed at will. This is where the structural aspect of the biographical lies. In view of current erosion phenomena, the plausible construct of an “institutionalisation” (*cf.* Kohli, 1985) that has taken place in the process of modernity probably still needs to be made more precise⁹. The development of biographical structures with a smaller scope, as is the case in particular with Schütze’s “process structures of the life course” (Schütze, 1981; 1984), certainly remains a useful desideratum. On the other hand, biographies cannot be understood if the emergence dimension is ignored, the stubborn, individual in the biographical process. This double perspective, however, cannot be imagined as a harmonious interaction of two levels: the emergence and structural dimensions, the subject and object perspective, do not “fit” directly with one another. There is a dialectical tension between them that makes subjectivity possible in the first place.

Biographical action is oriented towards socially predetermined patterns of events, is dependent on them and cannot escape their constraints, but it does not simply disappear in their “re-enactment”. It does not just reproduce certain social structural conditions at the individual level, “but always has the character of an open design” (Kohli, 1985: 21; translation by the author). Experiences and patterns of action acquired in the course of a biography do not pile up quantitatively. There are qualitative leaps, breaks, surprising new approaches, moments of emergence and autonomy. And it is precisely this ambiguity that makes the social phenomenon of biography so interesting in terms of conceptual strategy. It is not only the theoretical achievement of sociology or pedagogy – as in the case of various concepts like “identity or socialisation” – but the “lived experience” of the biographical itself that creates the productive tension between “object perspectives” and “subject perspectives”, that is important for pedagogical questions.

The “biographical paradigm” in pedagogy

Surprisingly, this dialectic can already be found in a classic text of pedagogy. In his pedagogical lectures of 1826, Friedrich Schleiermacher identified a double task as

⁸ We can compare such structures to a kind of “grammar of biographical action”. The individual action can certainly deviate from this. In the medium term, however, the biographical actor must conform to such patterns (within the framework of limited decision alternatives). Incidentally, Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” as an “active principle of unification of practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 1990: 77) also seems to vary this idea.

⁹ The question is whether the “institutional model” is still accurate here, or whether, for example, Glen Elder’s “transition” concept (Elder, 1985) captures current change processes more appropriately.

the goal of education: “namely, making people fit for the community and developing personal individuality” (Schleiermacher, 1957: 66; translation by the author) – in more modern terms: “adaptation to structures” and “being open to personal life plans”. In a very abstract sense, this double option is certainly a triviality of educational theory formation. However, if one follows the historical traditions of educational science (not only in Germany) with a critical eye, it becomes clear that this dialectic was by no means concept-forming. Classical pedagogical theories often hypostatise the development of the individual, detached from structural conditions, and pave the way for the “development of personal individuality” at best for the socially privileged (*cf.* Schulze, 1985: 29). “Making people fit for the community” at the expense of personal individuality has produced a number of dissuasive examples in the past two centuries (*cf.* Gamm (ed.), 1984). And even the defense of the subject against its social instrumentalisation, which is claimed in critical educational theories with terms such as “emancipation”, “maturity” or “self-determination,” maintains an idiosyncratic distance from the concrete individual (*cf.* Schulze, 1985: 30).

The recent prominence of the concept of biography, even in educational contexts, seems to have less to do with critical reflection on educational theory traditions of the last two centuries than with contemporary symptomatic phenomena: today. More obviously than ever before, individuals must create the balance between objective requirements and subjective characteristics themselves. “Becoming competent for the community” and “developing personal identity” can hardly be integrated institutionally anymore. Here, the biography itself becomes the focus. Those who have a biography:

[...] must learn, under penalty of personal collapse or permanent social disadvantage, to independently link different fields of experience and action [... They] even have to independently balance out the seemingly incompatible demands and requirements of various institutionally differentiated subsystems, areas of life and learning in order to be able to endure them on a daily basis [...] The individuals, no longer primary social groups, become centres of cooperation and coordination of the actions and life demands of different people [...] They actively create sociality or face social isolation and loneliness (Körber, 1989: 139; translation by the author).

This unusually pointed diagnosis of the times undoubtedly calls for consequences in educational theory. It has also been given a publicity-effective label in the – empirically rather controversial – “individualisation thesis” (Beck, 1986: 205)¹⁰. It does not seem implausible to link the increased importance of the biography topic in pedagogy

¹⁰ In the macro-sociological area, this thesis still seems extremely speculative. The “structured nature of social inequality – the effectiveness of class, ethnicity, gender, etc.” (Kohli, 1994: 266; translation by the author) has not noticeably decreased. Changes in the micro-social area, on the other hand, are undeniable. Here, the praxeological analyses carried out 30 years later by Andreas Reckwitz in his remarkable diagnosis of the times, *The Society of Singularities* (Reckwitz, 2017), are decidedly more convincing, even if it also deserves differentiated criticism (*cf.* Alheit, 2025: 226 ff.).

with this prominent diagnosis of the late 1980s¹¹. Undoubtedly, this symptom of the times does not guarantee a convincing theory. And indeed, no consistent concept of “biographical pedagogy” has emerged from this, but rather a series of more or less elaborated approaches that are worth looking at more closely. For the sake of clarity, six approaches¹² will be distinguished and critically analysed below:

- the “anthropological approach”;
- the “compensatory approach”;
- the “autobiographical approach”;
- the “historical approach”;
- the “intercultural approach” and
- the “emancipatory approach”.

The “anthropological approach”

This label is associated with the most elaborate and established “biographical theory of education” in the German-speaking world, at least until the beginning of the 1990s: the concept of Werner Loch (1979) and his students (*cf.* Spanhel (ed.), 1988). In his main work, *Life Course and Education*, Loch draws on the tradition of humanities-based pedagogy, particularly on Dilthey (Loch, 1979: 121), and expands pedagogical vitalism to include phenomenological and linguistic aspects (*cf.* Loch, 1981: 37). The aim of this theoretical concept is to prove “that the human individual, having been born, must and normally can develop a series of skills over the course of his life that can be represented as a meaningful, anthropologically necessary sequence of ability

¹¹ In recent educational discourse, this insight has led to attempts to gain new aspects of educational theory through empirical biography studies. One group in particular has distinguished itself in this regard and works explicitly on the basis of educational theory (*cf.* Koller & Wulfstange (eds.), 2014). The empirical studies are based on Humboldt’s classic concept of education, but attempt to combine it with newer theories such as Lyotard’s concept of contradiction (*cf.* Koller, 1999), habitus-theoretical approaches (*cf.* von Rosenberg, 2011; Koller, 2012), subjectification theories following Foucault and Butler (*cf.* Ricken, 1999; Ricken & Rieger-Ladich (eds.), 2004; Ricken & Balzer (eds.), 2012) or with power structure analyses based on Steward Hall (*cf.* Spies, 2010). The focus of research interest is primarily the clarification of theoretical questions, for example the differentiation of the concepts “education” and “learning”. This focus, which is particularly noticeable in the German-speaking discourse, appears to be overdetermined in terms of educational theory and often misses central findings of social science biography research – above all the thesis that biographical constructions are not only embedded in social and everyday structures (and their transformation), but are also conditioned by them and that it is precisely this intertwining of biography and society that needs to be systematically taken into account (*cf.* the convincing criticism in Dausien, 2016).

¹² This differentiation is certainly not arbitrary, and the labels chosen also have a high affinity to the self-predication of the single approaches, but it is nevertheless done with a systematic intention and pursues a certain “dramaturgy” in the mode of presentation. Of course, it neither claims to be complete nor does it exclude contrasting systems.

levels” (Loch, 1981: 33; translation by the author). Loch refers to these skills, which are reminiscent of classic stage theorems in pedagogy and developmental psychology¹³, as “curricular competencies”.

The term “curricular” here, however, has little in common with technocratic curriculum models. Rather, it refers explicitly to the *curriculum vitae* that has been already intended by Comenius to guarantee the holistic nature of the educational process. Loch assumes a “sequence of ability levels” that every person must go through in order to be able to cope with certain “curricular situations” – that is, situations in the course of one’s life. If curricular competencies and curricular situations are not synchronised, “learning inhibitions” arise (*cf.* Loch, 1981: 41). This is where education becomes relevant. Starting with maternal care, it tries to counteract the learning inhibition as a “learning aid”. In the course of a person’s life, very different types of “curricular conflict” – friction between competencies and situations – can arise, to which so-called “curricular patterns of education” then react. In this process, the pattern that Loch calls the “cross of education” (Loch, 1981: 46) in his “egological model of education” can be developed:

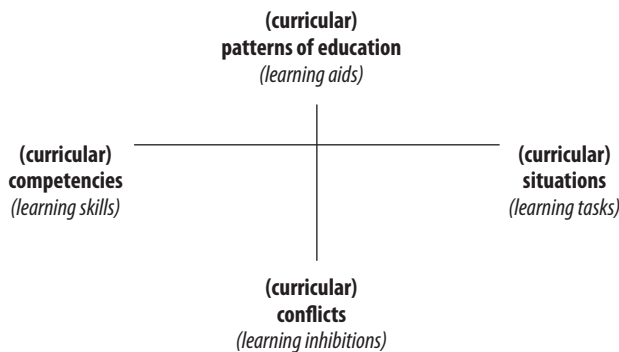


Fig. 1: The “cross of education”

Source: Loch, 1981.

The clarity of this scheme also indicates its limitations. The consistency of Loch’s biographical theory of education is due to the ahistorical recourse to anthropological constants. Spanhel, for example, does indeed appreciate Loch’s conception, especially against the background of current crises in modernity (*cf.* Spanhel (ed.), 1988: 7). However, this cannot fill the social-theoretical gap in the theory. The “biographical pressure” that weighs on individuals in late-modern societies (*cf.* Fuchs, 1983: 366) cannot be eliminated with ahistorical “curricular competencies”. Biographical developments themselves change with the historically modified “learning tasks”. In the context of

¹³ It is surprising that Loch does not refer to Piaget’s genetic structuralism in this context.

concrete biographies, structure and emergence do not form a “pre-established harmony”, but rather a field of tension that influences and changes the biography. Loch’s conception is interesting because it convincingly succeeds in linking the biographical question with pedagogical theories (*cf.* Kaltschmid, 1988: 106). For empirical educational practice, on the other hand, its utility is low¹⁴, because it does not provide convincing answers to current social crises and the consequences of modernisation that affect biographies.

The “compensatory approach”

But this is precisely what concepts that specialise in biographical crisis situations claim. It seems justified to characterise them with the collective term “compensatory” because the aim is – at least indirectly – to deal with problem situations in adult biography and to eliminate difficulties in educational processes. One paradigm that seems to be particularly promising for accessing biographical crises is the concept of “critical life events” (*cf.* Filipp (ed.), 1981). Identifying such events that are worth addressing is apparently unproblematic (*cf.* for example Breloer, 1984; Siebert, 1984; Kade, 1985). They coincide with risk situations, especially in social status transitions, e.g. during the transition from the education system to the employment system, when returning from family engagement to work or on the threshold of retirement. The superficial plausibility of this pedagogical approach to biography becomes more problematic upon closer inspection. The phenomenon of “critical life events” itself, and in particular the way in which they are individually processed, are by no means as clear as the “event lists” of the representatives of this position suggest. If one ignores the relatively standardised social status passages, any number of events can become critical life events from an individual perspective. This ranges from an embarrassing disgrace to the birth of the first child to a serious car accident. The problem here is not even primarily the theoretically conceivable variety of event constellations, but the fact that each event in itself can have completely different consequences in different biographies. For example, the birth of a child in the life of a career-oriented young woman may cause a dramatic revision of her life plan, initiated only with great inner resistance, whereas in the life of a well-off “late father” it may cause the discovery of a hardly expected, deeply gratifying experience of meaning.

Critical life events encounter specific forms of biographical experience accumulation and currently dominant process structures of the life course (*cf.* Schütze, 1981). It is of extraordinary importance whether they affect biographies in a phase that is characterised by a person carrying great autonomy of action, or whether they occur in phases

¹⁴ Here, references to Kohlberg’s studies (*cf.* Lempert, 1990; similarly Hoff, 1990) would probably be much more interesting for biography-oriented further training.

of life that are marked by biographical loss of control (Schütze, 1981: 88). Coping with them also depends on the biographical actor's life environment, on the functionality of the family or social milieu to which he or she belongs (*cf.* the criticism in Siebert, 1985: 44). In other words, it is not the event itself that is decisive, but the "biography" that it affects. In order to use the critical life event concept in a pedagogically sound manner, one needs either solid empirical experience with the biographical courses of certain target groups or a convincing biographical framework theory into which the ambivalence of critical life events can also be meaningfully incorporated.

In her analysis of the biographies of disabled people, the German special needs educator Erika Schuchardt attempted to use a comparatively prominent example to trace the strategy of gradual "crisis processing" of a significant critical life event for those affected and their caregivers (*cf.* Schuchardt, 1980: 113). In doing so, she succeeds in developing an empirically based theory of learning to accept and (re-)gain autonomy of action in disabled people. The learning process from cognitive realisation to emotional acceptance to active participation is so plausible because it can also be described as a "healing process". The compensatory-educational intervention is based on the therapeutic paradigm. However, generalising this model for adult education (*cf.* Schuchardt, 1987: 138-154) creates the dilemma of a diffusion of the terms "therapy", "research" and "education". Schuchardt strongly advocates abolishing the separation. The threshold between "learning" and "healing" thus becomes a problematic "gray area" (*cf.* Mader, 1983). A "biography-oriented adult education" disappears, as it were, behind the therapeutic setting, which has been overstretched to the point of lacking contours.

Similar tendencies are also shown by adult educators¹⁵ who refer to the "broad" concept of therapy in Ulrich Oevermann's so-called "clinical sociology" (*cf.* Oevermann, 1981)¹⁶. Ongoing modernisation spurts make – according to their assumption – personal meaning-giving a fundamental problem. Meaning is increasingly less guaranteed by the unquestioning participation of individuals in culture and society; its creation is left to the structurally overwhelmed subjects themselves. In this process, by no means exclusively "pathological" but also "normal" integrity deficits arise. The need for quasi-therapeutic action by professional instances of problem-solving is increasing dramatically. And it does not only refer to the healing of "pathologies" in the clinical sense. Adult education also takes on "therapeutic" functions" (*cf.* Koring, 1987).

Behind this initially understandable construct of legitimisation based on the theory of the profession, however, there are serious *aporias*. The radical objection of

¹⁵ Here, particular reference should be made to the works of Enno Schmitz (Schmitz, 1983; Schmitz, 1984) and Bernhard Koring (1987).

¹⁶ In this work, Oevermann already outlines the basic features of the concept that will have a lasting influence on the discourse on pedagogical professionalism as a "structural-theoretical approach" (Oevermann, 1996).

post-structuralist discourse analysis that the professional treatment of “modern” deficits in meaning only accelerates the process of decay of traditional resources of meaning (*cf.* Foucault, 1971; 1974) should be put aside here. For adult education, it seems more important to point out that a universalisation of integrity or identity deficits is in danger of losing the concrete objective of quasi-therapeutic action. Socially generated subjective deficits in meaning cannot simply be treated individually; “the loss of meaningfully integrated social worlds affects not only the “client”, but also the professional, who here becomes a ‘client’ himself” (Gildemeister & Robert, 1986: 12; translation by the author). It is not at all clear why the quasi-therapeutic process should be spared from loss of meaning and why the representative interpretations of professional educational practitioners are structurally less damaged than the “primary” interpretations of everyday people.

What seems particularly symptomatic is that the assumption of identity crises as a normal state has long since given up the independence of the biographical dimension. Our lives are by no means just made up of failed or successful self-interpretations, but also of a chain of events that happen to us and that we have to process. Of course, every experience wants to be fitted into our experience structure – and that also means subjectively “interpreted” – but it still remains part of a narratively remembered story that, together with other experiences, makes up the specific character of our life. This emergent potential of biography is underestimated when life stories are only viewed in the light of integrity deficits that can be compensated for quasi-therapeutically (*cf.* Alheit, 1988: 371). Compensatory approaches to biography-oriented adult education remain stuck in an artificial “normality construct”. They conceive learning processes essentially as guided adaptation processes. Subjectivity as an emergent potential for action that could actively counteract social processes of decay is no longer taken into account. Biography is understood as the – mostly damaged – result of “modern” developments, no longer as an authentic process in transition, as an individual “response” to the challenges of late modernity.

The “autobiographical approach”

At least in terms of its purpose, this option is linked to concepts that are based on autobiographical memories. The most methodologically advanced variant of such an approach, and one that has been successfully tested many times in adult education, particularly in the USA, is undoubtedly the technique of *Guided Autobiography*¹⁷

¹⁷ Birren’s concept arises in the context of his research on aging (represented by Schroots & Birren, 1988) and refers to a new, expanding field of work in adult education: the topic of aging and learning – a problem area that will undoubtedly reinforce the trend towards biographical orientation of topics and methods.

developed by James E. Birren (*cf.* Birren & Hedlund, 1987; also Mader, 1987). The key feature of this approach is a “topical approach”, a thematically guided reconstruction of the biography. With the help of a limited number of “generative topics” (e.g. “family”, “death”, “body”, “money”, “time” *etc.*), autobiographical experiences are remembered, written down, exchanged and processed over a longer period of time, individually, in fixed small groups and in plenary discussions (*cf.* Mader, 1987: 121).

In contrast to the concepts of biography-oriented (adult) education discussed so far, here not only the educational perspective is placed at the centre; the methodological approach and the didactic principles are also transparent and well-founded (*cf.* Mader, 1987: 125). Each topic is taken seriously in its own right and constitutes its own learning unit (“thematic element”)¹⁸. The recipients are encouraged to write down their thoughts on the respective topic in a concise form (“written element”), a process that contributes to the objectification of individual experience and promotes another didactic principle, namely the obligation of each and every individual to reflect (“singular-reflexive element”). This individual analysis is supplemented by the exchange of singular autobiographical memories with others in a small group (“social-communicative element”). The aim is ultimately to try to generalise personal life experience as vividly as possible (“metaphorical element”).

Despite the methodologically plausible and in practice quite obviously successful approach to autobiography, Birren’s concept does not go beyond the approaches criticised so far in two essential questions: The topical approach also takes a kind of “digital” approach to biography – in this respect related to the critical life event concept. It implicitly assumes that every biography is constituted by existential “topoi” of almost anthropological dignity. Now it can hardly be denied that topics such as “family”, “aging”, “sexuality” or “death” are part of the inventory of human life. They do not change with fashion. And yet, this statement only applies at the highest level of abstraction. The dramatic decline in resources of meaning in the course of current modernisation processes has long since reached the metaphorical association horizon of such cultural “universals”: What “family”, “sex”, “money” or “death” actually mean biographically certainly also depends on the social framework of the biography in view of the pluralisation and ethnicisation of lifeworlds and lifestyles.

A successful discourse on such “topoi”, as the guided autobiography strives for, depends on social-spatial proximity. And this is undoubtedly unreflectively included in the concept. The “written element” as an essential competence of autobiographical experience objectification, for example, is socially highly selective. The hidden “creaming

¹⁸ However, it must be emphasised once again that these are not just random topics, but “existential” ones. Ageing, sexuality, death, etc. are questions that no one can escape and to which we inevitably have to develop an autobiographical connection (for more details, *cf.* Mader, 1987).

effect” of the concept is most clearly noticeable here. Guided autobiography is also about stabilising (middle-class) biographical expectations of normality, which is, of course, designed as a learning process, not as a therapeutic intervention.

The second affinity to the compensatory approaches is the preference for interpretive biographical reconstructions. The “thematic”, the “written” and also the “metaphorical element” oblige the biography-oriented discourse to focus on higher-predicative structures of meaning in autobiography: on topical evaluations or metaphorical condensations. In this case, the event and action reference of biographical experience inevitably takes a back seat, remaining alive in narrative recapitulations (*cf.* Schütze, 1984). Here, too, there is no question that the retrospective interpretation of autobiography can be extremely effective for the learning processes of adults. Such “images of life” guarantee continuity and consistency of one’s own life. However, there is a danger that they become mere illusions of life, that the retrospective interpretation becomes disconnected from the process structures of the course of life and that “biography” loses its emergent dimension here too¹⁹. Guided autobiography can certainly encourage the discussion of life constructions; biographical action, on the other hand, influences them at best indirectly.

The autobiographical level of action is now of interest to an educational science project in which a group of prominent educators from the University of Bielefeld (Germany) have participated (representative Baacke & Schulze (eds.), 1979; 1985). It works explicitly in an interdisciplinary manner (*cf.* Baacke & Schulze (eds.), 1985: 1), but its specific concern is undoubtedly “educational biography research”. It seems to be about the reconstruction and expansion of educational science instruments through various forms of autobiographical self-thematisation and self-interpretation (*cf.* Baacke, 1985: 3; Schulze, 1985: 31). “From stories” we should learn (Baacke & Schulze (eds.), 1979), because stories are close to action and events and can transform abstract insights into practical educational processes (Baacke, 1985: 13). Autobiographical learning in this concrete sense means discovering a landscape of “biography” that until then had been naively preserved in the unquestioned or temporarily problematic self-identity: different stories of experience, the peculiarities of the surrounding living environments, breaks and transitions, situations and constellations as starting points for developments, paths and one-way streets, futuristic designs (*cf.* Schulze, 1985: 42).

The uniqueness of this approach is that biography is viewed as a multi-layered process and not just as a result. The primary goal is not to interpret the life story, but rather to reconstruct it. In terms of methodology, this concept is certainly nowhere near the level of guided autobiography. It is more of a programmatic nature. And yet it

¹⁹ *Cf.* here the provocative criticism in Bourdieu’s polemical essay *The Biographical Illusion* (Bourdieu, 1990), which is referred to in detail in the fourth section of this article.

could be an interesting addition to James E. Birren's approach: to see the special nature of the individual biography not only in the life story as a specific "thematic structuring" (Thomae, 1968: 329), but in the narratively remembered "stories of life". Such a plea for a "narrative pedagogy" of course has a theoretical background: by far the majority of our actions that are biographically significant do not have an orientation framework with an overall biographical scope, but rather a kind of "lay concept of the 'world' in the sense of everyday life or lifeworld" (Habermas, 1981, II: 206). This concept does not require higher predicative interpretations, but it does explain that we can locate ourselves in specific social spaces and identify a connection to the historical times in which we live. Both of these things happen when we approach our own history with narrative interest.

Narrating practice [...] does not only serve the trivial communication needs of group members who have to coordinate their cooperation; it also has a function for the self-image of the people who have to objectify their belonging to the lifeworld to which they belong in their current role as communication participants. They can only develop a personal identity if they recognise that the sequence of their own actions forms a narratively representable life story, and a social identity only if they recognise that they maintain their belonging to social groups through participation in interactions and are thereby entangled in the narratively representable history of collectives. Collectives only maintain their identity to the extent that the ideas that the group members have of their lifeworld overlap sufficiently and condense into unproblematic background beliefs (Habermas, 1981, II: 206; translation by the author).

These theoretical considerations certainly have consequences for pedagogy. The development of personal identity is obviously less dependent on "representative" identity offers than on the narrative recapitulation of autobiographical experience itself. This is not about a naive-emphasised appreciation of storytelling in biographical learning processes, but rather about the structural significance of narrativity for the elucidation of biographical action:

The grammar of narratives shows how we identify and describe conditions and events that occur in a lifeworld; how we network and sequence the interactions of group members in social spaces and historical times into complex units; how we explain the actions of individuals and the events that happen to them, how we explain the actions of collectives and the fates they suffer from the perspective of coping with situations. With the form of the narrative, we choose a perspective that "grammatically" forces us to base the description on an everyday concept of the lifeworld as a cognitive reference system (Habermas, 1981, II: 207; translation by the author).

It is precisely our intuitive biographical knowledge – the "grammar of narratives" – that has reference contexts which can be made explicit in the pedagogical process. In doing so, we begin to better understand not only ourselves but also the conditions of reproduction in our world. We increase our biographical autonomy of action. It would seem quite appealing to combine these considerations on autobiographical narrativity with the methodological experiences of guided autobiography.

The “historical approach”

The grammar of narratives also “enmeshes” individuals, as Habermas aptly puts it, in the “history of collectives” (Habermas, 1981, II: 206). The autobiographical recourse necessarily touches on the aspect of social identity. From biographical narratives we learn not only for ourselves and the worlds to which we belong; we gain insights into culture, society and history. It is therefore obvious to discuss in this context those approaches that want to initiate learning processes with explicit reference to “oral history” (cf. Günther et al., 1985). In such concepts, however, the relationship between learning and life course is not directly associated, but with an interesting twist: life stories are supposed to make history more transparent, abstract social structures in the individual constellation. The reason for this view is usually a more didactic argument:

It is no longer so easy to imagine oneself from the perspective of God or the world spirit; it is more difficult to put oneself in the position of the powerful and to analyse social problems from above as questions of order, domination or integration. Instead, we are beginning to be interested in ourselves and in the origins of our own living conditions, behaviour, patterns of interpretation and options for action: How, for example, have performance norms become inscribed in our bodies? Which working and property relationships have brought about which family constellations? What changes in behaviour and thinking have been forced upon us by the transition from the countryside to the city? What hopes have fascism destroyed? In this documentation of everyday life, whose external history can only be understood with difficulty and methodical imagination, questions are asked about the subjectivity of those whom we have learned to see as objects of history, about their experiences, their wishes, their resilience, their creative ability, their suffering (Niethammer, 1980: 9; translation by the author).

In concepts of this kind, biography is not primarily a place of learning; biographical experiences become educational content. Access is therefore also possible indirectly – via historical or literary autobiographies. However, direct contact remains characteristic, the questioning of contemporary witnesses as personally experienced “oral history”. Here the boundaries between political education and “everyday history” (Lüdtke (ed.), 1989), between workers’ education and “history from below” (Alheit & Wollenberg, 1982) become blurred. “Pedagogical biographical thinking” becomes a medium for social, political and cultural identity formation. The danger of the “historical approach” undoubtedly lies in the problematic distance from the biographical experiences of the learners, possibly also in uncritical tradition formation and iconography (for a more detailed critique of this risk, cf. Alheit & Dausien, 1990: 405–418). However, this cannot relativise the chance that with the “historical perspective” an essential aspect of autobiographical memory could be deepened: the insight into the interconnectedness of one’s own fate with the history of a specific social culture.

The principle of *Gräv där du står* (“Dig where you stand”) – introduced by the Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist (1978) in an unusually popular book at the end of the

1970s – has led to one of the largest lay education movements in Europe. In Sweden alone, almost 10,000 study groups are still active today. And a considerable part of their work consists of oral history research (*cf.* Dammeyer, 1978: 283). The learners are motivated by the belief that “the future ... began yesterday” and that they can only understand themselves and their own lives if they understand their past.

With comparable concepts, the question certainly seems justified as to whether it is even meaningful to speak of biography-oriented (adult) education here. On the other hand, the point can also be radically reversed: Can we still get to the bottom of history, which has been largely usurped or at least overshadowed by the interpretations of powerful organisations and interest groups (already Benjamin, 1965), if we ignore the people who “made” it in a practical sense – even if “not of their own free will” (Marx/Luxemburg)? Is the “detour” via concrete life stories not inevitable if we want to understand the past? For example, can the trauma of the Vietnam War for US society or the contradictory experiences of “reunification” in Germany still be understood from the official interpretations? – Biography-oriented learning processes seem to enrich not only pedagogy here, but historiography itself.

The “intercultural approach”

The fact that the clarification of biographical knowledge creates extraordinarily close links to developments in society as a whole can be made more concrete by another educational concept. The perception of the “foreignness” of migrants as a social problem or – conversely – the rediscovery of “ethnicity” (*cf.* already Murphy, 1977; similarly Klemm, 1985) as a protection of their psychological stability have made biographically oriented educational processes unusually popular, especially in so-called “intercultural pedagogy”²⁰.

The basic concept of this approach is, however, as simple as it is problematic. It is based on a “modernity difference hypothesis” (Bukow & Llaryora, 1988): migrants spend their biographies supposedly in two incompatible “cultures”, the culture of their “host countries” and the culture of their origin. The culture of origin is usually ideally identified with traditional patterns of living and given a folkloristic overtone. The target culture is considered unquestioningly “modern” and is determined by universalistic-rational value orientations. The focus of one culture is the “family”, the centre of the other is the “profession”.

²⁰ It seems remarkable that the prominent biography and migration researcher Ursula Apitzsch has critically addressed this fact from the very beginning (*cf.* Apitzsch, 1989a; Apitzsch, 1990 in her Habilitation Thesis “Biography and Migration. On the Constitution of the Intercultural in the Educational Courses of Young Adults of the Second Generation of Migrants”).

The compulsion to oscillate between the two cultures creates identity and integration problems and makes educational support necessary. It is of secondary importance whether the goal of intercultural education is a kind of second, “modern” childhood (Bukow & Llaryora, 1988: 15), or whether “strengthening the feeling of belonging to one’s own minority” seems more desirable (Klemm, 1985: 181). The result is a “modernisation trap” (Apitzsch, 1990: 15) that didactically over-stylises the constructed ethnic distinctiveness in order to justify educational interventions (*cf.* Hamburger, 1988).

We observe an interesting parallel here to the “compensatory approaches” that have already been critically discussed. Such constructed differences in modernity ignore actual modernisation problems that migrants can easily get into. As a rule, their home cultures are by no means “pre-modern”. The decision to migrate is often the result of a critical examination of modernisation processes in the society of origin itself. The migration process does not present itself as a path from an unspoiled traditional world to a problematic modern environment, but as a planned process of “individual modernisation” (Inkeles, 1984: 373 ff.) with a clear orientation towards the modernisation agencies of schools and industrial enterprises in the host society (*cf.* Apitzsch, 1990: 15). The problem with this widespread expectation is not only the danger of social disintegration, but the risk of a negative biographical trajectory with considerable dynamics (*cf.* Alheit, 1984b)²¹.

The results of comparable individual modernisation processes are, in the positive case, surprisingly unproblematic combinations of more conventional (“familial”) with clearly modern (“professional”) orientations, especially among women; in the negative case, however – often among male members of the subsequent generations – the collapse of biographical planning resources, because even retreating into ethnicity no longer represents a real way out (*cf.* Apitzsch, 1989b). This observation suggests that migrant biographies should not be interpreted in a culturalistic way in ethnic contexts, but rather that the difficulties of status passages today are a problem across multicultural society, that they are a problem of the modernisation of this society, which migrant groups experience not later, but earlier and more radically than other groups in the host society (Apitzsch, 1990: 18).

This example makes it clear how problematic “normative” constructs of biographical trajectories or identities would be for an educational concept. Educational practitioners are currently extremely poorly prepared to accompany biography-oriented

²¹ It is precisely this biographical dilemma that can become a “trap” for members of the second and third generation of immigrants. Here, hopes for educational and professional careers are even more widespread than in the first generation of immigrants; and a smooth return to the ethnic colony is usually blocked (*cf.* the interesting research results on learning biographies of female members of the subsequent generations in Apitzsch, 1990).

intercultural learning processes. The considerable risks, but also the opportunities, of modern migrant biographies are in a certain sense “anticipations” of universalised social options for modern biographies per se. Therefore, they represent – both positively and negatively – important resources for a pedagogy whose goal is “*biographicity*”, the creation of individual autonomy of action in the course of life.

The “emancipatory approach”

The structural experience of the insecurity of biographical timelines, of individualisation and marginalisation is also the basis for educational concepts that can be meaningfully characterised with the label “emancipatory” because they explicitly advocate a transformation of those basic structures that notoriously hinder the development of biographical opportunities for certain groups in society. This applies particularly emphatically to biographical approaches in “feminist educational work” (Schmeling, 1988). It has discovered the female biography as a “political learning field” because it is precisely the “normal biography” suggested by society that forces us to understand the structural and life-course-typical inequality between the sexes: the “gender-doing effects” of the educational system (Rabe-Kleberg, 1986) and the intensification of these effects in the status transitions to the paid work system.

Women are – biographically – generally not equipped with the same planning resources as men by the educational system. They are denied the systematic preparation for biographical action strategies and coping skills that the standard inventory of male socialisation conveys *en passant*, so to speak. Women therefore fall into “educational traps” more often and are more likely to become losers in the modernisation process of “human capital” (cf. Rabe-Kleberg, 1988). The cause of these structural traps is the basic pattern of “double socialisation,” that is, the ambivalent involvement of women in paid work and family work (Becker-Schmidt, 1987). This mode of socialisation seems – relatively independently of social structural characteristics – to influence the “logic” of social placement, the location in the paid work process and in the social power apparatus, with astonishing persistence. Interestingly, however, this “pattern” does not produce clear results, but rather the biographical diversity of women’s life situations (cf. Moen, 1985; Dausien, 1990).

This creates a “natural” perspective of biography-oriented women’s education work, which Alice Rühle-Gerstel (1932) had already pointed out in a critical way against the bourgeois women’s movement. She convincingly demonstrated “that it is not a question of self-realisation, as if there were a prior, easily identifiable substance in every woman that guarantees the unity and progress of knowledge. The problem must be developed on a different theoretical level: differences and boundaries are not to be resolved, but to be recognised. On the way away from oneself, there are realities to be perceived and

realised that are actually not even nearby” (Nordmann, 1988: 121; translation by the author). The goal and political issue at the same time is therefore the overcoming of each individual biographical constellation, the way “away from oneself”. But that means nothing less than subjectivism. For women’s education, it can become a new form of interventionist learning, a kind of social movement (Schiersmann, 1983). Resistance to imposed biographical structural traps does not just change individual life courses, but affects the social organisation of work and education as a whole.

It seems symptomatic, by the way, that the examples of emancipatory educational processes are no longer concepts from traditional social movements²², but ideas from feminist contexts themselves. This fact cannot be explained by willing concessions to the spirit of the times. The characteristic feature of emancipatory approaches in women’s education is precisely that biographical experience is not only taken seriously in its subjective particularity as the starting point of educational processes, but that the “private” enters into a process of politicisation²³. Collective forms of resistance are not excluded here, but are expressly intended (*cf.* Alheit et al., 1992). However, these are “new associations” (*cf.* Schmeling, 1988: 118), that do not “naturally” condense into collective social aggregates, but can become a social movement through the conscious and free decision of the individuals involved. The political learning process also seems to be changing its face; even collective learning must begin with the concrete biography.

Preliminary summary

The most interesting result of the critical review of various approaches to biography-oriented educational work is not the contradictory complexity of the theoretical references. The most astonishing finding is undoubtedly the conceptual range that biographically influenced educational concepts cover: the range of issues extends from individual therapeutic interventions to socio-political engagement, from classic topics of general and socio-cultural education to new questions of professional and political adult education. This means that biography orientation in (adult) education can indeed be viewed as a kind of “hidden paradigm” – at least of the 1980s. In a sense, it indicates

²² This certainly does not mean that biography orientation has no place in trade union education. Quite the opposite: the development of “new cultural models” particularly among young workers (Zoll et al., 1989) may require educational concepts that are more sensitive to life courses, which take up and expand on the ideas of the “experience approach” theoretically founded by Oskar Negt (1971) in workers’ education (*cf.* Alheit & Wollenberg, 1982). Of course, no one can claim that the impetus for increased sensitivity to biographies as a topic of political education came from the current workers’ and trade union movement. Here, the women’s movement is indisputably both the protagonist and the bearer of hope.

²³ The prominent feminist slogan “the private is political!” also refers to the realisation that social power structures and their conditions of reproduction do not leave privacy untouched. Socially, however, this primarily affects women (*cf.* Schmeling, 1988: 71).

a gradual change in professional dispositions. The following section will clarify whether this hidden syndrome requires a more consistent conceptual framework.

Biographicity and modernisation. Initial considerations on an educational framework concept

In an unusually provocative essay on the “biographical illusion,” Pierre Bourdieu speaks of the life story as a “perfect social artifact” (Bourdieu, 1990: 80). He is opposed to the complicity of biographical narrators who are interested in what could be called a “proper history” and researchers who see themselves as professional “seekers of meaning” (Bourdieu, 1990: 76). The product is often enough a “linear” life story that has nothing to do with reality and is also profoundly “obsolete”. The modern novel, as Bourdieu shows with Faulkner and Proust, has long since said goodbye to the rhetorical conventions of narrative. It clings to biographical identity “only at the price of a massive abstraction”, which basically means nothing but the proper name (Bourdieu, 1990: 78). Proust’s talk of the “Swann of Buckingham Palace” or the “Albertine of yesteryear” describes the sequence of independent states into which our life course can end up. According to Bourdieu, such sequences do not justify a “life story”, but at most a “trajectory” in social space, “which is constantly developing and subject to never-ending transformations” (Bourdieu, 1990: 80).

Bourdieu’s provocation is useful in three respects in order to answer the suggested question about a theoretical framework for biography-oriented education more precisely: (1) It enlightens us unsentimentally about the “social” phenomenon of “biography” and teaches us a certain skepticism towards “biography” as a mere construct of meaning. (2) It confronts us with a pointed sociological perspective and in doing so perhaps sharpens our eye for an educational view of the biographical. (3) The position is questionable in the most stimulating way, but precisely for this reason it gives us the opportunity to finally think about biography as a life and learning story.

(*ad 1*) Behind Bourdieu’s rejection of the “biographical illusion” lies a specific diagnosis of modernity. It is the same scepticism that characterises the discontinuous experience of reality of the *Nouveau Roman* as a collage: biographies are at best trajectories in social space. It is worth clarifying the positions that are passed through. However, there is no coherent history. This attitude has nothing in common with postmodern constructions, and is certainly not a plea for “paralogical knowledge” (*cf.* Lyotard, 1986: 175). It sees itself as radically modern (*cf.* Liebau, 1990: 85) because it sees the dissolution of conventions as an opportunity.

And there is some plausible empirical evidence for this position if we look at documents from the fringes of biographical knowledge: the impressive collection of

life stories from the Piedmontese Po Valley, for example, which Nuto Revelli (1977) presented under the title *Il mondo dei vinti* (“The World of the Defeated”), takes us to the limits of conventional biographical rhetoric. It breaks with the euphemism that the “life story” must be a successful document of social integration and reminds us of the possibility that even insight into the “conditions” that people endure can be a process of enlightenment. Revelli’s remarkable collection also sensitises us to the less dramatic consequences of modernisation: to “normal” frictions in contemporary women’s biographies (*cf.* Dausien, 1996), the breaks and traps when crossing cultural boundaries and levels of modernisation, the change of “positions in the social space” (Mannheim, 1964: 526)²⁴. Biographies are – read in this way – always radical documents of the “sociality of the individual” (Apitzsch, 1990: 13). They appear like externally determined individualities, like structures of placement and displacement in social space, which can be viewed at certain points as independent “ensembles of objective relationships”.

This rigorous view ironises the pedagogical-therapeutic idea of curable damage to biographical identity and places modern biography unsentimentally in its structural context:

To attempt to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient sequence of successive events, with no other link than that to a subject... is almost as absurd as trying to explain a subway line without taking into account the network, that is, the matrix of objective relations between the various stations (Bourdieu, 1990: 81; translation by the author).

However, such a structuralist, enlightened, strictly sociological approach over-stretches the important insight of the “sociality” of the biographical and ignores the “latent biographicity of the social”²⁵: even if the various metro stations in Bourdieu’s metaphor may be defined by the network of their respective connections, the route from station to station must still be covered. The peculiarity of a certain sequence of stations also makes a metro “line” identifiable – regardless of the networking of the individual stops – and gives users the opportunity to change or get off as they please. Each metro journey therefore has its own “logic”.

Biographies are inconceivable without this stubbornness. Even the biographical sequences threatened by radical modernisation processes, as in the case of Revelli’s “defeated”, show a certain internal consistency and are by no means empirically held together merely by the proper name, as Bourdieu assumes. The coherence and continuity

²⁴ This unusually modern formulation, which Mannheim already coined in his classic “Generations Essay” (Mannheim, 1964), is suitable for describing the complexity of the relationship between individual biographical uniqueness and the changing influences of social space (class, gender, generation, *etc.*).

²⁵ This formulation already implicitly reflects the conceptual claim that “biographicity” must be a construct between “individual” and “society” and that the artificial hermeticism of these two terms against each other should be dissolved.

of biographical self-experience cannot simply be discredited as an “illusion” because those who have a biography cannot suspend their biographical knowledge at will in each new “state” of the biography, but must reactivate it to a certain extent (*cf.* Alheit & Hoerning, 1989: 8). However, the question of whether such biographies will remain “worth telling” in the future, whether they will still produce a “life story” that can be reconstructed narratively, is interesting. The narrative structure of experience depends on being connected to the history of collectives (*cf.* again Habermas, 1981, II: 206). But if individuals are cut off from the resources of traditional and unquestionably shared experience in the process of radical modernisation of traditional lifeworlds, a central biographical competence may be lost along with the ability to connect to collective contexts.

(*ad 2*) There is no denying the ruptures and frictions in modern biographies; and Bourdieu’s critique sharpens our awareness of this fact. Of course, is it enough to describe the lives of contemporaries whose biographies change unplanned but unmistakably as a mere series of positions? Can the emergent spaces of possibility that exist even at the individual positional levels for the actors in their networking with other social actors, with power and domination structures – incidentally also in Bourdieu’s understanding – really be filled by ignoring the biographical perspective, that is, without recourse to action resources that come from earlier individual positional experiences, and without the idea of positional opportunities that could biographically follow the current entanglements? Both questions have been answered in a complex and fairly unambiguously negative way in the previous considerations. Bourdieu’s “structuralist voyeurism” does not even seem sociologically convincing – seen in this way. It would be counterproductive for a solution to the educational framework problem.

But what could a pedagogical answer look like if the unreflective return to the “therapeutic paradigm” is blocked? What opportunities are there to understand the bearers of contemporary biographies not only as victims of modernisation processes, but also as learning individuals who are opening up new biographical possibilities? In the course of modernisation processes, we “learn” to renounce unquestioningly accepted everyday certainties and conventions. This involuntary renunciation carries the risk of banal unlearning, of relapsing into “pre-conventional” behaviour²⁶. But there is also the chance that we will develop “post-conventional” action patterns and thus open

²⁶ In this context, it is informative to refer to the highly interesting results of the longitudinal study by Ernst-H. Hoff, Lothar Lappe and Wolfgang Lempert on the moral relevance of professional actions (Hoff, Lappe & Lempert eds., 1985). The findings obtained following Kohlberg’s moral concept certainly point to such “relapse risks”, the decline to pre-conventional moral levels due to the influence of the modernisation agency “industrial enterprise”. At the same time, however, they demonstrate the possibility of opposing development processes (*cf.* Lempert, 1990).

up completely new biographical scope for maneuver²⁷. This possibility has historically always accompanied previous modernisation processes. It leads to the formation of new social-moral milieus in the constitutional phase of the modern proletariat, as it were to the socially integrative defense of a class (*cf.* Alheit, 1989a). But it is also the driving force behind the essentially “moral-economic” function of the modern welfare state, namely to prevent the complete market-based exploitation of individual labour (*cf.* Kohli, 1994: 219). And it could become the basis of a provisionally extremely vague option, namely the cooperation (through radical individualisation) of threatened subjects in new association and learning processes.

To achieve this, at least three conditions must be met: (a) The consequences of current modernisation processes must be integrated biographically. This means that insight into economic and political power structures which covertly intervene in biographical “careers” must become explicit biographical knowledge. This does not only refer to political education processes, but even more urgently to knowledge structures of professional qualification²⁸. The integration of supposedly “meaning-indifferent” forms of knowledge is only possible in the long term through reflection on their biographical significance, that is, through the successful interweaving of “objective” and “subjective” forms of knowledge, of “expertise” and everyday knowledge. (b) “Biography” as an everyday resource of meaning is itself dependent on modernisation processes. In this context, it seems helpful to remember that biography, as a social institution and as an organisational principle of individual life, is a product of modernity and not a traditional resource of pre-modern forms of life. This does not mean that biographical knowledge can never draw on traditional forms of knowledge. On the contrary: the connection of individual biographical orientations to the forms of interaction necessary for reproduction in modern societies may require traditional solidarity structures. Contrary to the culturally pessimistic diagnosis of the “Frankfurt School” (*cf.* Habermas, 1981, II: 206), capitalist modernity develops not only as a “colonisation of lifeworlds”, but also in the exploitation, transformation or even revitalisation of traditional ways of

²⁷ Such processes can be observed empirically, for example, in the transformation of “trajectory”-shaped – *i.e.* “heteronomous”-process structures into action-schematic – *i.e.* “autonomous”-process structures of the life course: for example, at the end of a drug career, which enables a biographically self-determined new beginning through a cathartic breakdown; or in the transition from long-term unemployment to a new qualification process (*cf.* Schütze, 1981).

²⁸ In this context, Dirk Axmacher’s critical comments on the function of the form of knowledge he calls – following Max Weber – “specialist knowledge” are interesting (Axmacher, 1990: 28). However, it must be doubted whether the harsh contrast between specialist knowledge and everyday knowledge, which Axmacher uses as a backdrop for his considerations, is plausible. The long-term studies by Lempert and colleagues indicate how links between specialist and everyday knowledge components can influence and change the moral judgment of individuals (Lempert, 1990: 4).

life²⁹. Individual reproduction strategies are therefore always a mixture of conventional and modern knowledge components. However, when established ties and conventions become fragile, when self-evident solidarity and meaning resources dwindle, a “modernisation” of biographical knowledge is also necessary. Such processes are – historically speaking – quite normal. We have observed corresponding changes in working-class (everyday) cultures in Europe since the end of the 19th century (*cf.* Langewiesche, 1984; Kramer, 1987). Traditions that still originate from pre-proletarian, plebeian contexts of experience become dysfunctional and decline. New traditions begin to form (Alheit, 1989b). We can also observe comparable developments for the modernised solidarity structures of the new social movements. They “inherit” the solidarity traditions of the classical social movements through specific modifications. (c) What is therefore necessary is a competence that should be called “biographicity”: *the ability to connect modern knowledge to biographical resources of meaning and to re-associate and build social bridges with this knowledge.*

The chances of this are better than skeptics predict (*cf.* Axmacher, 1990). We only have to consider the change in status of the most advanced modern forms of knowledge to recognise their loss of legitimacy and meaning. Science in particular has lost authority as its sphere of influence has generalised to all levels of life. Ironically, with the pluralisation of knowledge offerings, the autonomy of the consumers has not decreased but increased (*cf.* Beck, 1986: 286). This does not only apply to risk areas such as nuclear energy, climate change, armaments policy or digitalisation, it applies – at least latently – to education and qualification offers in general. The right of the recipients to demand the meaningfulness of such offers has been informally established. It would now be interesting for pedagogy to see whether this opportunity can be seized: to use “modern knowledge” for the autonomy of action of biographical bearers, possibly to turn it into a kind of “counter-knowledge” and thus to create “new associations”³⁰.

(*ad 3*) This would certainly also contribute to the production of “life stories”, which would by no means be merely illusory, because they express the persistence of biographical experience in the face of modernisation and social change. We can only understand the “logic” of historical breaks and discontinuities, of wars, catastrophes and revolutions, if we have understood people’s need for continuity in these discontinuities.

²⁹ An achievement that probably explains the strategic advantage in the management of complex economies and administrations compared to strict and inflexible modernisation models (such as the so-called “real socialist” societies), but which on the other hand is also responsible for the fatal modernisation strategies of fascist systems.

³⁰ This prediction – long before the days of the Internet – was certainly far-sighted, but it was also not prepared for the conceivable ambivalence of possible “new associations”. Today – in the age of the Internet – we know that the opportunity to create new social networks has been used much more successfully by the populist right worldwide than by the still divided left.

We can – contrary to Bourdieu – only develop an educational perspective if we understand the tension between continuity and discontinuity as a “learning history”. And we must – with Bourdieu – realise that the “stories” in the future will be more strenuous than the narrative reconstructions of the past. It cannot be completely ruled out that we will soon have to slightly modify the Kierkegård motto at the beginning of our considerations: Life can only be lived if a plan exists – *it has to be understood “forwards”*.

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