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THE CONCEPT OF “BIOGRAPHICITY” AS BACKGROUND THEORY OF LIFELONG LEARNING?¹

The concept of the ‘educational biography’ frequently appears in programmes and documents relating to lifelong learning. What is meant by that often remains unclear. Like many notions pertaining to the field of the social sciences, the concept of biography has a peculiar dual nature. It is both an everyday term as well as an elaborate scientific concept. Even though it may cause us consternation at times, in everyday life we basically have no problem in accepting that we ‘have’ a biography. In the social sciences, however, ‘biography’ relates to a highly sophisticated social construct that is by no means self-evident. Biography (in the sense of the tension between the concepts of one’s life course as opposed to the story of someone’s life story), is a social form of self-construction and self-projection arising from a particular historical and social context. This concept is one that is historically still relatively ‘young’.

In my contribution, I would like to trace the already mentioned historical process. Then, by using three perspectives, I will discuss the current conditions relating to biographical learning and introduce the strange phenomenon of ‘biographicity’. Finally, I will use two empirical studies to show, in an exemplary manner, how we need to consider significant cultural differences when talking about biographies. I will conclude with a proposal for research with a comparative perspective.

The origin of modern life courses

In brief, according to the generally accepted theory in social sciences, the process of socialisation, that is, the way in which the individual is integrated into society, has fundamentally changed in the transition into modernity. It is no longer the affiliation to groups into which one is born, castes or family that regulate rights, duties and the scope of the individual’s permissible actions; rather these are pre-structured into life as a kind of temporally layered programme which is itself directly linked to the individual and to be ‘slaved away at’ by him or her.

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In the mid-1980s, the Swiss sociologist Martin Kohli wrote in his thesis on the 'Institutionalisation of the Life Course' (Kohli 1985) that the allocation of key societal responsibilities (education, gainful employment, participation in civil society) according to the specific age of an individual is highly functional for the organisation of modern political systems. It offers society (with Foucault: 'government of the people') as well as individual subjects ('self-government') a rational basis for planning in order both prospectively to design and retrospectively to evaluate actions and decisions.

Indeed, this system saw a kind of 'standard biography' develop in western societies in the twentieth century which orientated itself along the job market and divided an individual's lifetime into three phases: preparation (childhood and education); an active phase consisting of gainful employment; and the quiet time associated with retirement (see Kohli 1985). However, this has never been the empirical normality or even reality for all (or at least almost all) members of society. Women have never been included (see Dausien 1996). The dramatic diagnoses of the decay of the standard biography are therefore empirically wrong. However, what has changed is the unquestioned predominance of the three-phase-model for social institutions as well as for individual life plans and life stories.

The concept of lifelong learning is a symptom of the de-institutionalisation of the 'classic' model of what a life course is and also an active engine for the political implementation of new concepts. It is, however, still historically new enough that its longterm effectiveness cannot yet be judged. The phenomenon of biography would remain incomprehensible, were it limited only to this level. In order to become 'real', in any case, the societal programme of the life course therefore needs to direct the actions and thoughts of the individual, it needs concrete subjects which, to some extent, incorporate this programme and make it their own: It needs subjects which make it into a plan and into a story. The life course as a normative framework with actions and a subjective sense must be filled with real life to create a unique story – in order to create a biography of an individual subject.

Martin Kohli (1985) describes this achievement as '**biographisation**'. A biography is therefore not only superficially a sequence of events and evidence based on dates and facts as may be demonstrated by a socially 'presentable' or documented curriculum vitae. It consists also of the subjective meaning, the experiences and stories associated with a life course (Schulze 1993). Furthermore, it consists of the multitude of stories, images (of the past) that are not only relevant to the subject 'behind', 'beyond' or 'despite' the objective life course dates, but also that can be connected with one another in a **narrative structure** (Alheit 2008). The result of this construction process (which in principle is neverending and rather one that can be redrawn and reconstructed) is

the latent meaning of the ‘individual life course.’ This meaning, too, is not fixed but can – in principle – be retold again and again (see).

The distinctive feature of the modern biography

The German cultural sociologist Alois Hahn (2000) asserted that ‘biography’ is a specific diachronic formula for identity construction and representation. This is a feature of the development of a modern society as life’s journey is no longer predetermined therein but instead becomes more variable for both the individual as well as for whole groups in society through educational processes and social mobility, migration and technical-cultural change.

Social mobility – the ability to leave one’s social background or the ‘class’ into which one was born, to take on a job or make a life-plan that distinguishes itself from the experiences or normative expectation of the previous generation – means that the social position one has reached (as well as its associated social identity), no longer reveal the nature of the life-path from which one has come.

In a class society a peasant would in all likelihood have been the son of a peasant; a craftsman the son of craftsman who had completed a clearly defined apprenticeship; the wife of a nobleman the daughter of a nobleman. In the modern contemporary society, however (at least in the broad realm of middle social positions), one can no longer determine a particular ancestry based on current societal status. While a professor can be the son of a professor, he could also be the son of a butcher; a prime minister could be part of the educated urban middle class or the son of an unskilled worker etc.

Hahn writes: “the temporalisation of self-representation [...] only becomes imperative where an identical contemporary existence can be the result of two extremely different past-lives; where the present no longer adequately illuminates much of the past” (Hahn 2000, p. 107; translation by the author). In order to present convincingly and make comprehensible one’s own social position as well as one’s unmistakable identity, it is no longer sufficient to say who one ‘is’. Instead, the individual has to relate how he or she has ‘come to be’ what they are today. The ‘gap between origin and fate’, which has become part of the common experience of the modern individual, can be in some sense ‘remedied’ through the construction of a biography.

Hahn closely considered the development of biographical design formulas in his studies and developed the theory that the individual relied upon societal ‘*biography generators*’ (such as any form of religious confession) in the production of a biographical identity (see Hahn 1982; 1987; 2000). Other forms and processes of self-discovery and self-representation encompass pleas for clemency as well as defence petitions in courts of law; travel journals and diaries dealing with the (German) coming-of-age novels;

letters of friendship; psychiatric case histories and psychological theories of development; and can even include 'Facebook' as well as the talk-shows of our (post)modern media-world.

The theory that the new variability of journeys through societal space also requires new principles for the construction of one's self – which allow the individual to endow this journey with individuality, to design it and permit one's 'self' to proceed along it –, can be deduced from this historical perspective. The concept of learning associated with the Enlightenment (with education freed from the shackles of social and religious constraints), for a number of centuries fulfilled the function of such a theory of construction. It is reinforced with a Protestant ethic and an ideology of merit pertaining to the capitalist job market which, in its profane version, 'promises' that everyone can be the architect of one's own fortune.

Symptoms of 'governmentality effects' in a Foucaultian sense

In this process, the concept of a linear 'standard biography' based on education and vocation (in specific historical phases and for a specific part of the population), has provided a viable framework for both the individual and collective formation of meanings. While it may have recently become less relevant, or could even be said to have 'collapsed' dramatically, it does not, however, detract from the biographical principle of 'self'. If anything, according to my thesis, it strengthens it.

Apart from some (post)modern semantic variations, the idea of 'self-management' and 'lifelong learning' can also be integrated into this briefly described historical relationship where they function as contemporary variations that have not yet proven their historical validity and effect. When in the current debate reference is made back to the heightened need for educational counselling and career guidance relating to 'educational biographies' (Bröckling 2000; 2007) or 'lifelong learning' (Fejes 2008; Rothe 2010), this by no means refers to facts or distinct tendencies. Instead, it relates to the most demanding societal and scientific constructions that still leave their constructive character largely obscured. Foucault, in his reflections on "governmentality", has convincingly criticised those hidden constraints into "*self-governance*" (see Foucault 1976; 2000).

A new theoretical framing of lifelong learning

This assessment is especially true for the concept of 'lifelong learning' where the scientific content has not yet been satisfactorily resolved despite numerous publications. Hence, I propose for it to be treated as an educational strategy which can be subject to

scientific analysis but that is not, however, itself to be a scientific term with analytical precision or theoretical content (see Dausien & Rothe 2007; Dausien 2008). Conversely, I consider a perspective relating to biographical or educational theory to be useful for an analysis focused on educational and adult learning in the dimension of the life span.

It is useful for reflecting on (pedagogical) consultancy processes that relate to individual education and employment pathways where the processes can claim to build on the subjective, experiential and learned structures of the consulted subjects – on their biographical ‘self-constructions’. Even if this claim cannot be said to apply to all forms of consultancy in this field, it nonetheless appears to constitute a kind of core pedagogical professionalism. It therefore seems reasonable, at this point, to outline briefly the specific characteristics of a biographically theoretical approach to ‘lifelong learning’, or, more generally, to educational processes within the life span (Dausien 2008; Alheit & Dausien 2009a; 2009b). I want to highlight *three aspects* of such an approach that can be used for the analysis of educational processes: temporality, contextuality and reflexivity.

Temporality. The focus of using a biographically theoretical approach is essentially one of a differentiated notion of how learning processes are structured temporally; how (through the intertwining of various time structures – such as past, present, future, everyday life, life time, societal time; ‘own-time’ and ‘institutionalised’ time structures) they lead to the construction of high-order structures of experience and meaning.

Therefore, a biographical analysis enquires about the temporal structure, the temporal order and ‘re-order’ of education and learning within a life span. This is no linear structure in the sense of links in a ‘chain of ongoing-learning’, nor is it a quantitative accumulation of knowledge in the sense of a ‘knowledge-account’. They are considered to be more of a complex overlay of various logical approaches to temporal structures. Educational pathways often encompass detours, interruptions, revisions and repeated processes. This applies to both the required level of qualifications and education that are structured according to the social context (e.g.: institutionalised curricula, changes in the job market, the interconnectedness of institutions, guidelines on further education) as well as to their ‘own’ time structure formed and reformed through experiences and perspectives relating to biographical subjects and social groups. In this way, biographical research allows an elaborated analysis of the dimension of a lifetime of learning which, after all, is central to the principle of lifelong learning. This becomes especially significant in consultation processes during periods of biographical transition.

Contextuality. The second aspect relates to social contextuality or sociability. Biographical learning processes are not to be found ‘in’ the individual as simple cognitive activity of a self-referential brain, instead, they are located in the social world and dependent upon it (see Dewey 1916). The ‘worlds’ (in which learning processes take place as individual and interactive practices) are then not arbitrary learning environ-

ments but complex and inconsistently organised and multi-‘layered’ social contexts of varying levels of relevance: There are concrete situations, life-settings and structured historical-social spaces that are marked by specific power structures and structures of inequality. Learning processes virtually take place ‘between’ subjects and the worlds relevant to them – and these worlds change and are themselves historically variable.

I can only intimate the theoretical background for this conceptualisation. I use a biographical concept that is principally characterised by the theoretical tradition of social constructionism and is rooted in pragmatism, symbolic interactionism and societal phenomenology. It also focuses on the everyday view of the biographical subjects and on their relationship with themselves as well with the rest of the world. Furthermore, analyses of societal power relationships and inequalities are included following on from the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu or Michel Foucault as well as narrative-scientific concepts.

Educational biographies can thus be understood to be a subject-context-relationship and the question is then one of the **concrete ‘How’** of the temporal and meaningful structure of such relationships, or, more precisely, of such ‘configurations’. Particularly the perspective of biographical research that is supposedly ‘only’ directed at the individual opens up a view on the social structure of biographical processes, on the institutional and societal conditions and practices that add to the formation of biographies; that support, inhibit or block off pathways.

Such a concept of biographical theory within the pedagogical-consultative practice challenges us to examine the role of educational institutions as well as connection with other institutions and spheres of life in concrete biographies. It challenges us not only to look at the ‘competencies’ and ‘profiles’ of an individual as suggested by individualised approaches to learning. ‘Biography’, in contrast to these, is an attempt to take into consideration the **interaction between institutional structures and societal conditions** on the one hand; and the course of education shaped by the actions, experiences and interpretations of the biographical subjects on the other.

Reflexivity. A third facet comes into play in a biographical approach to educational processes: iographical reflexivity. In the first instance this refers to learning being understood as a process of ‘making-experiences’ and of the construction of meaning where the subject recursively refers to his or her own experiences and yields new knowledge and adventures. A specific biographical structure of experiences manifests itself through the many processes of learning. This occurs over the life course and in each of the relevant (and potentially changing) everyday contexts. This biographical structure virtually constitutes the individuality of the self. It can be understood to be a temporally layered, individual configuration consisting of social experiences – including, of course, embodied and emotional sentiments.

New experiences and knowledge are continually built into this biographical configuration of meaning – which can also be labelled as temporally layered ‘biographical knowledge’ (Alheit & Hoerning 1989). In this way the biographical sum of knowledge is successively being built and rebuilt. Put metaphorically, **‘life is a building site’** and learning is the constructive process where knowledge and sense are produced from actions and experiences. As to which biographical sense, which configuration of knowledge are produced depends on the ‘material’ and the tools that are available on any given building site. It also depends upon what the given options are for all possible concrete forms of action, whether for first time attempts, for repeated trying, for mistakes, for modifications and new designs, and, finally, through the communicative space for reflecting individually and in groups.

Such a space that offers the means, temporally, to ‘exit’ the process of biographical work to reflect upon it from a certain distance can, for example, be afforded through a situation relating professional training or consultation. It can, however, also be blocked or closed off by such a situation. The latter can occur when learning or consultative situations are set up in such a way that the individual experiences and expectations of the learners are not incorporated productively. These experiences and expectations may even be rejected, aggrieved or annulled through rigid guidelines, pressure to perform or power structures.

The concept of biographical reflexivity, however, also contains a second facet that I label *‘biographicity’* (see Alheit 1995; Alheit & Dausien 2002). This facet alludes to the fact that the ‘inherent logic’ of the already formed biographical sense structures subsequent actions and interpretations of a subject. A biography is formed not only through learning; a biography also impacts reflexively back on the same learning processes. Staying with the metaphor: How and what is actually and concretely constructed on a building site depends primarily upon the experiences, competencies and routines the ‘builders’ bring in from previous building works. That is what contributes to their biographical work. It also depends upon the attitudes to, expectations of and designs on the future with which they approach the task. This complex biographical structure of experiences that is formed in the past and relates to the future ‘arranges’ the actions and learning processes of a subject. It thus restricts, in a ‘self-made’, reflexive way, the scope for action that is possible in principle (see Bröckling 2000).

The limitation is both (and that identifies ‘biographicity’): a narrowing *and* an enablement. Not all conceivable constructions are built. However, there exists the creative potential to newly create a specific, individual construction from the general possibilities, even to the surprise of the producer. The biographical potential creates *‘self-will’* (‘Eigensinn’) that eludes not just pedagogical access but can also only be steered by the subject.

A fundamental difference, however, becomes apparent between a biographical-theoretical concept of learning processes and the idea of ‘self-management’ or of the ‘entrepreneurial self’. This seems to be fully self-explanatory, balances itself, plans and aims to avoid ‘mistakes’, and develops improvements – always with the goal of ‘self-optimisation’ in mind. Biographical learning in contrast is incalculable and surprises itself (see Bröckling 2000).

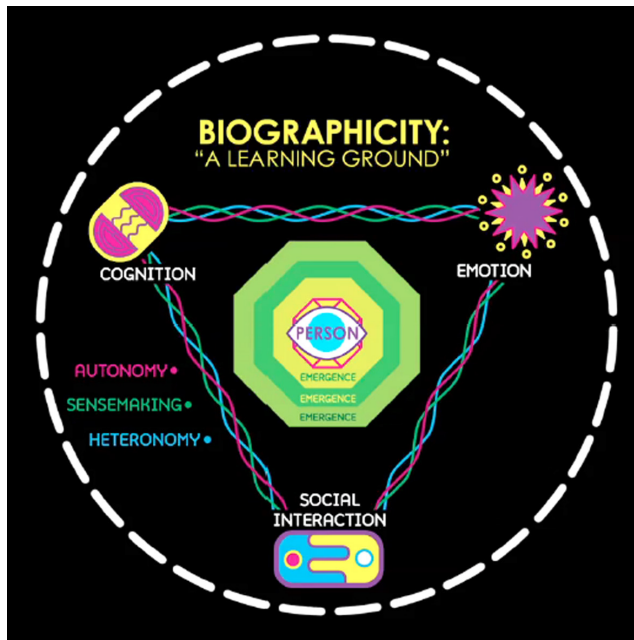
To summarise: A biographically-scientific approach to educational and professional biographies (i.e.: to a theoretically convincing concept of lifelong learning)

- assumes a complex and fundamentally ‘non-linear’ time structure of learning processes;
- it directs the focus not onto the isolated individual, but instead onto the subject-context-relationship that also always enquires about the institutional and societal conditions within which the subjects make their own experiences and
- it expects a wilful reflexivity of the biographical formation of experiences that manifests itself within concrete learning processes (as resistance, but also as creativity and surprise) and that paradoxically removes learning processes from pedagogical analysis and brings it to this strange idea of ‘biographicity’.

The cultural bias of ‘biographicity’

As far as this third point is concerned – that complicated phenomenon that I described as ‘biographicity’ – I have just returned from Washington where I was involved with Karen Nestor’s defence procedure, a PhD student who wrote about this concept in her dissertation. My impression was that she had developed my theoretical idea in a most creative way and, furthermore, had empirically substantiated it (see Nestor 2015). She complemented the original thoughts on concepts from the ‘enactive paradigm’ (e.g. Di Paolo 2005; Stewart 2010) and was plausibly able to link important results stemming from her qualitative data with Axel Honneth’s philosophical ‘**theory of recognition**’ (Honneth 1995). The wonderful picture she created gives an impression of her complex theoretical thinking:

Something else, however, was significant for me: a ‘**productive misunderstanding**’ of my thinking, as it were. Karen Nestor comprehends ‘biographicity’ radically as the ability in principle to reshape one’s life and initiate learning processes – like they say in America: ‘**where the sky’s the limit**’. The possibility that biographically layered experiences can also block and limit new learning processes is not really taken into consideration. Interestingly, she can plausibly evidence her optimism through life and educational experiences of young adults from educationally disadvantaged back-



(taken from Nestor 2015, p. 226)

grounds. Her protagonists also share her conviction that learning keeps *all* pathways open (see Nestor 2015, 168 ff.).

Nonetheless, she has to state empirically that in every one of the successful stories of learning and advancement a dimension exists that guaranteed success: very one of the individuals concerned had the profound **experience of recognition** in their educational history. This may have come from parents, siblings, teachers, supporters and friends or, occasionally, even from the public. And it is exactly this constellation that creates the experiential foundation for a willingness to reflect upon one's own life and to try new things.

It was this difference that made me consider a notion that I would like to discuss: Could it be that we think about biographical learning with an astonishing level of cultural bias? Does the clandestine myth of going '**from dishwasher to millionaire**' reflect the unbroken optimism of American pedagogues; while, mirrored in the ambiguous nature of the concept of biographicity (of 'narrowing *and* enablement'), do we see the scepticism of European intellectuals?

I am in the process of discussing with Zhiwei Chen, a Chinese PhD student, the interesting results arising from the differences in mentalities to education between

Germany and China. In the analysis of his qualitative data (having biographical interviews with German and Chinese students), he was able to identify four **key types** of educational biographies common to both German and Chinese students (Chen 2015). These consisted, as he labelled it, of a *'family type'*, a *'school or institution type'*, a *'social type'* and an *'individualisation type'*. The labels express the scope of sense that was relevant for each of the educational biographies.

He then placed these types from both the German and Chinese sample into a mentality-field that is characterised by two distinctive polarisations: according to the tension between *'modernity'* and *'tradition'* as well as the contrast between *'sociality'* and *'individualisation'*.

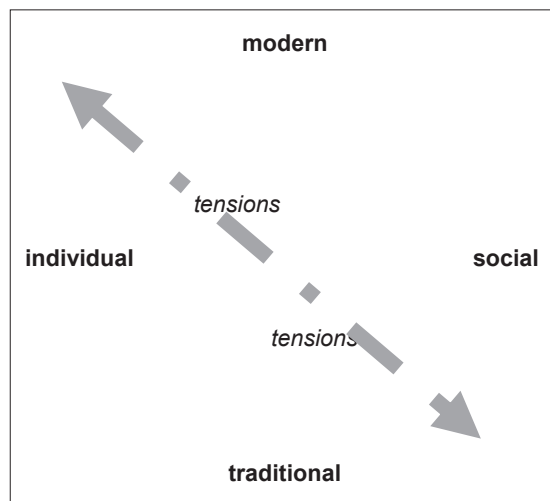


Figure 1. Field of educational mentalities

Resources: Chen Z. (2016), *Comparative Research on the Motivations, Influential Factors, and Current Status of Lifelong Learning in China and Germany*, Dissertation at Georg-August-University of Goettingen, Goettingen, p. 276.

The 'types' discovered in the Chinese field had a strong **'traditional bias'**. Even the 'individualisation type' (IT), which is surely the one most closely aligned with modern pole, still appeared to be very socially orientated. The 'family' (FT), 'social' (ST) and 'school/institution' types (SIT) had a more or less clear orientation towards the traditional pole. This generated a mentality cluster focussed between the social and traditional poles (see Fig. 2).

The German types are orientated in a wholly different manner. Each one appears almost systematically to take up a different position within the field of educational mentalities: the 'family type' (FT) appears to have generally freed itself from traditional restrictions and is drawn to the individualisation pole. The 'school / institution type'

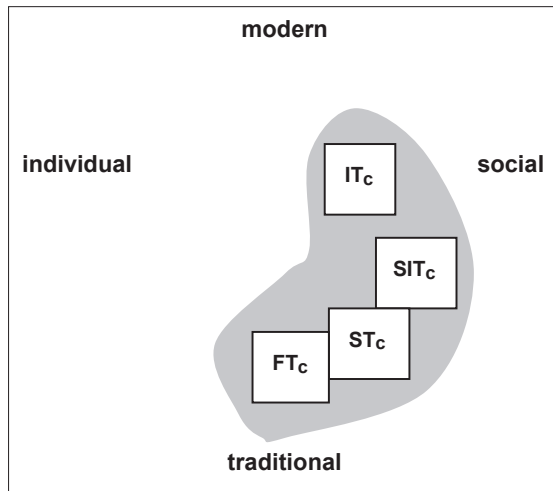


Figure 2. Chinese educational mentality

Resources: Chen Z. (2016), *Comparative Research on the Motivations, Influential Factors, and Current Status of Lifelong Learning in China and Germany*, Dissertation at. Georg-August-University of Goettingen, Goettingen, p. 276.

(SIT) has modernised and must find its place in the upper left quadrant of the field. This is especially the case for the ‘individualisation type’ (IT). In the German sample, only the ‘social type’ (ST) maintains a position relative to the social pole. The mentality cluster, however, has its focal point between the individualisation and the modernity poles – in direct contrast to the Chinese sample:

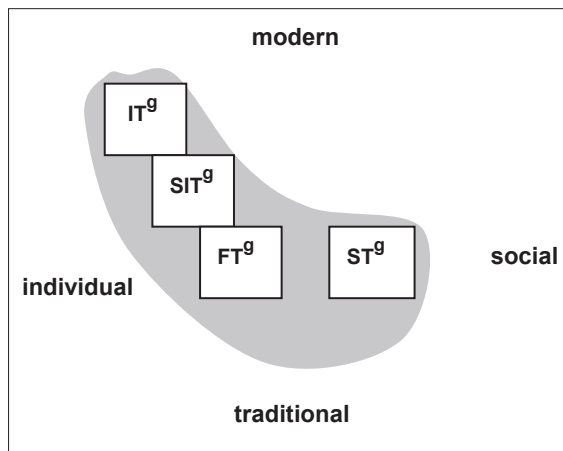


Fig. 3. German educational mentality

Resources: Chen Z. (2016), *Comparative Research on the Motivations, Influential Factors, and Current Status of Lifelong Learning in China and Germany*, Dissertation at. Georg-August-University of Goettingen, Goettingen, p. 276.

I cannot claim that this interim result really surprised me, but I must admit that the fundamental *difference* is astonishment. In contemporary China, can education and lifelong learning in their subject-context-figuration be so far removed from the European constellations?

As I said, it is exactly this that I would like to discuss in the future. And I am reminded of a South-Korean doctoral student of mine, Seong-Hie Park (2000), who had had extraordinary problems to motivate older women to participate in a biographical narrative interview. The presentation of the **personal 'I'** within the religious setting of Confucianism appeared to be an ethical problem. We are learning that the modern 'self' is a western creation and we are unsure if an uncritical application to other cultures is useful or legitimate.

Outlook

What does make sense meanwhile, is to have an intelligent comparison of 'movements' (scientific but also practical) that have the desire to combine the themes of biography and learning. I am thinking of the '**constructionist turn**' within American and European educational research. However, I am also thinking of the quasi-dynamic biographical research undertaken in Brazil where more than 2,000 conferencegoers regularly come together every two years. I am thinking of approaches in South-East Asia, especially about conferences in South-Korea which are now taking place for the fourth time. I have a secret desire to understand the cultural idiosyncrasies of these different 'movements' and to compare them with each other – for the benefit of all. You may have the wish to help me in this quest. I most warmly invite you to join me.

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THE CONCEPT OF "BIOGRAPHICITY" AS BACKGROUND THEORY OF LIFELONG LEARNING?

SUMMARY: The article gives an idea of a new conceptualization of lifelong learning taking into account that learning in the life course is framed by cultural and mentality patterns. The background resource of our learning potential represents both an intimate personal dimension and a vivid social aspect. The concept of 'biographicity' has been created as an expression of this interwovenness. Empirical examples from the US society, from China and Germany show interesting differences of mental framing patterns in lifelong learning processes.

KEYWORDS: Lifelong learning, biographisation, biographicity, temporality, contextuality, reflexivity, cultural bias.

KONCEPCJA „BIOGRAFICZNOŚCI” JAKO TEORETYCZNE TŁO DLA OPISU I ROZUMIENIA PROCESU CAŁOŻYCIOWEGO UCZENIA SIĘ?

STRESZCZENIE: W niniejszym artykule autor stara się pokazać nowe ujęcie idei uczenia się przez całe życie. W swoim opisie tej kwestii bierze on pod uwagę to, że nasze ścieżki edukacyjne są kształtowane przez kulturę i mentalność w niej zakotwiczoną. W tym sensie potencjał naszego uczenia się jest wypadkową zarówno indywidualnych, jak i społecznych aspektów życia, a koncepcja biograficzności – do której odwołują się andragodzy – stanowi odzwierciedlenie tego mechanizmu. Przywołane w tekście empiryczne przykłady uczenia się w takich społeczeństwach jak społeczeństwo Stanów Zjednoczonych, Chin, Niemiec świadczą, zdaniem autora, o interesujących wzorach różnic w procesie całościowego uczenia się ukształtowanych mentalnie i kulturowo.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: uczenie się przez całe życie, biografizacja, biograficzność, tymczasowość, kontekstowość, refleksyjność, podstawy kulturowe.