

Alicja Jurgiel-Aleksander\*  
Jolanta Dyrda\*\*

## EXPLANATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL SUCCESSES AND FAILURES IN THE BIOGRAPHIES AS A REASON TO UNDERSTAND LEARNING MEANINGS. CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ANALYSES

The main aim of this text is the attempt to demonstrate what kind of learning meanings are created when adults justify their life successes and failures. The question of what success means has inspired the individual narration about life experiences of the 40 plus generation. In Poland this age group is perceived as the stabilization generation because of the fact that people at this age did not have to experience any war, the communist oppression or a martial law. They were educated before the times of the political transformation in Poland in 1989 and their adulthood occurred after the economic changes. As a result, the narrations' analyses led to identifying the concepts of learning. They are: learning as the process of economic independence pursuit (1), learning as creating job opportunities (2), learning as the result of assessment of one's own competence by others (3). During the conversation (while being interviewed) it turned out that the language of narration was economic regardless of whether they were talking about their vocational or personal lives. The analyses that followed should be treated as qualitative case studies only.

### Some reflections referring to methodology of this project<sup>1</sup>

The starting point of our research is created by analyzing the contemporary culture in which learning is not only an activity of common people but it also defines our human being in the social world, as well as our subjectivity<sup>2</sup>. This simple approach has methodological consequences because it describes the human condition through the prism of knowledge creation process. It means that our knowledge is the result of the

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\* **Alicja Jurgiel-Aleksander**, Associate Professor – University of Gdańsk, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Education; e-mail: pedamj@univ.gda.pl.

\*\* **Jolanta Dyrda**, PhD – Academic Teacher, Ateneum – University in Gdańsk; e-mail: j.dyrda@ateneum.edu.pl.

<sup>1</sup> This is only a part of the project analysing the language of lifelong learning In biographies of people aged 40 plus.

<sup>2</sup> R. Usher, I. Bryant, R. Johnston, *Adult education and the postmodern challenge. Learning beyond limits*, London–New York 1997.

negotiation between individuals and the world in which people exist. This knowledge has the text form because of the fact that people use a language together with its cultural and social codes. What is more, they not only use the language instrumentally but also present the reality with meanings in special individual ways. For a researcher this attitude is a challenge also in the technical sense of this word. Firstly, a researcher has to reconstruct what authors of biographies say and secondly has to find the meaning scheme and rationality behind their explanations<sup>3</sup>.

In this project the reconstruction of learning categories description hails from their life experience recorded in their biographies. Practically it means that the question about their successes and failures is the instrument to narrate their own stories. The outcome of the analyses is unveiling the issues on the basis of which we can problematize learning. This takes place when the contexts are revealed. In technical terms this procedure includes the following steps:

- a) voice recordings and transcripts of the biography interview inspired by the question: what do success and failure mean in your life?; why do you treat *it* as a failure or success?; what is their learning potential? Complementary questions like: what does it mean or why do you think so? are a natural progression of this procedure,
- b) highlighting the topics in the transcription and condensing the interview text into semantic areas,
- c) distinguishing the contexts in semantic areas,
- d) comparing the contexts in one biography (within one text),
- e) comparing the contexts between biographies,
- f) searching for issues and for a pattern of rationality.

As researchers, we are aware that a biography study in social sciences is treated in a variety of ways. Despite the traditional model devised by Florian Znaniecki, contemporary research is practised in different ways<sup>4</sup>. In the Polish adult education area the analyses aimed at educational paths of individuals dominate<sup>5</sup> over the studies where the tensions are usually presented<sup>6</sup>.

As it was stated above, in the following project we treat the text which is constructed culturally and socially. Even if we consider ourselves to be uniquely thinking indi-

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<sup>3</sup> J. Bruner, *Życie jako narracja*, „Kwartalnik Pedagogiczny” 1990, no 4. See also: A. Bron, Ch. Lonnhenden, *Opowieść o przebiegu życia jako klucz do uczenia się*, „Dyskursy Młodych Andragogów” 2009, no. 10.

<sup>4</sup> A. Giza, *Biografia jako fakt empiryczny i jako kategoria teoretyczna*, [in:] *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, (eds.) J. Włodarek, M. Ziółkowski, Warszawa–Poznań 1990. Also: M. Malewski, *Od nauczania do uczenia się. O paradygmatycznej zmianie w andragogice*, Wrocław 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See: E. Dubas, W. Świtalski (eds.), *Uczyć się z biografii innych*, Łódź 2011.

<sup>6</sup> B. Merill, *Gender, klasa społeczna, biografia: teoria, badania, praktyka*, „Terazniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja” 2011, no. 2(52). A. Jurgiel, *Walka o zmianę statusu a (nie)moc kształcenia w świetle analizy doświadczeń edukacyjnych kobiet*, „Rocznik Andragogiczny” 2011.

viduals, our understanding is still culturally and socially bound. Therefore analyzing the utterances' contexts we can identify the mechanism of their origination. In that sense justifications of subjects dominate over the facts in a biography. Ambiguity and tensions within the meanings we play with in the reality are more important than obvious meanings.

The results below show analyses of three biographies:

- Christopher, 45 ex-communist village inhabitant, married, works in a bank. His career there started after his A-levels, and he is doing his Master's degree in several months,
- Anna, 46, lives in the suburbs of a big city, married with son, 6. After her A-levels she worked for several years and then she started her own retail company which gives employment to some people. She graduated from part time studies at the age of 40.
- Violet, 44, single, lives between two cities in Poland and abroad living out of a suitcase. In Poland she owns a bed and breakfast and abroad she is engaged in the disabled children care.

It appeared that that the language they use to describe their life experiences is the language of the economy. However, in every case the emphasis is placed on different aspects. In the first biography the stress is on financial independence as an aim in every activity, in the second it is creating the new vacancies, in the third it is the assessment of competence as regards their market value.

### **Case study 1. Learning as a process of economic independence pursuit (Christopher: "I had my plans and wanted to be independent very badly")**

In Christopher's biography the main purpose of his activity is the financial independence and this is a motivation that drives him. The work and all efforts constitute the value in his life and the education is the instrument allowing him to reach the goal. He says:

*I have always known that I have to be financially independent and it was the most important thing for me. After I passed my A-levels I managed to get the job as a cashier. At the same time I learnt at a vocational school of economics. It was the time when small banks started to operate and that is how I got the job. What was important was that I knew how to ask questions and I could solve my own problems. People say that I'm well-behaved and this is what matters. I was landed a job and I decided to go to university. I was apprehensive as I never had a talent for learning. I have ambitions but I know that I have some learning gaps. It was enough for me to learn with friends.*

The factor which created the needs was the picture of the environment he was born into. That is why he knew that everything depended on him and he had to be self-sufficient. The following utterance shows it:

*When I reflect on myself, I see that I have aged and matured – it is also my success, because it means that I did not wait for anyone to help me or to notice that I came from a poor village and that I needed help. I started as a peasant, I come from an ex-communist village and I still live here, because it is comfortable for me. All the people who wanted to work in the town also woke up and stopped waiting for help.*

The difficult economic situation of the early 1990s also had its advantages. New jobs surfaced, new prospects of employment in the areas that had only just appeared. Christopher:

*If I hadn't been ambitious, I would be unemployed now and like many of my friends I would be poor now and I would still complain. My parents weren't very well-off, which was for the better for me as I had to get a grip. I only wish I had tried harder. Now I would be working at a higher position which is unfortunately unenviable for me any more. Now the younger generation is in demand. I think that I have been successful in my career anyway and I have never had to struggle like others in my area.*

To pursuit to be financially independent shaped a new attitude, namely the ability to take advantage of practical situations like: low costs of rent, absence of children and lower costs of living in the country, thus saving more money to pay tuition fees. Education like all the factors mentioned above is the instrument of acquiring better position financially and socially as well:

*I got married right after my A- levels. We wanted to be together so we moved in with my mum. I took out a mortgage and I bought a cheap flat in the country. We don't tend to overspend. My wife is studying now, it is easier because we don't have children. I advised her to study in the same area like me. That saves us books and exam training. I will graduate from my master's degree soon while she is starting the same way. We believe that in this way we will have a better life and a better financial future.*

## **Case study 2. Learning as creating new job opportunities (Anna: "You are learning even if you serving sandwiches...")**

Unlike a previous case study, this one treats financial independence as a result of undertaken activities and not as an aim in its own right. In this biography a job is treated as a life success and an opportunity to learn. In that case being self-employed and not being a so-called *mercenary* (working under someone) is a way of heritage and habitus. In her opinion, the world is divided into two groups: the self-employed and the employees. The attitude to work defines the attitude to the social world. Anna says:

*I have never thought that I could ever work for somebody but me. Just like my parents who couldn't imagine that they could work at a state company. They also started their professional lives from small service firms in communist times, and I started my private activity from market service. We still compete despite the fact they are pensioners, but they are still working in their minds.*

*Since the day I became a mother, I have not been able to spend such a long time at work as before. At work we deliver products to shops. I have to care about my clients because we apply for contracts. What is more, the drivers who are working for me are still complaining. Of course they want to earn money and have bigger salaries, but I have to make money to pay taxes, insurances and other expenses. It means that I worry about these matters but they don't.*

Entrepreneurial attitude, creating a workplace and being dutiful all have a powerful impact on educating and upbringing of her own children. As a result, what springs is independence and self-sufficiency. Anna says:

*I couldn't live with my mum or my parents-in-law or with my grandmother like my friends. It would be crazy! I have always felt like an adult person and I teach it to my children because financial independence provides freedom. The parents who only give without demanding do not end up well. Only efforts are rewarded. My mum also helped us but in moderation. To me having a job is a success even if you study later in life. It is because the money is important for being independent. You are learning even if you serving sandwiches... actually even more than during your studies.*

### **Case study 3. Learning as the result of assessment of one's own competence by others (Violet: "Somebody has to buy your abilities")**

According to the next person, one's abilities are important for achieving a life success. Qualifications, as well as informal knowledge and skills, are the key to a better life and welfare. The basics are your competences and their value for the free market. Violet confirms these words:

*When I passed my A-levels I thought it was the beginning of my career. It was naïve of me. I decided to study biology but I did not have any financial support from my parents and I had to give up my studies. I found a badly-paid job. Then I was given a leaflet about a job in Germany. I went there to work as a cleaner and I learnt German. I worked for a few years and then returned home. I bought a small new house, redecorated it and I rent out the rooms until this day. But it was not enough for me and I decided to return to Germany and I started to work as a carer of disabled children. It is a tough job and not much in demand. I liked it though. I could work there on end if it hadn't been for physical exhaustion. That is why I now travel back and forth.*

From this perspective higher education is not an addition. On the contrary, along with what you can do, it determines your status on the free market and the kind of job. It results in a social status and financial independence. Violet says:

*When I look back on my past, I think I would not have given up my biology studies. I have started my studies many times, but I just don't feel it. I'm aware that I could find a better job in Germany if I had better qualifications. A lack of them is my failure. I observed that well educated people are sometimes unemployed too. But they find it easier to look for a job. A good job with a high salary guarantees a success in life, you can do different things providing that people will buy your abilities. It has always been like this and a diploma can help you and illustrates your efforts.*

The relations between a client and a service define Violet's world's understanding and describe her position there. Her status is shown as a sum of her qualifications and the quality of services in demand. In short, her value in the social world depends on the tangible skills:

*Life is not easy like years ago in the sense that if you once got a job, you had it for life. Times have changed. My parents worked in the same place all their professional life and they can't believe it that I am constantly rushing somewhere, I can't stand still. I'm an adult person and I fight for my position on the market like millions of others. I started an aged care course, I'm sure that I will find a job near Berlin easily. People are always needed in this kind of job there.*

### **From an individual learning experience to the description of a social world in the language of economy**

The aforementioned fragments of quotations allow to refer to the matter of the world understanding in which they exist. It is interesting that what determined the narration was a question about the success and failure in their lives, regardless of their biographies and experiences. They not only use a language of economy when they describe the economic struggle, finding jobs, creating financial independence, but also when they are talking about bringing their children up, looking for the right place in their lives and a return to their own childhood.

The meaning of learning understood as being a self-made person, creating an internal motivation important for themselves and the world around them in their biographies is shown as a matter of competition, influences and a strong power of individuals. In the first case the social value of a subject is when one is not a burden for the society as he or she is able to provide for themselves. In the second, the meaning of a person is shown through the prism of the ability to create new job opportunities. The third case demonstrates competencies indispensable for the job market and at the same time for the society.

All these examples account for a life career as solely a product of individual efforts, activities, trials, without referring to abstract social goals. The authors of the three utterances seem to say that the shape of the social life depends on individual attempts and rational choices. They learnt the rules based on the economic utility as socially significant. They create mechanisms which allow them to adapt to the world as it is. They do not undermine its quality, they simply identify their own needs with the needs of the society. The idea of a social subject has different dimensions – in the private life (I want more), in the professional life (I must sell well), in the parental life (every effort must be awarded) and in the educational life (your diploma illustrates your efforts). The common platform of these three cases is emphasizing the importance of internal

motivation as a driving force but it does not mean that they are self-centered. The methodology applied here does not account for such a label. Our intention is only to identify a different kind of language the subjects use to describe learning in the context of power of the life success and failure.

It is beyond doubt that the quality of the language in this project results from the fact that the subjects had been educated in the communist times and their adult life is part of the free market times. What is more, they not only adapted to the new economic order but also have come to terms with the new reality, which is now their own. This is not the only explanation of the attitudes they have adopted. Some theorists allow for an understanding of this phenomenon in a more sophisticated manner. What does it mean then?

Joanna Rutkowiak<sup>7</sup> claims that the free market narration in education has been produced by the global economy mechanisms, does not have solely a local (Polish) dimension. That is why one might think that we should accept the new order and internalize it. According to this author, education is a matter of responsibility, ethical decision and social engagement. The other Polish scholar, Zbigniew Kwieciński<sup>8</sup>, demonstrates that the economic narration as domineering in learning is the effect of a lack of interest in the civic duties and democratic issues. In that sense, we as citizens have accepted the process of educational system commercialization, which has now become a market issue in the public eye. In a nutshell, the process of learning and education should be treated as not only as an instrument of free market adaptation but first and foremost as a tool of a changing world.

Gert Biesta<sup>9</sup> suggests that the instrumental language of economy in the field of education results in the lack of sensitivity in social life. We still think about facilities, measurement, effects of learning and have ceased to consider education as a public good.

It is clear that we cannot renew the meaning of learning using the old ways of justification, referring to the ideas of civil education, democracy, civic society. Some radical researchers<sup>10</sup> say that nowadays the consumer has replaced the citizen and the latter doesn't want to look for one's empowerment. What is more, yielding to the pressure of a new economic order is the new form of oppression. Therefore, a contemporary language in andragogy based on building juxtapositions like the ones below: individual

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<sup>7</sup> J. Rutkowiak, *Uczenie się w warunkach kultury neoliberalnej: kontekstowanie jako wyzwanie dla teorii kształcenia*, [in:] *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji*, (eds.) J. Rutkowiak, E. Potulicka, Kraków 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Kwieciński, *Między patosem a dekadencją. Studia i szkice socjopedagogiczne*, Wrocław 2007.

<sup>9</sup> G. Biesta, *Good education in an age of measurement. Ethics, politics, democracy*, Boulder-London 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ch. Hughes, M. Tight, *The myth of the learning society*, [in:] *Inside the learning society*, (ed.) S. Ranson, London-New York 1998; S.D. Brookfield, *The power of critical theory for adult learning and teaching*, New York 2005.

learning (based on the freedom of choice) vs social learning (based on compulsion and duties<sup>11</sup>), private learning (directed towards one's own aims) vs community learning (aimed at social purposes<sup>12</sup>), economic learning (aimed at benefits) vs social learning (defined by social sensitivity<sup>13</sup>) – is not enough to understand learning practices in the cases described above. The description of learning experiences in this project may be an example of adopting an economic rationality in the social world. Their world is homogenous; one where they attempt to become self-sufficient adults, work, create new job positions, and where the value of their education is measured by the demand for the competences they possessed.

This project has shown that the question of the meaning of the public matters is still valid and the learning experience is a part of it. In the Polish context we have reached the place where the social meaning of learning does not only involve cooperating, communicating, ability to solve conflicts, representational democracy but also the acknowledgment of the public sphere as created by individuals. The beginning of the 1990s saw the reclaiming of the private sphere once neglected in the communist times, the presence of which is so significant nowadays due to its sensitivity building function.

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<sup>11</sup> E. Kurantowicz, A. Nizińska, *Trajektorie uczenia się w instytucjach kształcenia ustawicznego*, Wrocław 2012.

<sup>12</sup> E. Kurantowicz, *O uczących się społecznościach*, Wrocław 2007.

<sup>13</sup> A. Jurgiel, *Nauczyciele dorosłych w społeczeństwie obywatelskim*, Gdańsk 2007.