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## THE TRANSITIONAL POTENTIAL OF 'BIOGRAPHICITY'

**ABSTRACT:** 'Biographicity' is a concept that has been discussed in international adult education for more than 30 years. It has stimulated research concepts and has become a metaphor for the resilience potential of biographical learning processes in modernised modern societies. A basic theoretical foundation has so far been lacking. This article attempts to provide such a foundation. It first introduces the quite sophisticated conception of 'biography' and emphasises the dialectical tension between structure and emergence (1), then turns to the challenge of describing 'the social' from the perspective of the acting subject – the 'biographicity of the social', as it were (2), and ends with a reflection on biographical learning (3) that overcomes its own limits ('transitional learning').

**KEYWORDS:** biography, biographicity, structure, emergence, un-lived life, transitional learning.

### The inner dialectic of the construct 'biography'

What we usually understand by 'life' is undoubtedly not the simple sequence of events in our biography, but a largely predetermined social orientation structure that must be meaningfully processed and adapted by the individual. This includes aspects of temporalisation and chronologisation: biographies run in different phases, and these phases essentially follow the chronological age. They establish a kind of orientation pattern that can be described as a 'normal biography'. We usually speak of *life course*.

This observation does not mean that all people actually live such standard biographies. On the contrary, there are good reasons to assume that characteristic deviations can be observed for certain social groups and that even the standards themselves shift due to social change (Hagestad 1990). However, the orientation function of the *normal life course* remains decisive (see Kohli 1985; Fischer & Kohli 1987). Even with the experience of drastic variation and de-standardisation, we have an idea of how our lives should work. We are dependent on a sequence grid with which we have to synchronise our actual life more or less successfully.

However, such important biographical normality schemes are unable to anticipate all the options that appear in a specific biography. There remains an abundance of alternative courses of action that we as individuals have to decide for ourselves: Is a professional career the central perspective of our lives or do we set other priorities? Do we prefer a patriarchal-hierarchical or a partnership-based family model? Should we

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burden future life planning with house construction or do we prefer to keep free from financial commitments? Do we join a political party, or do we prefer the private sphere? Do we insist on returning to work or do we focus our energy on family and children?

Biographies therefore contain both: 'structure' and 'emergence', predetermined patterns and individual, spontaneous design elements. Already on the level of concrete action and not retrospectively through theoretical reconstruction, the two essential problem aspects of every scientific interpretation of the social world are integrated here: the subject and the object perspective<sup>1</sup>. This undoubtedly has a crucial theoretical significance for the concept of biography. And it seems sensible to describe this special 'performance' in more detail. It is precisely the subject's ever-new efforts, which are necessary in order to develop an individual biography, that seem to be dependent on hidden structures.

Individuals have concrete experiences, which in turn enable them to do and act sensibly. But what does 'having experience' mean? Obviously, this is by no means a matter of course. We don't have every conceivable experience; and the experiences we have are 'our own experiences'. This means that our concrete biography limits the actually accumulated experience knowledge spatially and temporally – *spatially* because the social space in which we have experience is essentially determined (Bourdieu 1978), *temporally* because biographies are finite and set to a specific period in historical time.

The fact that we have our own experiences also has a deeper meaning. "Experience means that you now know it better than before" (Fischer & Kohli 1987, p. 32) But this can be done in two different ways: either we find our previous biographical knowledge confirmed by experiences that we have, because we easily manage to integrate the biographically new into existing orientation patterns. This is where our implicit knowledge is consolidated. We know it 'better' than before (see Alheit & Hoerning 1989). Or the new experience cannot be seamlessly integrated into the existing experience resources. So, we are forced to revise our biographical knowledge. This process also means that we know 'better' afterwards<sup>2</sup>.

Two aspects are theoretically interesting: We always make our experiences on the foil of existing knowledge structures. There is no 'experience in itself'. Our gain of experience is, as Schütz and Luckmann say, 'biographically articulated' (1979, pp. 85ff). On

<sup>1</sup> Of course, this 'basic dialectic' only represents part of the dynamic that unfolds in the social phenomenon of biography. The objective structure foils are more diverse than the term 'object perspective' suggests. They relate to genetic-structural conditions within the subject as well as to social patterns that structure biographical processes. The emergences are not just spontaneous and accidental activities of the individuals. They are also involved in action and development contexts.

<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the revision never affects the entire building of biographical knowledge. The so-called 'basic elements' of knowledge or 'habitual knowledge' are more or less fixed components (Schütz & Luckmann 1979, pp. 178ff). Even forms of knowledge with a high degree of 'familiarity' cannot simply be erased (see Schütz & Luckmann 1979).

the other hand, the structure of our biographical knowledge remains dependent on the contemporary perspective. The emergence of current experience may revise existing structures. 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 therefore 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 make biographical past appear in a new light and keep biographical future open.

Another term stands for the relative openness of the biographical future, which initially also seems to affect only the emergence dimension of the biographical: the concept of *action* – as an activity with a subjective meaning and intentionality. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that even such actions are not free of ambiguity. A certain action, for which we choose and provide a specific subjective sense, may prove *post festum* to be an action that we had not really intended. The situation and the consequences of the action could not have been foreseen. The result of the action contradicts our expectations. Others have assumed a completely different meaning to our actions than we have. This means that in each concrete action there is 'more', as it were, than an actor could intentionally connect with it. Every action potentially has an excess of meaning. The subjective intention associated with it *in actu* is only one of the various possibilities of meaning (see Fischer & Kohli 1987, p. 37).

A conceivable explanation of this peculiarity of subjectively intended action is the assumption of a structure operating behind the concrete case. We are by no means continually required to have intentional actions with far-reaching biographical consequences. Over longer periods of our lives other decision-makers – intra-family opponents, for example, or institutional protagonists – determine the next steps of our biography. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that the crucial points where we actively influence our biographical future also have to do with a 'logic' that refers to the structural conditions beyond the specific action. Using the example of biographical 'trajectories' or 'changing processes' that Fritz Schütze has identified empirically and which can dominate biographies over longer phases (see Schütze 1981; 1984). With the construct of the 'most probable path', Martin Kohli (1981) sets out a more undramatic variant of Schütze's considerations, but also points to a structure 'behind' the everyday actors<sup>3</sup>.

Using the example of biographical action, we also observe that ambiguity of biography between emergence and structure. On the one hand, biographies can be interpreted

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<sup>3</sup> We can compare those structures with a kind of 'grammar of biographical action' (Alheit 2019, pp. 120ff). The individual action can certainly move away from it. 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 standardising practices and representations' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 77) also seems to vary this idea.

as sequential orders of socially prescribed ‘patterns’ that cannot be changed arbitrarily. Here is the structural aspect of the biographic. The plausible construct of an ‘institutionalisation’ that took place in the process of modernity (Kohli 1985; 1986) probably still has to be specified in view of current erosion phenomena. The elaboration of biographical structures with a smaller reach, as is especially the case for Schütze’s *process structures of the life course* (Schütze 1981), certainly remains a sensible desideratum. On the other hand, biographies cannot be grasped if the emergence dimension is ignored: the self-willed, obstinate, wayward dimension within the biographical process<sup>4</sup>.

However, this double perspective cannot be imagined as a harmonious interaction of two levels: emergence and structure dimensions, subject and object perspective, do not ‘fit’ directly to one another. There is a dialectical tension between them that makes subjectivity possible in the first place. Biographical action is based on socially prescribed process patterns, it is dependent on them and cannot escape their constraints, but it does not work out in their comprehension. It not only reproduces certain social structural conditions on an individual level, ‘but always has the character of an open design’ (Kohli 1985, p. 21). Experiences and patterns of action that are acquired in the course of a biography do not simply build 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. Not only the theoretical achievement of sociology or education (as in the case of different identity or socialisation concepts), but the lived experience of the biographical itself creates a productive tension between the subject and object perspective, of biography and sociality, that are so important for pedagogical questions.

### **On the ‘biographicity of the social’**

Against the background of what has been said so far, it seems sensible to consistently perceive sociality from a biographical perspective – not to deny the ‘objective’ character of external influences, but to understand the semantics with which ‘psychic systems’ cultivate social coding (see Nassehi & Weber 1990; Schimank 1988). Regardless of whether we are women or men, transsexuals or lesbians, workers or professors, old or young, we have an idiosyncratic attitude to our life: namely the amazing and usually counterfactual disposition, that we are actors in our biography and can always establish a certain continuity of our ‘self’ (see Alheit 1993, pp. 390ff). The classic identity

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<sup>4</sup> See also the excellent analyses by Christine Delory-Momberger in her fundamental study *Histoire de vie et recherche biographique en éducation* (2005) and its deepening in more recent articles (2014, 2016). The particular quality of this work for the present article lies in its complementary reference to the francophone theory tradition, particularly to the work of Paul Ricœur.

concepts refer to this basic disposition, although they have no real empirical basis for this: 'You are not a "somebody" once and for all, but you present yourself as someone who has "developed" or "changed"' (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995, p. 51).

This contradiction of a generalisable sense of identity with the fact of continuously forced changes can only be conceptually 'cured' by the fact that the external influences are obviously never perceived *as such*, but always as aspects of layered experiences. It is important whether I am a woman or a man (Dausien 1996). Certainly my 'biographical habitus' (Herzberg 2004; detailed Alheit 2019, pp. 124ff) is shaped by the fact that I grew up in a certain social milieu (Bourdieu 1987). There is no question that my parents' forced migration leaves irreversible traces in my life (Apitzsch 1990). The time that characterises me in decisive biographical phases also accompanies my life (classic: Mannheim 1964): I remain a '68er', even if I have distanced myself from the ideas of that time. I am a member of the 'war generation', even if my grandchildren see me as a well-off grandmother. The traces of the 'objective' conditions that shaped me are by no means erased. But the 'logic' through which they work is still in need of explanation.

It seems plausible that this 'basic disposition' is actually not an intentional scheme of action, not a conscious and wanted biographical plan, but a kind of hidden 'sense' behind the alternating process structures of our life (see Schütze 1981; 1984) – the undoubtedly virulent, but strategically not available intuition that – despite all contradictions – it is *my life* (see Bude 1984, pp. 7ff).

How does such an intuition come about and what 'logic' is behind it? Apparently, the non-intentional is more decisive than what is actively wanted. This basic feeling does not guarantee the success or failure of the plans we have, but rather a sort of 'background knowledge' that also captures the threatening impression of a loss of consistency and coherence in our experience. It is about the phenomenon of the connectivity of biographical problems to already accumulated experiences. Such experiences are obviously more orderly than we usually assume. They no longer have the character of randomly layered experiences that we encountered in the course of our biography, but of a concrete 'gestalt' ('figure') (Rosenthal 1995). We can describe it as a kind of 'inner construction' (Alheit et al. 1992; Dausien 1996), as a 'process script' of our concrete life (Fischer-Rosenthal 1995) – a generative structure especially of our biography that is by no means strategically but intuitively available.

This 'gestalt' is by no means to be imagined as a prison, not as a hermetically closed system. Rather, it embodies the implied processing structure of an outwardly open self-referentiality, which perceives external influences with its own 'logic' that weighs, ignores or takes over impulses from outside and changes itself in this process. The constructivist thought is useful here, that this process must be viewed in the strict sense as a communication of internal states. At the same time, it seems plausible to

interpret these 'states' to a large extent as *coded external conditions*, as a chain of processed external social impulses, the unique sequence of which determines the "intake" of each new impulse (Alheit 1997). However, this 'inner world of the outer world' is not just a spontaneous construction that our brain generates in response to new external 'perturbations' (Maturana & Varela 1987) in order to maintain its continuity and consistency. It has to be understood as a *construction in time*, as a biographical temporalisation of social structures. We can view it as a kind of 'experience code', as an 'individual grammar' (Alheit 2019), whose performance level remains connectable to collective interaction modes.

Biographical constructions are therefore not self-contained entities. Their character is 'transitory' per se. Metaphorically speaking, their contours appear soft and flexible. Nevertheless, in biographical crises, we notice that there are certain limits for us. We know situations in which the connection of new experiences fails. We can no longer classify a requirement that is placed on us or a behaviour that we are unexpectedly confronted with. It irritates us. We lack the tools to deal with it. We feel overwhelmed. We – as everyday language says – 'get in over our heads'. We do not want to get rid of the feeling that we live 'against our time'. We fail in our social rise because we lack the cultural resources to fill the new position in social space (Alheit 1996). Or we simply feel that the conditions under which we have to live our lives leave us no room for manoeuvre. Perhaps we also have the opposite feeling: that completely new 'worlds' have opened up for us, that we have had a qualitatively new experience that will change our future lives. All of this indicates that there is a 'logic' behind everyday experiences that affects our very personal lives. Biographical 'bridge constructions' are created between the 'outside world' and the 'inside world'.

These constructions undoubtedly go beyond what we can tell about our lives. First of all, they are hidden references to the structural conditions that are imposed on us. Bourdieu takes this fact into account with the concept of '*habitus*'. And anyone who knows his unmasking analysis, particularly of the life practices that the social habitus of the (French) petty bourgeoisie produces (Bourdieu 1978, p. 169ff), becomes shocked about the 'power' of the structural framework.

Biographical constructions have yet another aspect: in the course of our lives, we create 'more' sense in relation to ourselves and our social framework than we 'overlook from the perspective of our biographical self-thematisation' (Bude 1985, p. 85). We have a biographical *a tergo* knowledge, as it were, which in principle enables us to fill and exploit the social space in which we operate. None of us has all possible options. But with limited potential for change, we have more opportunities than we will ever realise. To take up a stimulating metaphor from neurobiology: 'we can start again and again' (Roth 1987, p. 281). Life stories have a potential that we can legitimately call

'biographicity' (Alheit 1990; Dausien 1996; Alheit & Dausien 2000): the fundamental ability to use impulses from the outside in a wilful way for self-development, i.e. in a pedagogically expanded sense to learn.

Biographical constructions convey sociality to us in a form that is available to the individual; they prove the 'biographicity of the social' (Alheit & Dausien 2000; Alheit 2019). This means that we can only 'have' the social in a self-referential way - by referring to ourselves and our life story (Schimank 1988). This insight into radical constructivism remains an intellectual provocation of considerable theoretical scope. Of course, it also means that this self-reflexivity must be 'porous' to the outside world. Its processing practice 'understands' - to a certain extent *en passant* - the 'code' of social perturbations. Its own generative principle, a 'social grammar', as it were, is the result of a chain of previous interactions. That is why modern biographies are not hermetically closed systems. They remain dependent on the social context (Alheit 1995).

### **Biographicity as a resource of 'transitional learning'**

The tension between structure and emergence, between 'social outside' and 'biographical inside' has another effect: It creates a dimension of experience of the '*not yet realised*'. The unorthodox inventor of 'biographical medicine', Viktor von Weizsäcker, speaks in his *Pathosophy* (1956) of the 'unlived life'. The intuitive knowledge of it is part of our practical consciousness (Giddens 1984). It is reflexively not easily accessible, yet it is an extremely exceptional resource for learning and identity formation processes in two ways:

- Our prescriptive knowledge of the unconstructed or not yet realised life constructions that accompany us keeps the reflexively available self-reference open in principle and creates the prerequisite for us to be able to take a different position on ourselves without losing that hidden 'sense' or 'logic' behind our very personal life. The process structures of our life course and their emergent dynamics suggest an extension or restriction of biographical autonomy of action. Their conscious 'ratification', however, lies with *us* as protagonists of our biography. *We* have the opportunity to recognise the excess of meaning in our life experience and to use it for a conscious change in our self and world reference.
- Biographical background knowledge is at the same time an emergent potential for changing *structures*. The modification of individual self and world references - be it in the limited context of specific life constructions or in the context of participation in social movements - harbours opportunities to transform the institutional framework of social existence. To a large extent, 'structures' are the background certainties that function unquestioningly, to which social individuals intuitively

relate when they act biographically. As soon as such prescripts – or even parts of them become conscious and available, ‘structures’ change. Unlived life has indeed social explosive power.

- The dynamics of this ‘double educational resource’ awaken associations with that enlightening option of classic psychoanalysis, ‘*Where it was, I should become*’. On closer inspection, however, it appears to be clear that it is not only about the sovereign, ‘I-strong’ handling of an otherwise unchangeable basic dynamic, rather about the transition to a new quality of self and world reference – a process that neither leaves the learning subject nor the surrounding structural context unchanged. This type of identity formation describes a ‘transitional educational process’ (Alheit 1993; Alheit & Dausien 2000; 2002).

The systematic quality of such transitions can be demonstrated by confronting the architecture of conventional educational processes. From the point of view of biographical research, these are designed in such a way that new information is ‘subsumed under a stable context’ (Kokemohr 1989, p. 340). Learning serves to expand and thus to stabilise this established framework.

*Transitional educational processes* interpret new information in a different way. They do not relate them to *existing* structural contexts, but already understand them as elements of new contextual conditions (see also Kokemohr 1989, pp. 340ff; Marotzki 1991, pp. 171ff). This gives the processed ‘new knowledge’ a different quality. It is not only built into the existing architecture of biographically accumulated knowledge. It changes this knowledge building. Transitional educational processes are to a certain extent *abductive*. They realise what is described in early American pragmatism, especially by Charles Sanders Peirce, as the ability to network something that ‘we could never have previously dreamed of bringing together’ (Peirce [1903] 1991, p. 181).

This ability does not only require concrete social actors, but also the certainty that one’s own biographical activity finds a social resonance (Rosa 2016). Knowledge as biographical knowledge can only be transitory if its intention to change structures is perceived and recognised by others (see Honneth 1992). Only if specific people relate to their living environment in such a way that their self-reflective activities have a formative effect on social contexts, is that modern key qualification *biographicity* touched, whose meaning has been implicitly focused by the previous considerations (see also Alheit 2003; 2008; 2019). Biographicity means that we can continually reinterpret our life in the contexts in which we (must) spend it, and that we experience these contexts as ‘formable’ and ‘shapeable’. It is important to decipher the excess meaning of our biographical knowledge, and that means: to perceive the potentiality of our ‘unlived life’.

Interestingly, we discover empirical biographicity not just as a programmatic construct of ‘pedagogical avant-gardes’, but especially in the biographies of ‘*transitional*



*existences*': people who have to leave their country, women who seek a balance between family and work, men who are born in the wrong body and girls who want to be a boy. Migration processes, biographical breaks and transitions, the experience of withdrawal of recognition and the desire for a correction of sexual self-determination provoke not only considerable risks but also biographical opportunities. New biographical beginnings, i.e., the chance to redefine and relocate oneself autonomously, is much more common in everyday life than we suspect. It is therefore all the more incomprehensible that especially biographically oriented educational processes are repeatedly designed as quasi-therapeutic interventions (for detailed criticism see: Alheit 1990).

Transitions obviously create fears among representatives of educational processes. The idea of 'healing' is easier to endure. But aren't we really dependent on learning processes in transition? Isn't an 'identity' that combines intuitive self-reference with the opportunity to take steps in a new situation not necessary for survival? This implies, however, the courageous insight into the biographicity of modern existence, into the transitional potential of a lifelong change in self- and world reference.

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