

# **Critical Psychology and biography research: Individual life stories, collective dimensions of experience and societal reality\***

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## *Abstract*

In Critical Psychology biographical research has so far appeared only marginally. Key considerations on human biographies have been developed, but a subject-scientific approach of biographical research has not yet been developed. Klaus Holzkamp distinguishes between *phenomenal* and *real* biography. The ‘phenomenal’ is the biography as it is experienced by the subject herself. The ‘real’ biography captures the living conditions, abilities, needs etc. of a person together with the inherent opportunities and limitations at each point in time. From a temporal point of view, there is a reality of a person which transcends the mental state of the subject, but which only selectively becomes reality for the subject and necessarily goes beyond it. Biographical research in a subject-scientific sense therefore refers to research with the aid of the analytical categories “real/phenomenal biography”.

After an introductory positioning of a possible subject-scientific approach to biographical research, the second part of the paper is dealing with the question about what is and can be understood as a ‘biography’ and which new possibilities are offered by the categories of Critical Psychology in this context. Five theoretical horizons are presented and discussed in order to develop some kind of theory-led grid for analyzing concrete biographies in subject-scientific projects of biographical research. As an illustration the biography of the fictional person Amal is analyzed in part three. It is necessary to create a theoretical framework for subject-scientific biographical research before questions of research methodology and methodological procedure can be

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\* In this text the pronouns “she”, “her” and “herself” are gender-inclusive, in quotes from other authors the traditional gender-inclusive “he”, “him”, “his” and “himself” are used.

discussed. A short conclusion of essential methodological and methodical considerations is given in the fourth part.

### *Keywords*

biography research, biographical research, subject-scientific research, critical psychology, phenomenal biography, real biography

## **I. Introduction**

Autobiographical statements are a natural part of everyday human living together. In everyday conversations between people experiences are exchanged; when they meet, people tell each other stories from their lives and in this way take an interest in the lives of others; they receive and give advice in various life situations. Social institutions also require episodes of biography – mostly with special emphases – at job interviews or police interrogations for example. On special occasions, such as weddings, birthdays or anniversary celebrations it is not unusual for speeches to be made which feature (auto-) biographical elements. In social networks and on Internet blogs it is common for biographical content to be presented, orchestrated in the media, shared more or less publicly and commented on by others. Every person has a biography, which she can communicate, one she can also recount and she also does that frequently in various contexts and with different intentions and emphases.

Intention, purpose, as well as individual or collective function and objectives can therefore be very heterogeneous when biographies are compiled and recorded. The life stories of rulers have already been the subject of historiography for centuries (cf. Alheit, 1985). “To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege. The chronicle of a man, the account of his life, his historiography, written as he lived out his life formed part of the rituals of his power.” (Foucault, 1977, p. 191). By contrast, the life histories of ‘ordinary’ people only became the focus of attention much later and with another objective. When with the dissolution of status-based society ceremony, “in which status, birth, privilege, function are manifested with all the spectacle of their marks” (Foucault, 1977, p. 192), became ineffective, it was necessary – as Michel Foucault says – to find new methods of control and domination, which to a certain extent exist to this day. “It is no longer a monument for future memory, but a document for possible use. And this new describability is all the more marked in that the disciplinary framework is a strict one: the child, the patient, the madman, the prisoner, were to become, with increasing ease from the eighteenth century and according to a

curve which is that of the mechanisms of discipline, the object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts.” (Foucault, 1977, p. 247). Of course, not every interest in the biographical processes of ‘ordinary’ people can necessarily be reduced to an interest in control and discipline. “Just as the bourgeois drama leaves the ‘courtly’ and focuses on the tragedy of the bourgeois individual, the biographical method could provide validity to the simple life, the discredited life of the ‘proletariat.’” (Alheit, 1985, p. 101).<sup>1</sup>

The invention and constant development of sound recording equipment at the end of the 19th century also greatly facilitated the entry of autobiographical statements into the scientific context. With the aid of recorded and transcribed narrative biographical interviews and thematic biographical group discussions, it was now possible to allow the most diverse social groups to express themselves with their concrete live conditions and their collective history. The transcribed word could be systematically analyzed and interpreted.

Autobiographical statements as empirical material refer to concrete facts; they contain observations, introspections, experiences, memories and happenings. They provide information about the person, her inner conditions, but also about the world she lives in, the real historical contexts, the living environment(s), the social space and the (affective) meaning for the person. Biographical research thus contains “the possibility of a political learning process. The autobiographical memories of ‘ordinary people’ are a piece of real history of daily routine, of work and life – a ‘history from below’” (Alheit, 1985, pp.130). The quite specific opportunity contained in biographical research is to gain access to collective dimensions of experience and realms of possibility through the life histories of individuals. “This methodological ‘hope’ rests on a certain theoretical understanding of ‘biography, more specifically on the autobiographical recapitulation of life history: It is not conceived as an ‘individualized’ result of mental processing detached from its social constitutional context, but as the current result of a development process in which social reality and the individual mental structure are linked in a complex interaction. This dialectic becomes concrete also – or precisely – in the uniqueness of a biography” (Alheit & Dausien, 1985, pp. 47).

A classic of biographical research in sociology is the migration study "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America" by Thomas and Znaniecki (1984) at the University of Chicago during the years 1918/1920. The study contains, among other things, the biography of a Polish migrant to the USA. The background to this scientific interest was the large immigration movement with the subsequent social problems in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. As a result, the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. also: Kuczynski, J. (1961-1965). *Geschichte der Lage der Arbeiter unter dem Kapitalismus*. Berlin: Akademie (40 volumes)

biographical method gained acceptance in the so called ‘Chicago School’, as one opportunity to gain information about the social living environments of different milieus through the subjective perspective – on the topics urban areas/slums, crime, prostitution, family disorganization and later on the ‘race issue’. In this process, however, any systematic analysis of the objective processes of change in (American) society was set aside. “The great significance attributed to the subjective definition of the situation for the real social reality (Incidentally, a theoretical attitude with a high affinity to symbolic interactionism and the more recent phenomenological interpretative sociology of Alfred Schütz), suggest the possibility that through comprehensive evaluation of subjective documents – here specifically ‘life records’ – generalizable parameters for social aid and control will be developed” (Alheit, 1985, p. 105). At the end of the 1930s the change in the economic situation in the USA and the reinvigoration of nationalist ideas in view of the imminent entry into the war prompted an increasing interest in quantitative studies on a social scientific basis. The social problems of the 1930s and related research were something to be left behind (cf. Alheit, 1985, pp. 102).

In German-speaking countries there was no comparable consistent tradition of biographical research ‘from below’. Self-affirmation of the bourgeoisie was always a stronger motive for research than the research of social problems (Alheit, 1985). The beginning of biographical research in psychology and sociology within a university context dates back to the early years of the 20th century. Freud (1905, 1910, 1939) presented for the first time biographical analyses at the University of Vienna – for example, those of Leonardo da Vinci or Moses. The focus of the psychoanalytic approach is on significant experiences in childhood and youth, which are regarded as being constitutive for the entire biography. It is a matter of individualized mental processing. In this context Holzkamp (1995) also speaks of a “colonization of childhood” by psychoanalysis, insofar as there the life path seems to be determined by childhood<sup>2</sup>.

The first works in the 1920s and 1930s, which take the entire lifespan into consideration, can be traced back to Bühler (1933) with her publication “Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem” (“The course of human life as a psychological problem”). In her remarks she concentrates principally on the older age as a lifespan. For this reason, she is also regarded as a pioneer of gerontopsychology.

With National Socialism biographical research came to a sudden end in the German-speaking countries. The conception of human beings as learning subjects shaping their lives actively and substantively by confronting social

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<sup>2</sup> On the debate in critical psychology with psychoanalysis see also: Aumann,(2003) and Holzkamp-Osterkamp (1976).

conditions contradicts the hegemonic National Socialist ideologemes of race and heredity.

In the 1970s biographical research gained a renaissance in West Germany and on an international scale and still plays a role in sociology, psychology, pedagogy, education science and history. There is also more recent biographical research on, among other things, sociopolitical topics – with reference to the National Socialist period (*inter alia* Rosenthal, 1986, 1990, 1997; Schreiber, 2005), to Israel/Palestine (*inter alia* Rosenthal, 2015; Bar-On, 2001, 2004), on workers' biographies (*inter alia* Alheit & Dausien, 1985; Alheit, Dausien & Förcken-Erdbrink 1988), to right-wing extremism (*inter alia* Kötting, 2004; Inowlocki, 1988, 2000), to migration (*inter alia* Apitzsch, 1990; Juhasz & Mey, 2003), on gender relations (*inter alia*, Dausien, 1996) – to name just a few examples. The extent to which socio-cultural contexts and social conditions should be integrated is subject to controversial discussions. Various tendencies have crystallized which primarily differ on how and whether they conceive the relationship of social reality, individual (experienced and narrated) biography and experience and take them into account in their analysis (on this cf. Juhasz & Mey, 2003; Alheit et al., 1985; Rosenthal, 2005).

In Critical Psychology biographical research has so far only appeared marginally (cf. Weber, 2016). Admittedly, key considerations on human biographies have been developed, but the attempt to develop a subject-scientific approach of biographical research has not yet been undertaken. In general, Critical Psychology as a Marxist science of the subject provides categories, which allow to conceptualize the above-mentioned mediation between individual and society and to analyze it in up-to-date empirical studies (Holzkamp, 1985, 1993; Markard, 2009). The individual human existence is mediated by society as a whole, which means that individuals not only live under conditions, but also actively produce them and are able to act on them in order to change them. With the aid of the central category “capacity to act” it is possible to discuss the relationship between opportunities to act and obstacles to action and how these are mediated through relations of domination and power. Problems of subjective lifestyle between adaptation and resistance can in this way be broken down and analyzed. By ‘restrictive capacity to act’ is meant setting things up under the given conditions, which also includes the potential to harm oneself and others. One therefore contributes to the reproduction of the existing relationships of domination in order to deflect the threat to one’s own capacity to act in the short term, but not to abolish it. ‘Generalized capacity to act’, by contrast, highlights the utopian potential, without which an emancipatory perspective cannot be pursued. “The generalized capacity to act is something that cannot exist, instead the point is that we participate in the struggle for the possibilities of human

emancipation and in the battles for it and deal with the psychological issues that arise in this context: on the one hand with the question of which demands are being made on the people (without therefore already assuming that one knows how they should deal with them), and on the other hand, with the question of investigating empirically how they should deal with them in reality” (Markard, 2015, p. 53).

After this introductory positioning of a possible subject-scientific approach to biographical research, it is important to clarify – in the *second part* – what is and can be understood by a ‘biography’ and which new possibilities are offered by the categories of Critical Psychology in this context. Five theoretical horizons are presented and discussed in order to develop some kind of theory-led grid for analyzing concrete biographies in subject-scientific projects of biography research. As an illustration the fictional biography of the person *Amal* is analyzed in *part three* with the help of these five theoretical horizons. It is necessary to create a theoretical framework for subject-scientific biographical research before questions of research methodology and methodological procedure can be discussed. A short conclusion of essential methodological and methodical considerations is given in the *fourth part*.

## II. What is a ‘biography’? A definition attempt

‘Biography’ is composed of the Greek words βιογραφία, from βίος, *bíos* “life” and -graphy from γράφειν, *gráphein* “scratch, paint, write”.

Firstly, there is, of course, a ‘biography’ as a text with a narrative character – for example the result of a research process of a literary reconstruction with the goal of publication. But there is also life as a biography to be carved out with an interior and an exterior aspect. The exterior aspect here means biography as movement, as a ‘*résumé*’ in a geographic, socio-cultural and historical space. The interior aspect understands biography as an experiential context (Schulze, 2006). “A biography is, as we have said, the life movement of a person in a socio-cultural space and in historical time and the experiences he gathers in the course of his life arise from his engagement with his environment. The decisive significance we bestow on the biographical subject in this context should also not be understood in such a manner that he reaches his decisions alone and independently. On the contrary, many biographically significant decisions are made by others and have to be acquiesced to and endorsed by the ego. Thus, biography must of necessity always be considered to relate to society and to be embedded in society” (Schulze, 2006, p. 45). Biographies always contain – according to Alheit (1990) – both emergence and structure. We gather our

experiences against the backdrop of existing socially mediated structures of knowledge. However individual experiences can also revise, change and further develop long-established structures.

The knowledge of the world is linked in a biography with self-knowledge through the deals of the subject with the world, in which she lives and moves, in other words, with those sections of 'society' relevant for her life.

Holzkamp (1985) distinguishes between the *phenomenal* and the *real biography*. The phenomenal is the section of her real biography experienced by the subject. "My own past is given to me as characterized by earlier opportunities, their realization or 'non-realization', as well as by the 'unavailable' facts limiting these opportunities, which I was at the mercy of, this in relation to both my earlier living conditions (in their 'situational' circumstances) and my own mental state, my abilities, my intentions, my plans etc., whereby also the emotional aspect of the earlier opportunities and their limitations belong to the experience of my own past" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 337). Correspondingly, the phenomenal biography is not something static which is merely extended in the course of life, but rather it changes with the present mental state and thus with the person. "On the current stage of development of the individual and the resulting relationship of personal/situational and real life circumstances/person depend to what extent the restructuring of the individual's phenomenal past from the present actually provides a more significant, more correct and more fruitful view of myself on the basis of the increase in my own experience for the expansion of my capacity to act or to what extent a falsification of my past, for example to justify limited personal capacity to act, has prevailed in my present behind my back" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 338). For example, it may appear quite functional to a mother who has just given her 5-year-old daughter a slap on the ear to justify her own childhood and the fact that her own mother viewed slaps on the ear as a legitimate parenting tool, with the statement that "it didn't do us any harm." In the course of doing so, she has to block out the feeling of injustice that she experienced at the time in the many situations where with stinging cheeks and tears in her eyes she was angry about the abusive misuse of power by her own mother.

In contrast, by real biography are meant a person's real living conditions, abilities, needs etc. with the inherent opportunities and limitations on opportunities at each point in time. Taking into account the temporal point of view, there is a personal reality which transcends the mental state of the subject, but which only selectively becomes reality for the subject and necessarily goes beyond it. This real biography, which does or did indeed exist, can only be approached in the context of biographical research – proceeding from the (phenomenal) biography narrated and compiled together in the research

procedure. An interdisciplinary socio-theoretical analysis of the living conditions with the inherent opportunities and limitations, an analysis that goes beyond what was narrated, is indispensable here. It is not just a question “that situations should be taken into account, but that the situations to be taken into account are integrated into overarching structures which must be comprehended; otherwise the ‘situations’ cannot be comprehended.” (Markard, 2015, p. 50).

Through my ‘attitude’ to my own life history, just as it appears in biographical life narratives, the relationship between my real and my phenomenal biography “from the respective current location of the subject I myself can become part of my ‘phenomenal’ view of the world and myself by relating my previous assessments of opportunities to act and limitations to such action to the ‘actual’ opportunities and limitations: At that time I still believed that in this or that profession there really were opportunities for me, that these and those skills could be developed by me in some specific manner, that I would get over these and those emotions (jealousy or similar) but now I know that I assessed my situation and myself incorrectly (or *vice versa*, at that time I mistakenly I did not see these and those opportunities, I still underestimated myself and my skills etc.).” (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 337).

Biographical research in the subject-scientific sense therefore means research with the aid of the analytical categories “real/phenomenal biography”. It is a question of approximating the real life conditions, skills, needs etc. with the inherent opportunities and limitations of the person (real biography) through the remembered, narrated, experienced (phenomenal) biography that has been jointly compiled and by drawing on, among other things, findings gained through interdisciplinary social analysis or other social-scientific research projects, in order to be able to understand and comprehend why at various stages in her life she acted/thought/felt this way and not some other way. At the same time, this opens up the opportunity for her to gain new insights through the joint analysis and reflection on her previous life in relation to her current view of the world and herself.

Schulze (2002) formulates five *theoretical horizons*, which biographical research in general can help to unlock. With respect to the development of a subject-scientific biographical research these horizons can be taken as a starting point in the following to discuss also further (theoretical) conceptions with emphasis on the analytical possibilities, which are provided by the categories and theories of Critical Psychology.



## 1. Theoretical horizon: The individual subject

The subject appears in two ways in a biography. On the one hand, it is the “I” that is narrating, remembering and reacting in memory to her life. On the other hand it is the “I” that experienced what she is narrating and what she is narrating and in the past learned, acted, reacted to various issues, happenings and decisions made by others and has led her life right up to the present where the biography is being narrated (cf. Schulze, 2002).

Rosenthal (1995) distinguishes between the ‘narrated’ and the ‘experienced biography’, which in her judgment are “in a mutually constitutive relationship” (Rosenthal, 1995, p. 20). In the phenomenological tradition she assumes that “objects in the normal sense of the word disappear, and all that remains are *noemata*, the world as it really is is eliminated, it remains the world as it appears at the time” (Gurwitsch, cited from Rosenthal, 1995, p. 27). Accordingly, the researcher’s perspective focuses on the biographical material presented to the researcher. “The experienced biography (life history) can be understood neither as a constantly recited object that is remembered and presented differently depending on the perspective and mood of the autobiographer, nor as an object that can be constructed arbitrarily by attention” (Rosenthal, 1995, p. 20). The way the experienced life story is presented to the researcher and the way she is associated with the life story being told are for Rosenthal the central issues, which are reflected in her method of evaluation (Rosenthal, 2005). With this settlement it is possible to approach both the experienced life story and the life history being narrated in terms of Gestalt theory, because it is now only a matter of taking things in the way they present themselves to consciousness – in this case the consciousness of the researcher. Questions about social conditions, about relationships of power and domination today and back then, about the interaction between the researcher and the biographer<sup>3</sup>, about differences between memory, experience and social reality, about different today’s perspectives on childhood/youth back then etc. cannot even be posed at all within this paradigm.

Bourdieu (1990) speaks of a ‘biographical illusion’ when ‘life history’ is spoken of in the context of biographical research – without differentiating between experienced life history and life history as narrated. “To produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that is, as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events, is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion, to the common representation of existence that a whole literary tradition has always and still continues to reinforce” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 2). Bourdieu is of

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<sup>3</sup> In the following the person whose biography is being considered is designated the “biographer”, i.e. the “bearer of the biography”.

the opinion that the proper name as an arbitrary imposition is the only thing that holds an identity together. As an institution it is extracted from changes and from place and time. It guarantees the constancy of a person through all social and biological changes and at the same time conveys no properties. “So the proper name is the support (one would be tempted to say the substance) of social identity (what is called *l'état civil* in French), that is the support of the set of properties (nationality, sex, age, etc.) attached to persons to whom the civil law associates legal effects, which are *instituted* under the appearance of a mere record by the acts of social identity” (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 3-4).

If, however, one assumes that with their plans, intentions and interests people (can) relate consciously to themselves and their world (cf. Holzkamp, 1985, 1993; Markard, 2009), every lived biography also displays an internal consistency that can be reconstructed. This does not happen – as elaborated by Rosenthal – in the form of a Gestalt presented, but also not only – as stated by Bourdieu – by means of a proper name. As ‘centers of intentionality’ subjects relate to themselves and the world and do not confront it in a neutral manner. All actions are related to conditions but that does not mean they are caused by them: For people (objective) conditions are significant as an ensemble of opportunities to act and obstacles. Against this backdrop, in Critical Psychology ‘premises’ are understood to be meanings subjectively accentuated in accordance with the interests and needs of the individual. In subject-scientific (biographical) research it is accordingly a matter of working out or reconstructing premises-reasons-connections, more concisely, rationales. It follows that life is not a history, not a sequence of “cause (immediate or final) and effect between successive states” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 2). But biographical events are also not – as stated by him – mere “investments and moves in social space, or more precisely, in the different successive states of the distribution structure of the different types of capital which are in play in the field considered.” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 6).

By contrast, the “life history being narrated” is really “a history” – namely one about one’s (own) life as experienced. As with all impromptu narratives it is subject, according to Schütze (1976), to various ‘narrative constraints’ (cf. also Rosenthal, 1995, 2005). These are rules for narrating facts, events, circumstances, sequences, which must at the very least be observed if the listener(s) is/are supposed to be able to understand and comprehend them. Schütze distinguishes the ‘Gestalt closure constraint’, the ‘condensation constraint’ and ‘detailing constraint’. A story, which has been started, is supposed to be told to the end with all the necessary details. Since the time available to tell the story is not the same as that available for experiencing the corresponding episode in life, in every narrative it is a matter of condensing the experience to the essential, subjectively significant details. In addition, it is not

sufficient to mention just key points of the earlier events and list them one after the other. References, relationships and, where appropriate, people must be introduced, which are necessary in order to be able to organize the story so the listener can understand it.

Which sequences from the experienced biography are told in the survey situation, which are left out, abridged or presented in great detail can be rooted in the setting of the interview, in the interaction with and the perceived closeness to/distance from the interviewer and/or the life situation from which the interviewee's previous life is being narrated and reflected. The location of the interview, the interviewer with her social position and situation (gender, ethnicity, class, etc.), which may mean a distance from/closeness to the interviewee, and knowledge/lack of knowledge of research interests of the interviewer may be related to the emphases the interviewee focuses on when telling her life history. The manner in which each life episode is reported, narrated or presented may also be connected with current issues in the life of the interviewee at the time of the interview. This becomes especially evident in the extent to which the biographer goes into detail, in what she starts and ends with, and the selection of topics, which are addressed or avoided. Which biographical sequence is structured more as a report, as a narrative or as an argument may provide information about what (emotional) significance the sequence has for the biographer and what its connection is with the complete story (on this cf. also Rosenthal, 1995, 2005).

The 'experienced biography' can – as presented in the following paragraphs – be analyzed in terms of the thematic fields of biographical learning, the biographical process and historical change, which leaves 'traces' in every life history.

## **2. Theoretical horizon: Biographical learning**

Learning is a central element of everyday life. What is special about biographical learning is that it is discontinuous; "it blends events from the far past with later and present ones, and it combines apparently far-flung and varied contents into one meaningful complex" (Schulze, 1985, p. 46). Biographical learning processes are – according to Schulze – complex, long-term and establish a connection between the learning history of the human species and the learning processes of single individuals.

Biographical learning processes are often triggered by experienced contradictions and irritations. These can be environmental changes, political upheavals and technological achievements just as much as accidents or the loss of important attachment figures. Generally speaking, it is a matter of ruptures in

the established order, which has been accepted as valid – the subject is unable to progress further using her previous strategies for coping with life, activities or routines. With Holzkamp (1993) learning is conceived as an opportunity to open up or unlock the world and thus to extend one's subjective ability to act. This learning world insight is based on the general interest of the human being in gaining control over her living conditions. This extension of control through learning is accompanied by an increase in subjective quality of life. The dominating reason for learning world insight lies in overcoming the individual subjective restrictions on control and living opportunities.

In his learning theory Holzkamp (1993) refers to learning processes 'in general' without explicitly formulating a biographical perspective. Rather he is concerned with developing a subject-scientific learning theory through a confrontation with traditional learning theories; a theory that proceeds from the subject who wants to learn with her motives and interests. He analyses individual learning processes, which arise because of a problem regarding action. By this is meant exactly those irritations, ruptures, discrepancies, conflicts, happenings mentioned above, the resolution of which is not possible through normal action because of contradictions, obstacles or dilemmas. Therefore a "learning loop" is hived off from the original problem and a learning action is incorporated. In contrast, under biographical perspective Schulze (2005) conceives what is called a 'biographical learning field', which is also characterized less by a goal aspired to than by a problem, a sustained topic encompassing offers and resistances from the living environments. "It emerges, grows, stagnates, shrinks, extends itself or relocates itself. It is interrupted, pushed to one side and reactivated" (Schulze, 2005, p. 47). It is embedded in comprehensive collective learning fields, which may stand in a certain hierarchy to one another, one which can change, they may compete with one another or be linked in the course of life. Some can only be discerned temporarily in the life history, others dominate the entire life history and are linked, for example, to occupation, special commitment or similar things. "A biographical learning field is always something additional. It floats on the surface of normal life like an oil stain or an oil slick, fed by the learner's energy, which flows into the field, and borne by the tension, which builds up again and again in the interaction with certain contents. The interaction is continually interrupted by necessary or diversionary transactions and their contents include only a limited segment of the social reality in which the individual exists" (Schulze, 2005, p. 55). Biographical learning processes are integrated and, at the same time, integrating learning processes which accumulate a wide variety of everyday learning processes.

In addition to the processing of contents from the biographical learning fields in every life there is the matter of organizing everyday routines and

securing a living, processes which in turn are accompanied by countless learning processes.

Holzkamp distinguishes fundamentally between ‘incidental learning’, which accompanies more or less any action, and ‘intentional learning’, which occurs as a result of a focused action mediated with a problem. Intentional learning is present “when the learning intention also includes gaining a permanence that goes beyond the particular situation and the accumulation of what is learned, i.e. what is acquired is not immediately lost again, but remains transsituationally in such a way that it can now be used in future at this new level” (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 183).

The reasons for learning can be of an expansive or a defensive nature. Expansive reasons for learning are present when for the subject “in view of a certain learning problem the inner connection between the learning information about the world, the expansion of control and increased quality of life can directly be experienced or expected” (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 190). Thus through learning the subject gains information about the real contexts of meaning. Defensive reasons for learning are present when the subject turns to a learning topic in order to ward off a threat to her quality of life and imminent limitations on her opportunities to act. The subject feels justifiably forced to learn because she has to reckon with an adverse effect on her quality of life if she refuses or neglects to learn.

The actual learning actions – whether they are a result of expansive or defensive reasons for learning – derive from the particular learning topic, i.e. from the contradictory social meanings, which as a rule are laden with conflict. The tools used here are the product of social labor. “Methodologically speaking, social meanings are therefore not just names that signify different things; they articulate simultaneously specific social, political and epistemological standpoints, including the particular consciousness of the subjects concerning their particular position in society” (Marvakis & Schraube, 2016, p. 207). Therefore learning also always means grappling with socially contested meanings and thus with contradictions, struggles, standpoints and collective conflicts.

Learning always happens through participation in social practices, which are complex and contested (cf. Marvakis & Schraube, 2016). The relationship of *biographical learning* and *institutionalized learning* plays an important role in this context. Institutionalized, collective learning fields “bundle together a large number of individual learning processes and subordinate them to guidance, but also control, monitoring and evaluation through teaching, in which learning processes already carried out by other members of society are preserved, transmitted, compressed and consolidated” (Schulze, 2005, p. 50). The question

whether there is a match between the individual learning fields and the institutionalized learning fields is an open field for discussion. According to Holzkamp, it is a matter of whether the subject also wants to learn, what she is supposed to learn and what she can do within an institutional framework. However, collective learning fields do not necessarily need to be institutionalized, they can also be (sub) cultures, certain places, districts or virtual and real spaces.

Through learning it is not only possible to change and extend behavioral and imaginative options of individual people but also those of a group of people or even those of humanity as a whole. "The question of the universal significance of individual learning is the supra-individual effect of individual learning processes: Does the learner personally adopt just one of the many options already preformed in the collective universes, or does he/she add a new one? That is the question" (Schulze, 2005, p. 60). However, which individual learning processes are accumulated in collective learning fields is contingent on continuous social processes of negotiation. In particular, which learning contents have their place in institutionalized learning fields is embedded in concrete relationships of power and domination with specific interests, which have to be analyzed in each case.

Biographical learning is not planned in advance, but forms an understandable context, which can only be linked and restructured in retrospect, i.e. by means of reconstruction and reflection. This continuous process of self-reflection as part of biographical learning also incorporates the collective history, which involves the individual history. Biographical learning processes can only be captured and reconstructed by memory. "But how can we know whether a behavior is changed on a lasting basis? During the process it is difficult to judge, particularly when it stretches over many years. Only when the change becomes clearly evident and the result has found its overt expression in the life history, i.e. only in retrospect is it possible to review the entire process" (Schulze, 2005, p. 46).

Accordingly, from the standpoint of the subject 'education' can be defined as "all processes of the reflexive formation of experience and knowledge, which make up the life history of this particular concrete subject. In this formation process cultural and social patterns of experience are actively processed and formed and transformed in a particular manner in each case into a 'structure of biographical knowledge'" (Dausien, 2001, p. 70).

### **3. Theoretical horizon: The biographical process**

The progress of the entire biographical process is in itself a central topic in biographical research. In this context the question has to be answered, at what

time a person can shape her biography herself in the first place and which additional prerequisites must at least be achieved in the ontogenesis. Undergoing these biographical processes can be comprehended in very different ways from a developmental psychological perspective – as a series of developmental crises with Erikson (1973), as developmental tasks with Havighurst (1972) or as the processing of critical life situations with Filipp (1981), to name just a few examples. Fundamentally, ontogenesis can be understood as a series of phases which supersede one another, of steps which build on each other or as maturation, i.e. as following an internal program largely without external influences – depending on the conception of humanity and the theoretical school (cf. Montada, 2002). Following Holzkamp a general criticism of this developmental psychological perspective applies, that, on the one hand, it conceives of the development of the child as it were “isolated from its real social reference to the world and to itself” (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 498) and, on the other hand, leaves out what is called the dual aspect of ontogenesis in research. ‘Dual aspect’ means: First there is childhood as lived and experienced by the child, and then there is ‘childhood’ as interpreted from the standpoint of the adult as an earlier phase of life but one which still has significance for ‘adult life’. “Then again, ontogenetic personal development is to be analyzed additionally from the standpoint of the subject affected as in each case my childhood/youth, i.e. as the early period of my biography, which will characterize me as long as I live and which will have an influence on my current opportunities for action and life” (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 497).

For the analysis of biographies, it does, of course, make a difference which conception of humanity and which theory of ontogenesis the research is based on, or in a nutshell: what life is all about. Holzkamp places the human need for improvement of living conditions and extension of control through participation in the social process of sustainment of life – which appears subjectively in the event of corresponding obstacles - at the center of ontogenetic development. Development of the human individual always encompasses “the resolution of developmental contradictions with, in each case, a personal pole of contradiction and a situational pole of contradiction which is located in social conditions of life” (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 433). The impulse for further development is provided by “operative influence on objective social reality” (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 437) and by the corresponding resistances. It is precisely these objective conditions of life that are changed in the course of ontogenesis. The framework of control and life of small children is at first limited to everything that is near them, as a rule the domestic space. The radius becomes successively greater as a result of the increasing (motor and cognitive) skills and knowledge, which enable the child, on the one hand, to have experiences outside the domestic space and, on the

other, to submerge into ever more mediated semantic structures of her living environment – to the same extent the support required from the attachment figures/parents for social participation decreases. In the course of this, development occurs in confrontation with contradictions. Even if, at first, the child's life and her opportunities for control and participation are limited to a relatively small sphere, nevertheless social conditions, relationships of power and domination intrude into this 'private' space. "The social relationships of oppression are not suspended at any time during ontogenesis, but are present for the child from his/her very first day, only initially just in a more or less non-specific form conditioned by the mode of contact to the world" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 458). There are, for example, limitations on their opportunities to act, which attachment figures/parents are subject to, which at first also play a role for the children in the domestic sphere.<sup>4</sup>

Holzkamp distinguishes three types of process in ontogenesis: *generalization of meaning*, *breach of immediacy* and *replication of the ability to act*. "The sequence here does not imply a chronological determination of when, at what age, each of the following process types will be achieved. Nor do they contain ideas any stages or phases of development determining the overall development, which are temporally predictable from one another. Ultimately, it is not even specified here that the course of development of each prior process type has to be finally completed before the next process type can begin" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 424). However, it follows logically that the sequence of the process types is irreversible because they build upon one another.

When the child is born, she first goes through a sort of preliminary stage before she starts to gain orientation – with the initial goal of elementary satisfaction of her needs and, subsequently, of expanding her framework of control. The term 'generalization of meaning' implies, that the 'were-made-for'-ness of objects is understood and the utility value of the object is realized. It must be understood that the chair was 'made' in a historico-social process in order to be sat upon, the toothbrush in order to clean one's teeth, and the mop in order to clean the floor. With respect to interpersonal relations the child must understand the social intentionality of human interactions and learn to realize them. Through this the relationship between child and adult gains an interactive level. The child understands that adults consciously relate to the world and themselves with plans and goals. In this way she gains the opportunity to consciously influence the intentions of the adult herself. The first yardsticks for evaluating the activity of adults are developed. The child's vulnerability is reduced by the possibility of social influence. "The child draws a picture 'for' his father, with bricks he builds a house that the others should look at and find good; this includes the practical

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. on this Markard (2018) on childhood in this issue of ARCP.



insight that one can influence the intentions of others with reference to one's own control of conditions/satisfaction of needs by such 'efforts'. In accordance with the new level of reciprocity of social intentionality it also in this way becomes comprehensible, that others in the living environment of the child also do things for the others. One adult bake a cake for the others, repairs the television set so that 'we' can all watch the Muppet Show again; (...) When the cake is on the table or the television is 'running' again, the others are happy, and therefore I am also happy about this" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 451). In this phase the development of the child depends initially very strongly on the supportive measures of the attachment figures/parents. However, the child is increasingly involved into everyday things as soon as she deals properly with the things in her living environment and understands that the adults not only use the objects in accordance with their "were-made-for"-ness, but also their use is intentional, that the adults are pursuing a purpose with them. The criteria for evaluating the activities of adults continue to be refined in the child.

Through this expansion of the living environment the opportunity arises, analogous to the process type 'breaching the immediacy', of comprehending the mediatedness of opportunities for human action. Experiencing the relationship of opportunities and obstacles, and thus the limitedness of opportunities for control, by social structure becomes more present. It is a matter of recognizing that existence is not the product of individual activity, but is a result of "social functional interaction" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 489). Social structures become particularly present with entry into social institutions such as kindergarten and/or school. The mediatedness of human existence within social realms of possibility then becomes particularly tangible (and comprehensible). The teacher, for example, invokes the school rules and cannot simply do with the pupils what she – and possibly all of them – would really like to do. Also the pupils cannot simply go home without any consequences because they have no interest in the content of a lesson. School attendance is compulsory.

Only the experience of herself as a center of intentionality, one which itself relates "to the world and itself consciously with intentions, plans and resolutions" (Holzkamp, 1993, p. 21) makes conscious behavior with reference to social conditions possible and thus the conscious creation of one's own biography. Only with the understanding of the total social mediatedness of one's own existence does development lead to the process type replication of the ability to act, which lasts a whole lifetime. With the aid of the analytical category 'restrictive vs. generalized capacity to act', which was outlined above, it is possible from this process type to break down all actions, decisions and learning processes.

#### 4. Theoretical horizon: The concrete living environment and the social space

In every biography one learns a great deal about the social milieu and the socialization and living conditions of a person. It is possible to gain an insight into the transformations of the social general – such as gender, ethnicity, age group, nationality, religion – into the specific general, into the concrete living environment. Under ‘particular general’ Schulze (2002) combines the insights which one acquires through biographical research into the ‘small living environments’, i.e. into the social milieu of families, of a cultural minority, of an occupational group, of an association, of a community etc. This living environment “must not be misunderstood as a ‘*topos*’, as a specific place which is qualitatively distinct from other localities or segments of life. The living environment is a set of pre-conscious, semi-conscious orientations and structures, which may potentially be brought to full consciousness, a ‘knowledge resource’ which may not necessarily be reflexively available, which a social actor can access in order to move without problems in his everyday life” (Alheit, 1992, p. 44). In biographical narratives it is not just a matter of a sober description of the living environments, but also always of an evaluation and the meaning these have for the subject. “The living environments present themselves simultaneously together with their undertones and overtones, together with their fears and expectations, the opinions, histories and fantasies, the secrets and promises, the resistances and forces which have accumulated in them and coalesced with them” (Schulze, 2002, p.142). In every biography there are goals aspired to, well thought-out actions, ideas generally collectively shared about a ‘normal biography’ and ideas about a ‘good life’ which are, as a rule, specific to one’s gender, class, culture, and era, which one grapples with – and which, in the final analysis, have to be determined new for each person. Each living environment appears in a biography as a dynamic process in which the subject tries to get out of it, to change it, is rejected, is attracted by others. Demotion, promotion, gain, loss, impotence, power are topics to be found in biographies. In addition, in every life there are experiences, decisions taken by other people, which may have far-reaching consequences for one’s own life. Therefore it is always possible to work out a difference between the possible and the real biography. Under the possible biography, can be conceived everything which would basically have been possible for the concrete person in her particular position, situation, time and thus in her living environment.

The experiences of the biographer must be analyzed within the framework of biographical research by attempting to reconstruct precisely this mediation relationship between the immediate living environment where the experiences are made, and the social system which, in turn, structures the living environment.

“The unclarity of social structures certainly does not now mean that it is impossible to experience them; instead it only means that experiences, insofar as they are not analyzed for these moments, are being analyzed incompletely and wrongly. Social structures inevitably ‘intrude’ into the direct experiences of individuals in the living environment” (Markard, 2009, p. 87).

## 5. Theoretical horizon: Historical change

Biographies contain information about the change in the situation of an individual person in the changing human society. A biography always starts at a particular point in time in history where there are ways of life and living conditions that are typical of the time. Among these are technological achievements just as much as the specific contents and topics that preoccupy people. “Biographical developments themselves change with the historically modified ‘learning tasks’; in the context of concrete biographies structure and emergence do not form a ‘pre-stabilized harmony’, but an area of tension which alters the biography” (Alheit, 1990, p. 28). Concrete biographies are also always positioned in historico-social space with regard to dimensions of social order and difference such as class, ethnicity, gender, cultural affiliation and sexual orientation (cf. Dausien, 1996, 2001). Ways of life and conditions of socialization, which are typical of the time period, are described and commented on.

Schulze (2002) has worked out three constellations in which historical change can appear in biographies: Firstly, in the manner in which the biographer moves in historical space and attempts to get her bearings within it, such as, for example, how she tries to emancipate herself from the dominant conditions, acquiesces to them, comments on them, criticizes them or compares them to the current conditions at the time of the data collection. Secondly, it is not a rare occurrence in biographies that ‘history’ forces its way into individual biographies. Revolutionary historical processes, a dictatorship, a decree, a political decision, war, persecution etc. suddenly play a large role in the living environment and the subject must respond and find a way to deal with it. Thirdly, there are changes affecting all living environments such as globalization, modernization, technical achievements etc. which bring profound changes, a change in the spaces of opportunity and the restrictions on opportunity.

In the following chapter we introduce the fictional biography<sup>5</sup> of Amal, which is intended to serve as a clarification of these theoretical horizons. It will

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, at the time of writing no material from a subject-scientific biographical research project is available. This fictional biography is solely intended as an illustration; it is neither exhaustive, nor does it encompass all possible hypotheses and

become clear that these levels are not absolutely distinct, but they do accentuate relevant aspects.

### III. Case study: Amal

If the subject-scientific biographical research with Amal had taken place in reality, it had to be oriented on the following two overarching methodological requirements (cf. Allespach & Held, 2015).

#### 1. *Technical versus emancipatory relevance of social-scientific research:*

Referring to Jürgen Habermas Holzkamp (1970) distinguishes between the 'technical' and the 'emancipatory relevance' of psychological research. Compared with the technical (rulers') interest in the control of social processes "a piece of research is relevant for emancipation insofar as it contributes to the self-enlightenment of the person about his social dependencies" (Holzkamp 1970) and to liberation from them. The object of research is not the subject herself, but rather the world as the subject experiences it. "For this reason subject-scientific statements are not statements about people, let alone classifications of people (e.g. as lacking in concentration, see above), but statements about experienced – and potentially generalizable – opportunities to act and limitations on action" (Markard, 2000, par. 18).

#### 2. *Co-researcher principle:*

People are not researched, instead they stand alongside the researcher on the research side. They are conceived of in the research process as "co-researchers" (Markard, 2000, par. 29): "This principle of participation of those concerned in the research project (prescribed for all more specific methodological principles) highlights a central difference of the subject-scientific approach compared with variable psychological control-scientific procedures: Subject-scientific categories, theories and methods are not theories, methods etc. *about* those concerned, but *for* those concerned" (Holzkamp, 1985, pp. 543). The

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interpretations. All details, persons and institutions are fictitious: The "fiction" has been constructed to be close to what the author observed while executing the profession of a street worker working with teenagers, their mothers and daughters. In countless situations, discussions, incidents, parent interviews and excursions the author experienced the multifaceted collective problems of women who grow up in Arab communities in a large German city.

involvement of the co-researchers in the processes of evaluating and interpreting the data is thus included and is an essential part of the research setting.

In the following remarks on the fictional biography of Amal, however, the possible interpretations and the directions that can be explored further are merely described and interpreted from the standpoint of the equally fictional researcher. These are extracts from possible observation protocols, memos, paraphrases of interview sequences, and initial interpretations. The potential opinion of the co-researcher Amal, her opinion of the remarks and her own interpretations have not been presented or invented for pragmatic reasons. The goal and aspiration of this case study focuses on illustrating the theoretical horizons rather than demonstrating the entire research process.

At the time of the interview Amal is 35 years old, mother of four children and divorced. She was born and grew up in a large German city.

*"When they were themselves teenagers, Amal's grandparents were expelled from an Arab country where their ancestors had lived from agriculture for generations. Her parents grew up in a refugee camp in a neighboring country, got married there and finally migrated to Germany.*

*"At the age of 17 Amal herself was married to Ali, who at that time was 35 years old. In the first years Amal made a great effort to settle into 'married life' with Ali and to find 'happiness' there. In the course of the years her suspicions that Ali was cheating on her were corroborated. There was a big crisis in her marriage. Through female friends she got to know a women's center with a very easily accessible psycho-social counseling service. With the support of the counselors she finally separated from her husband.*

*"Today Amal is divorced, a single mother and works in an emergency shelter for refugees as an office assistant. In addition to her office work she interprets interviews between the non-Arabic-speaking social workers and the Arabic-speaking refugees."*

## **1. Analytical horizon: The individual subject/the narrated life history**

### **a) Setting of data collection:**

Amal reconstructed her biography in a biographical interview carried out by a woman with Western, European female socialization, who grew up in Germany and does not have a migrant background.

*"I was looking for contact with Muslim women living in Germany through the women's center which, by chance, Amal was also frequenting regularly. For a foundation I am carrying out a study on 'the living environments of Muslim women in Germany'. I myself studied Islamic Studies and during this course I spent some longer periods researching in*

*various Arab countries. I disclosed this in the preliminary discussions before the interview and introduced myself and my project. (...) Amal consented to the interview. Her open manner of speaking about these very private thoughts, decisions and doubts in the various phases of her life suggests that she considers me, on the one hand, a person that she can trust to be careful with her biography and, on the other, that I have sufficient prior knowledge about Arab culture, religious and cultural rituals and differences in different countries in order to be able to categorize and understand her problems, difficulties, doubts and fears appropriately. Also the fact that I have been socialized as a woman myself makes access easier to Amal's world, which is permeated by traditional role models, separation of the sexes and patriarchal family structures. At the same time, however, she also sees me as a person who is clearly outside her community, one who knows this community about, is not part of it. I have the impression that, on the one hand, this makes it easier for her to speak openly about her conflict and doubts within the community but, on the other, it also inhibits her at the start of the interview from 'westernizing' her doubts and fear and thus to forgetting or denying or openly broaching as an issue the origin/home of her grandparents, something we do then talk about in the course of the interview."*

The life history would presumably have had another emphasis if the interview had been conducted by Muslim, older/younger or transsexual man who had been socialized in the West, or a Muslim, veil-wearing woman who had only been living in Germany for a short time, or a young girl who had been socialized in the west freshly graduated from university without prior experience with and in Arab Muslim and working-class living environments. Many different constellations could be constructed, *inter alia* along the social dimensions gender, ethnicity, culture or class and corresponding to these hypotheses could be formed about possible emphases and topics which are not or cannot be addressed without inhibitions or only with great effort in order against the background of these scenarios to work out the specifics of the constellation in which the biography was actually reconstructed.

#### b) Current living situation:

Amal is narrating her biography not only *in* a specific situation, but also *from* a current living situation.

*"Amal is right at the start of her independent life as a divorced single working woman with four children. The 'great catastrophes' have not happened, which she had been very afraid of for years and which were the reason why for a long time she had not even dared to consider leaving her husband. Many things are still unfamiliar; in many things she is uncertain*

*and regularly seeks support in the women's center with its psycho-social support service. But she feels more and more comfortable in her 'new life'."*

From this perspective she reconstructs her former life. Her narration of her life with its thematic emphases would presumably have looked different if she had not found work so quickly in the emergency shelter for refugees, if her husband had refused to pay maintenance or had even wanted to take away her children, if the family court had had to be called in, if her family had not accepted her decision or had threatened her with violence, if as a result she had had to seek protection in a women's refuge, if the women's center had suddenly been closed because of economy measures etc.

## **2. Analytical horizon: Biographical learning**

Various learning fields can be detected here.

*"In Amal's biography there is one very dominant cultural theme, a learning field which runs through her whole biography. It involves the role of a Muslim Arab woman, the German-born daughter of traditional parents, who is seeking to liberate herself from her foreignness resulting from a traditionally assigned role with a very rigid strong and powerful 'normal biography' without losing her cultural affiliation in this process. How can a life in the diaspora/in exile look like – between adaptation to values and traditions of the 'new home', 'the country where her family found asylum', and resistance through conservation of traditions and customs from her country of origin.*

*"In addition to this there is a social theme, a learning field which involves relations between the sexes. From a marriage molded by patriarchal family structures and sex role models, a marriage which was unsatisfactory for both partners, Amal is attempting to find a way out and to build herself a more self-sufficient and independent life.*

*"A further learning field subordinate to both of these arises from her low level of (formal) education. Amal does not have a school diploma. As a result of her lack of formal educational qualifications, she is initially denied the opportunity to start an apprenticeship or traineeship, to pursue a job with correspondingly better pay and with personal fulfillment. Together with the counselors from the women's center she is developing and trying out (in the form of internships) possibilities of finding a wage-paying job which she can do without formal qualifications, one which corresponds to her interests and enables her to participate in social life.*

*"This is followed by the learning field 'single working mother' who from now on has to perform not only the necessary reproductive work but also has to work as a wage laborer. Responsibilities in the family have to be arranged differently. (...)*

*"In Amal's living environment numerous resistances can be detected for the learning fields, but also many resources. The strict culturally mediated ideas about marriage, the family and the allocation of sex roles, which stand above the individual and her needs, have not constituted a breeding ground for her movements to free herself from her marriage for a long time. Only when through a friend she meets 'like-minded' women in the women's center and can express her suffering, be heard and receive support for her efforts, can the learning field develop. Many small learning processes can take place now.*

*"This women's center with its psycho-social support service can be recognized as a collective learning field. It matches Amal's learning fields very well.*

*"Amal is not the only woman in her neighborhood/city facing these problems. The operators of the women's center/the city administration have recognized this and offer support and space for precisely these learning fields, which in their opinion can offer support to women in similar circumstances."*

### **3. Analytical horizon: The biographical process**

With reference to her biographical process the following aspects can be mapped out:

*"In Amal's biography the collectively shared ideas about a 'normal biography' specific to her culture and sex are very dominant. At first she fits in, tries to find the 'happiness promised to her' and strives to be a good daughter, wife and later mother."*

#### **Early childhood:**

*"Amal's childhood takes place to a great extent in the family/in the home. She was born into a very traditional family with patriarchal family structures. She has ten brothers and sisters, five older sisters, two younger sisters and three younger brothers. In the family's three-bedroom apartment there was a bedroom for her parents, a living room, a room for her brothers and she shared one with her sisters. In Amal's memory her mother was almost always at home. Amal can remember that when she was a small child, her mother cooked herself and did the shopping for the whole family and left the house to visit friends and relatives. Later her older sisters took over the cooking and shopping. Her mother developed backache and pains in her joints, which got worse and worse in the course of the years and only left the house very reluctantly. From a certain point onward she spent almost the whole day in the living room on the couch, received visits from her older daughters who were already married along with her grandchildren, watched Arabic-language television programs and*



*drank tea. Often other women from the neighborhood came to visit. Her father was rarely at home. He worked in a large bakery and had to leave the house very early in the morning while everybody was still asleep. After finishing work he regularly visited a café with his friends before coming home exhausted, ate a small snack, played a bit with the children and went to bed early. (...) "*

#### School days:

*"Also entering school as a social institution which would potentially be better suited than the domestic space/family for experiencing the mediatedness of human existence can hardly be recognized or perceived by Amal as such. This would also have been accompanied by the opportunity to expand her subjective control over social conditions. Even in school she spends most of her time with members of her family. She is so strongly involved in family life with its allocation of roles and tasks that school, learning, education a school diploma and later an apprenticeship or traineeship collide too violently with the strict clear and powerful 'normal biography' of an Arab Muslim woman, which is lived in her family and for which she receives social recognition: As a girl Amal was expected to come home immediately after school and stay there. In school she was not a particularly good pupil. However, she loved going to school because she could meet her girlfriends there. Her best school friends were her cousin and the daughter of a friend of her mother's who both joined her class. By contrast here brothers were mostly sent out again immediately after school into the courtyard to play football, to let off steam. (...) "*

#### Engagement and marriage:

*"Only when she became engaged to Ali was she allowed to leave the house in the afternoon in the company of her fiancé. The marriage was arranged by both families. She and Ali agreed. At that time Ali was 35 and was an employee by a second-hand car dealer. She was 17 and had just left school – but without a school diploma. The period of the engagement was the most pleasant time of her life. Everything changed. She got recognition from other women; Ali gave her expensive presents and took her around the city. She alone decided how the apartment should be furnished, her wedding dress was beautiful, many envied her. The wedding itself was a lavish feast, for a whole day she was the centre of attention, like a 'real princess' (...) "*

#### Important events/experience:

*"A girlfriend took her to the women's center which was to become an important support for her future life, but at that time it had absolutely no*

*significance for her. Only later does she resort to the women's center and its counseling service and receives support from other women in similar situations and from the professional counselors. She begins to reflect on her life and confronted with other lifestyles she eventually decides to confront the conditions, which limit her and demean her so strongly. Above all, this is the confrontation with ideas about family, marriage, relations between the sexes, the dominant standard ideas and role models."*

#### **4. Analytical horizon: The concrete living environment and the social space**

Through Amal's life narrative we receive a glimpse into various living environments.

*"First of all, we learn a great deal about the everyday life of a family in Germany whose ancestors come from an Arab country ("Well with us, with us in such an Arab family there are different rules than with the Germans"), what is called a 'cultural minority': In Amal's memory there was always a lot of things happening at home, it was noisy, there was lots of laughter, scolding and gossip. There was lots of cooking, baking, cleaning and tidying; beds were made and mattresses laid on the floor when relatives stayed for the night. As her sisters gradually got married and moved out, she took on more responsibility for the household and her younger brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces, who often came to visit. (...)*

*Secondly, we learn a great deal about everyday married life in an arranged marriage – the loyalties and the niches: She experienced her first discrepancy after the wedding when the whole hustle and bustle and the attention were over. Probably unconsciously, she had assumed that things would continue like that, that this was the start of a wonderful married life. But often Ali stayed away in the evenings with his friends in the café. She was at home on her own, looked at a lot of television, cleaned the apartment until it sparkled and tried to keep Ali longer at home by always cooking new meals. Only the birth of her first son regained for her again the recognition she had experienced at the wedding. She got lots of visitors, Ali doted on the little boy and stayed home in the evening more frequently. She had a lot to do looking after the baby. After having and raising three children – two boys and a girl – in the course of the years, the birth of her last daughter was not without problems. It was clear that she would not be able to bear any more children. After each birth Ali had again been at home more frequently at first, particularly at the weekends he looked after the kids a lot and spent a lot of time especially with the boys. After the birth of her last child, however, the amount of time he spent at home grew less again, in the evenings he often did not come home until*

*very late. For some time she had suspected that there was another woman behind this. There were indications – strange perfume on his clothes, the frequent business phone calls when he left the room; in a funny way he was much more attentive to her. Frequently he brought her small presents or took her in his arms. She did not dare to talk to him about it, her fear of the ‘truth’ was too great. She was certain he would not leave her, he was too attached to his children and his sense of duty and his fear of disappointing his and her families were too great. (...)*

*Thirdly, we receive a glimpse of everyday life in an urban housing development, what is called ‘social housing’, and into the family life of a working-class family in the city with all its joys, worries and difficulties: Only years later – in the meantime she was going regularly in the mornings to a women’s center that had opened on the housing estate – did the latent conflict with Ali come to a boil again. A girlfriend had taken her there. Mostly she met with other women there for breakfast while the children were at school or in the kindergarten. One morning a friend told her that she had seen Ali with another woman, on very intimate terms in a café. (...).”*

## **5. Analytical horizon: Historical change**

There is a series of global historical events that Amal has to relate or which her ancestors had to relate and which have consequences for Amal’s life.

*“Amal was born in Germany as the daughter of parents who themselves were born in a refugee center in an Arab country: The circumstances of her ancestors’ expulsion is one such “historical event” which is of significance in Amal’s biography to this day and to which she has to relate. There is a collective narrative about this expulsion. It followed a war, a so-called ‘man-made disaster’. Her parents’ migration to Germany was not, or was only partly voluntary. Admittedly, it was her parents’ decision to come to Germany, but the fact that they had to decide at all where they could or wanted to live in future and that this ‘freedom to decide’ was very narrowly limited because of their refugee status is connected with the expulsion of her grandparents.”*

*“Her grandparents were – like very many other people from this region – expelled violently from their country of origin because another nationality claimed to their country and seized it. Both families, which came from the same village, were made homeless from one day to the next and had at first to move into a provisional refugee camp – within sight of their house, which they were not allowed to enter any more. At first all the families in the refugee camp assumed, that it would be a temporary situation and that they would soon be able to return to their houses (...).”*

*"Further historical events which happened during her life were wars, massacres and dictatorships in the Middle and Far East as well as North Africa, which resulted in the flight of very many people. This happened precisely at the time Amal separated from Ali with the aid of the women's center and was looking for a job. In Germany a large number of people were being sought who spoke Arabic and other languages from the war zones and crisis regions and/or were familiar with 'the culture'. People with a migrant background from Muslim countries received a very different type of attention and social recognition in the 'care professions', but also in other jobs in shelters for refugees. This so-called 'language and cultural competence' suddenly became more important as a qualification for a job in this field than formal educational qualifications (but not for allocation to wage-scale groups and thus for pay). (...)"*

*"After gaining more and more confidence – first through small jobs as a home help and a child minder – and coming into discussion with other working women, she finally mustered up her courage and applied for an advertised job as an office clerk in an emergency shelter for refugees. She immediately clicked with the manager of the shelter. He accommodated her by splitting the advertised full-time position into a half-time position as an office assistant for Amal and a half-time office clerk position for another applicant with the appropriate formal qualifications."*

#### **IV. Conclusions regarding methodology and method for subject-scientific biographical research**

Based on the analysis of the biography of the fictional person Amal an attempt has been made to illustrate which areas and horizons can be examined more closely to arrive at an understanding of the reasons why during the course of her life a person acted, felt and thought exactly the way she did in the situations described. It is very much dependent on the specifics of the concrete life narrative and of course on the research interest and questions which theoretical and/or analytical horizons have the greatest weight and promise to provide insights. They can be used as a theory-led grid which constitutes a sort of counter-balance in order to prevent one from becoming stuck on one direction or another, or trying, in the course of one's own learning process, to grasp the biographical context, always taking the whole into consideration again and again.

There are a number of conclusions regarding the method arising from the theoretical horizons described above for subject-scientific biographical research, which can be formulated as theses:

### **1. The narrated life history:**

Taking the first theoretical horizon outlined above into account, it is necessary to document the situation(s) in which the life history is being told in as much detail as possible. Especially illuminating for later analysis can be the researcher's observations, irritations and reflections on the interaction experienced. These include the entire 'common history' from the first contact, the run-up to the narration of the life history and the editing, the discussions, remarks, interactions which take place before the recording device has been switched on and after it has been switched off. Field notes can be very helpful; they can then be transferred to and tidied up in memos/observation protocols. Information about current living conditions, the topics, problems and interests should also be recorded in written memos, particularly if these do not appear in the narrated life history. The researcher herself is part of this process in which the biography is reconstructed.

### **2. Biographical learning:**

The problem with biographical learning processes is that, as a rule, they are not described as such by the biographers themselves. The attention is focused on the contents, the actions, the conclusions, the expansion of control gained, but not on the learning process itself. Schulze (2005) has attempted to identify learning processes based on the autobiography of Marc Chagall. "First of all, we must develop a sort of feel for process of the biographical process, for its characteristics, outlines and conditions. There are what could be called signatures resulting from our understanding of learning: 'For the first time' and 'Again and again' or 'From then on' or 'Earlier...' and 'Later...'. In Chagall's biography we frequently encounter such designations of a particular point in time" (Schulze, 2005, p. 46). However, these are – as Schulze says – only indications of starting points, stages in the learning process, but it is important "that one is able to see the contours of the complete learning process as if it were a bird's eye view of the course of river" (Schulze, 2005, p. 46).

In this phase of the data evaluation it is therefore a matter of looking at the entire narrated life history again and not losing oneself in analysis of details. What overarching topics are there which appear again and again in different manifestations and forms in the various phases of life? What differentiates the way they are handled? Is it possible to identify a "higher level" from which the biographer reacted to problems regarding action in later phases of her biography compared with earlier ones? What is new?

### 3. The biographical process:

Narratives about the biographer's childhood should be particularly taken into account with regard to the process types formulated by Holzkamp. From what point is it possible for adolescents to 'relate to' in the first place? "For the adult his childhood is firstly a particular part of his earlier life which, on the one hand, he 'remembers' more or less well in various episodes and of which he 'knows', on the other hand, that he 'developed' there under certain living conditions and social-institutional relationships into what he is today: this 'adult'. (...) In each case his childhood appears to him as something past and done with which one now no longer cannot change in any way" (Holzkamp, 1985, pp. 498). The reconstruction of the biography also contains the opportunity to develop a conscious relationship to one's own childhood through narrating and jointly analyzing it. "To overcome the "hostility towards oneself" represented by restricted ability to act I must also gain a conscious relationship with my own childhood, i.e. I must be able to see through my modes of experiencing/coping during early childhood to the past premises of their subjective merit/functionality; and thus realize that I am no longer a child and, insofar as I attempt to cope with my problems in a 'childish manner', I am barring the way to objective and subjective improvement of my life circumstances" (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 506). However, a biographical interview is not a therapeutic process. Therefore, to what extent space can be given and taken for analysis of childhood in the research process and to what extent this is desired – by the biographer/co-researcher and the interviewer/researcher – must be negotiated in each individual case and is also dependent on the 'gravity' of the person's childhood and on the biographical topics.

### 4. The living environment and the social space:

As a rule, additional interdisciplinary social analyses are necessary in this step. "In other words, one can understand a trajectory (that is, the social aging which is independent of the biological aging although it inevitably accompanies it) only on condition of having previously constructed the successive states of the field through which the trajectory has progressed. Thus, the collection of objective relations link the agent considered – at least in a certain number of pertinent states – to the collection of other agents engaged in the same field and facing the same realm of possibilities" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 6). Or to put it another way: "The necessity of this *detour* through the construction of space seems so evident as soon as it is stated – who would think to recall a trip without having an idea of the landscape in which it took place?" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 7). It can be helpful in

this step to develop hypotheses about a possible ‘normal biography’ – as close as possible to the data by systematically reworking the sequences where the biographer addresses the desires, fantasies and expectations others have for her and her life.

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