
Professional identity as learning processes in life histories

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Abstract

Refers to work domains that might be termed professional or semi-professional: engineers, social workers, nurses, pedagogues, police, and researches the subjective engagement of the people in the development of their profession. Considers how to theorize the subjective side of work within a life history perspective and focuses on a critical discussion of the notion of professional identity. This theorizing is seen as a complementary contribution to a critical sociology of knowledge and other concepts of profession identity and learning.

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Background

This article is based on comprehensive empirical material from a couple of specific research projects with slightly different aims. One project dealt with the labour market of engineering, and with engineers' subjective recognition of their lives, their educational and job career, and their life perspectives. A total of 17 individual life history interviews have been conducted (with Anders Buch and Tania Christensen). The other project dealt with continuing education within a number of white collar and semiprofessional work domains, preferably human services. In this project, 20 individual life history interviews were conducted (with Mette Vestergaard Hansen).

Why focus on professionals and professionalization: reflexivity and expert society?

To understand what happens in the workplace you need to look outside. This is true when talking about the objective structural and technological aspects. It is no less true for subjective aspects – identity and learning. Our interviews exposed a close interrelation between professional learning and personal development. I think this has a far reaching perspective as a spearhead of a general development. The demand for a lifelong qualifying process for work will include an ever growing demand for/enabling of personal development in the form of a subjective involvement and taking responsibility, at the same time as work will rely ever more on specialized competencies and societal division of labour. More and more people may become professionals and semi-professionals in the double sense of being knowledge based and subjectively involved in their role within the division of labour. At the same time, however, the relation between knowledge and subjectivity, is becoming more delicate. In the classical professionalization, the individual subjectivity is more or less entirely integrated in a professional identity, based on unquestioned expertise, and often connected with a great but well-defined power. If the trinity of expert status, knowledge, and subjective involvement on the one hand has been spread to a larger part of the population, then the

relation within the trinity on the other hand becomes more multiple and fluid. The political implications seem obvious.

The ambition with a life history approach to knowledge and competence could be to establish a critical complementary to the knowledge sociology, which can connect the critique of rationalities with the social practices of everyday life. It should ground the idea about social dynamic in concrete identified historical subjects – and thereby also in the question about their learning processes. Professionals are individuals who, in a specifically direct way, incorporate the societal knowledge, and on an institutional level professions stabilize subjective views and practices.

Profession and subjectivity

Within theory of modernization professionalisation appears as a moment in rationalisation of society – and the professionals therefore as those agents in whom the contradiction between the aspects “reason” and “reification” is directly embodied. We could also see the individual subjective actions as historically concrete versions of societal rationalities – and so professional practice as one of the forms in which contradictions and dynamics of this rationality is embodied. That becomes particularly interesting exactly due to the briefly outlined development of a reflexive, knowledge-based society, which penetrates everything and so to say “secularize” rationality into a battle field within the social practice and somebody’s subjective action.

The professionalisation of public human services may be even better than older professions, e.g. engineering, illustrates that the division of labour and the knowledge-based specialisation penetrates ever more comprehensive parts of the life world; or, to put it differently: reflexivity as a characteristic of modernity is not an individual, but a societal quality, organized in division of labour and differentiation of individuals’ conditions for learning and knowing.

There is a tendency in work life research to examine subjective phenomena as attachments to the sociological, technological and economical conception of work. The inner and independent dynamics of subjective development phenomena are mostly not

accounted for – or if they are – then in entirely psychological concepts, which do not conceptually integrate societal contextual factors – here especially work. The basic theoretical problem is to establish a theoretical understanding of two separate yet interdependent dynamics – social history and life history.

Professional learning as a personal development in the human services

We have been very interested to find out which emphasis people put on work relatively, how their life spheres interact, how they themselves define their relation to work. Work identity and professional identity are ways of apprehending meaning to work in general and to specific contents of the work – of course it reflects what the work offers/ demands – but it is primarily a subjective assigning of meaning. The subjective relation to the profession and to specific contents of the job is grounded in a life history context, and therefore very individual. They are however not individual case stories – there are gender, generation and cultural relations interwoven with educational system and labour market structures.

We have been able to recognize four different work and professional identities across different professional domains, though with very different frequency in each domain (Figure 1). Each quadrant represents a prevailing, though not exclusive, way of relating yourself to work.

The two on the top refer mainly to an engagement in the content of the work, and the two lower ones mainly to some form of instrumental outcome – and you may also more or less distinguish a dimension of historical development in the sectors. Since the sectors are extremely different in the quality of the work, in work organization, in recruitment and career structure – and for example in gender composition – these labels do mean something different in each sector or profession.

The people we have interviewed within human services are deeply involved in their professional-development – most often it is not possible to distinguish clearly a professionally-oriented learning and a personal development – they interfere and

Figure 1 Four different work and professional identities

Craftsman	Professional
Wage Labour	Career/Position Orientation

together form a life history with learning, blockings and leaps.

For some, the interaction between developments in the life spheres is a conscious life strategy. A pedagogue, who took regular university degree programmes, going far beyond the profession and at the same time continuing her work career, had arranged her life course so that she would pause and have children – having scheduled when she could continue – just as she had previously interrupted studies in order to take a post as an institution head. To her, the challenges of the job and professional education were subjective development options, not just meaningful in relation to the work sphere – recognizing however that you cannot do everything all the time.

A nurse was trained in traditional practise-oriented nursing and had been professionally active throughout her career, including taking specialist courses. At the time of the interview she had moved the emphasis of her involvement from work into interesting and challenging leisure activities. In her presentation it appears that this choice has to do with a certain alienation to the latest development of her concrete job – she has consequently defined a professional role and a leisure activity which complement each other, arranging her life differently from before.

It is characteristic for several nurses that they feel professionalisation and the “academizing” of their domain as a threat to what they see as the core content. They became nurses at a time where the core function was practical caring and the human contact with the patients. Their professional competence is communicatively rooted in practical experience. This appears to be a gendered work socialisation, however we have observed the same approach to the profession from male nurses. The common label “crafts(wo)man” covers the rooting in concrete work processes, even if the female nurses may have imported it from their

general gender socialisation and their housewife competences. The present development in the profession puts demands on them that they are not able to – or do not want to – honour.

I will present a more detailed case, another teacher, who herself emphasized a high level of identification with the teaching profession. She also, however, feels that she has to reduce her professional involvement and reports disappointments in her job. She has had children after several years of work career – and the children and her family offered new opportunities for her.

Vibeke: 24-hour teacher

Vibeke is married, 39 years, and has two children (3 and 7 years). She has a strong identification with her profession – she “thinks as a teacher 24 hours”, and has done so all her life. What ever she experiences and sees, is considered as a potential contribution to her teaching. As a teacher she has an engagement far beyond normal work hours. And, as she thinks, in teaching you are always working with your entire personality – it is difficult to see yourself as wage labour.

She gives glimpses of a childhood experience with her father who was a “literate worker” and who has strongly influenced her curiosity and interest into learning. She has internalized this attitude as a part of a general attitude. To be a teacher is a part of Vibeke’s personal identity, and she has been very devoted to the profession ever since she finished studying. She has been working most of the time in a private school with a quite high ambition and responsibility.

Working conditions for teachers have changed quite a bit during the latest few years, she feels. New regulations of duties, more detailed than previous ones, have influenced notably everyday life in the school. This way of counting the minutes does not comply with Vibeke’s conception of an involved teacher, because she thinks it

strangles the involvement and initiative from the side of the teachers. Also a change in the educational tasks has taken place, influencing the working conditions. The mission of the school today is comprehensive, it is expected to manage all the problems of the pupils, at the same time as the proportion of “problematic kids” is increasing. The result is a reduction in time for what Vibeke sees as the core of teaching, the solid teaching of school subjects. Altogether it has influenced her experience of work conditions, which now seem to be uncertain and contradictory to her professional identity. The structural requirements towards the work cannot comply with her professional identity, and the job satisfaction is severely reduced.

Vibeke has always devoted much energy to her work, but as she raised a family with husband and children she began to prioritize family life. It has become more difficult to identify with the role of teacher to the same degree as before. The dilemma also appears to Vibeke to be partly gendered – as children arrive, one of the partners will have to reduce professional and educational activities for some years – most often the woman.

Vibeke now sees herself in a situation where working conditions, as well as her own life course, imply a shift in her professional ambition. A high level of professionalism is difficult to maintain throughout a whole life, and Vibeke is facing a shift where her professional orientation is influenced by other circumstances, that seem to drive her in the direction of a more wage labour-like orientation – in spite of her feeling a high degree of identification with the profession.

We cannot know how her professional life would have developed had she not had her children now – maybe she has already earlier in her career encountered equally big difficulties, but handled them or tolerated them because she was not in a position to choose the children – or maybe she would at that time have changed her job instead of resigning a little bit, as now.

The subjective dynamic in this work identification is certainly strong. The positive image of “the good teacher” is nourished from her memory of a childhood with her father – a memory which qualifies the professional identity as an autonomous expression.

Where did real engineering go? The vanishing professional identity

The engineering profession is – differing from human services – a well-established profession. It has settled a strong, though not necessarily very distinct, image of “real engineering” with the professionals. The most striking aspect of the engineers is that they tend to see their own job as not real engineering. Standard engineering work with technical problem solving and construction based on specialised knowledge and within a differentiated organisation is actually disappearing – following technology development and new organization of production – but nevertheless, the image of it is still there. Engineers’ relation to their specific jobs is thus mediated through this image, and its subjective meaning in itself. Beside of course, they relate immediately to the concrete qualities of their work.

The image of the profession seems in itself to have a double meaning: it implies the idea about exciting and challenging tasks with good opportunities for self-realization – the opportunity for the expert to do something important – and at the same time it guarantees social security and a social position.

We have observed with the engineers a substantial element of security orientation – many seem to have chosen the career because it contains “adventurous” expectations together with security. Even with some of the women we interviewed, who in one sense have made a daring and unusual career choice, we find that they are, in other important respects, playing safe with this career.

There is of course a rich variety in the material – for example, the son of a gründer entrepreneur, i.e. a craftsman who developed an industry – who more or less by fate takes over the profession as well as the family industry. Or the young female engineer who had been inspired by her father’s work as an independent (engineering) consultant, and who was herself good at math and physics. She plays safe – but in the end she leaves the profession in order to establish her own design enterprise because her dynamism and creativity could not find a way within the (masculine) division of labour of engineering.

The individual engineers do not necessarily complain about not doing “real engineering” – they find their ways – I shall only mention a few of them to explain the variety and the dimensions.

Peter is a classical engineer by life history – son of a craftsman, not very interested in school except in science subjects – leaves school for an apprenticeship – and later finds out that he wants to know more. In the meantime, much of his energy was structured by the liberation movements of youth in the early 1970s, and he remains an anti-authoritarian person – which is an obstacle to the developments in his work life: he is expected not to be “tinker technician” but to become a manager or consulting collaborator. His concrete life history decisions are very much influenced by private life and family.

Carsten is a quite young engineer – who chose the profession because of a fascination with technical work, and gets employed in a development unit of a retail market-oriented enterprise. However, he appreciates the social aspects of work life, and feels a little lonely in this job, but finds his way in some technical support work, mediating between technical and market organization. In the meanwhile he devotes much energy to private life and local community – and coincidentally a biker club and a Harley Davidson. By the time of the interview he was oriented to travelling around the world on his bike – work was OK but subordinate.

Lotte enters engineering because of concern with the environment, and after graduation she gets involved in administrative jobs, dealing with environment safeguarding. Like most women in engineering she meets some difficulties, but after a while she is very satisfied with her present job. The content of the job seems to be mainly social, and Lotte feels her original motivation with the engineering fulfilled – though the technical content of the job seems to be very modest. She likes to work in dialogue with the people she has to control.

The vanishing positive background for the “real engineering” takes the engineers in different directions. One might say that the way of handling it is digressive, in the sense that they tend to dislocate their interest from the profession and the technical qualification in it – it is problematic to say in which sense the ways engineers find is also producing a

new professional identity. Maybe the complexity and differentiation has since long made it impossible to define this dialectic relation between basic knowledge base and profession, and individual experience and career. The historical-normative reference is definitely not able to organize learning processes for a professional identity – the question is whether there is one. Lotte seems more than the others on track to a new identity by integrating professional responsibility with her own political or civil involvement. Her identification with the opportunities of the profession in a moral or political context seems to organize her professional learning in everyday work.

Theoretical approaches: the concept of identity

I would like to explore the concept of identity, which signifies the subjective component of the mutually interrelated structures and processes of the work society. In everyday language, the notion assumes a successful accordance between a coherent individual and a social reality (including work) which is, at least from the point of view of the individual, integral.

This is in many respects an ideological and false perception. Especially for adult education it removes the potential for understanding the dynamics of learning as a result of the dynamic and conflictual interaction with reality, performed by a subject with its own inner dynamics and conflicts. Why then speak about “work identity” when it seems awkward to our interest? – Mainly exactly because it is ideological in a marxist sense: it delimits the right problem in a wrong way that is produced by real human practice. So a critical elaboration of it may serve a theory building purpose. Let us assume that it is only a preliminary and indicative notion, covering a contradictory and dynamic subjective process, coping with a contradictory and complex reality of the societal work.

Volmerg’s (1978) study of the identity threatening quality of industrial work sees identity as the subjective capacity to establish defense mechanisms, and so stand industrial work in capitalism. As an alternative (to dominant Erikson) frame of understanding

(Erikson, 1968), Volmerg refers to Lorenzer's materialist, though not biologically reductive, theory of socialization (Lorenzer, 1972). The biological development and the social interaction around the needs of the child gradually produces the individual subjectivity. The mother-child dyad is the first "common subject" for this production of patterns of practice. Later, through the gradual separation of the child from the mother, the interaction becomes the production process of the interaction patterns of the child, and the acquisition of language. Or, through the separation and the interaction with physical and social reality, the child gradually builds up its individual subjectivity. Subjectivity in this theory is a societally produced, culturally mediated way of coping, which is specific for each individual, and closely related to language. Contradictions of societal structure are built into a systematically contradictory, though individual, subjectivity. A similar understanding of the production of subjectivity, though in a quite different context, can be found in part of feminist rethinking of psychoanalysis (e.g. Benjamin, 1988, ch. 1). In opposition to Erikson's cultural concept of society, leaning on Lorenzer's very basic definition of the material character of the social, Volmerg sees the societal work as the basic identity building factor, in the mediated form in which it appears in the interaction of the individual child with its primary relatives/relations persons. When the individual later interacts with and in work, he/she draws on interaction patterns produced in the early socialization.

Volmerg provides an outline of a psychoanalytic psychology of work, which specifies human labour as a produced subject, and the ways in which the subject relates to work as a societal reality. However, critical theory should not (only) be a fixative which elucidates and preserves this epochal picture of the relation work identity/industrial work. It must conceive how individual subjects and societal work produced by each, and detect the historical genesis and changeability of this interaction. Identity was seen as a delimitation of a field of interaction and conflict, and we must analyze work as a field for an ongoing production of subjectivity. Societal displacements and shifts on the one side, and individual life histories, with their experiences of society, are different registers and rhythms.

Contradiction and ambivalence

Lorenzer's (1972) theory of socialization sees the individual psychological development as an acquisition of an individual variant of society and culture, a concrete mediation of societal structures and contradictions in subjective orientations and meanings – in this perspective "identity" makes sense as an individual ability to (re)produce and differentiate this subjective experience when relating to the actual reality and its new phenomena.

Becker-Schmidt *et al.* (1984) researched the subjective relation to work of female industrial workers – especially the double work as housewives and workers in industrial jobs with lousy conditions and very limited space for subjective action. This analysis assigns work a much more complex and multiple meaning than Volmerg, without in any way intending to idealize the industrial work. On the one side it analyses the concrete and societal contradictions in work, focusing on the experience of time. On the other side it searches traces of subjective conflicts of meaning – ambivalencies and ambivalences – in the way of handling these conditions of everyday life. Objective contradictions are mediated through their subjective meaning. Ambitendency and ambivalence are rooted in objective contradictions.

The theoretical point in these additional notions is – beside an analytical differentiation – that they relate the concept of identity to the complexity and changeability of real history. On the one side a life history dimension – subjective meanings must be interpreted as possessions through life history, that are structured by initial socialization, but are also dynamic potentials throughout life – or in this context: learning potentials. On the other side to study the objective dynamic in its own right – an open examination of the new developments of work, and the subjective appreciation of changes and trends. We may now – theoretically – understand how the societal contradiction of professions – as the bearers of rationality and democracy as well as instrumentalized and reified vehicles of capitalism and social control – define contradictory conditions for professional identity production. And how the learning processes of professional workers' lives, and

their subjective involvement in everyday work processes form a societal force – you might call it a politicization of work.

To include the learning process, as well as the political quality, we might substitute or complement the concept of identity with a more anticipating theoretical notion which can search for and contain a learning aspect as well as an active and shaping involvement in work. Self-regulation could be such a comprehending notion. This notion comes from the Frankfurt School sociologist Oskar Negt (Olesen, 1999, p. 17f), and it refers to autonomy as well as a certain balancing “ecological” relation to societal (and natural) conditions. The development of new types of work could be examined in the perspective of their potentials for enhancing self-regulation, and the subjective involvement as a learning process. Self-regulation may have a voluntaristic connotation or it may be perceived as a regulation within and controlled by a capitalist setting. The intention, on the contrary, is to emphasize the utopian and dynamic potentials in everyday work life learning. It should also be clear from the discussion about the social production of subjectivity that I am not assuming an essential self, or a “free actor”.

Institutional discourse and experience – defense and learning

I think we could see the identity process as an ongoing concern of the professional in a field with two main objective elements: the practice of his/her work, with its more or less contradictory and coercive conditions, and with social interactions with other people (colleagues and clients), missions and changes to which the professional has to and wants to relate. And a cultural institution consisting of the profession as an institution (with legal or moral bands) and a professional discourse (academic or habitual).

A life history approach applies in order to “see the social institutions and discourses from below and in social practice” – but also in order to see the subjective contribution of the learning persons to the profession and its development. This is quite simple, yet I think it has fundamental implications, that could be specified in relation to well known, important theoretical positions.

Let us for a moment go back to the case of Vibeke. By content her professional identity is relating to a normative definition of the core of the teachers work: the solid teaching in school subjects. A great endeavour and a strong involvement in teaching have been organized in this identity – and probably still are, in spite of her feeling increased difficulties. It has been in accordance with a specific school and situation, but has left her more vulnerable to “social work aspects” of education and to changes in the tasks.

This profession model can be identified as one out of two dominant profession definitions of teachers, that have accompanied the modernization of school. The other one is an academically-based technical definition of a pedagogue. During a historical process where teachers have lost their traditional aura, and have resigned from the personification of moral and cultural values, teachers have (had to) become professional pedagogues or competent subject teachers – which is not exactly the same.

Vibeke’s professional identity has guided and encouraged her, but also restricted her learning potential. The way she now sees the pupils as increasingly problematic indicates an exclusive aspect of this discourse. You could see this double-sided quality in line with a Foucault-inspired discussion of the professionalization of education like Popkewitz and Simola (1996). Beside the critical quality of a Foucauldian approach, which reveals the repressive aspects of discourses, and the specific social interest constellation behind in this case Finnish academization of education, Popkewitz and Simola also have an awareness of the empowering aspects. This is not just a triviality – we do know of alternatives to professionalization of teaching when traditional structures of morality and culture fail: dissolution and anomia, or authoritarian mechanisms. So the professionalization as an empowerment is highly political, and depends on the learning process of teachers, i.e. the building of collective consciousness, knowledge and practices.

This is also a subjective process. A (school-) subject-oriented definition of teaching is a way of handling the modern loss of auratic status of the teacher and the school, a legitimate position which enables a shield against a generally excessive burden

on a teacher's consciousness. For Vibeke this discourse of teaching and teacher identity seems to be an obstacle to meeting new demands. It was synthesized with the life history identification with her father who was a role model very similar to the "traditional" teacher – a personalization of thirst for knowledge and a caring authority. The shift in her own family situation puts her under pressure – she has to reduce or change her way of identifying with the profession (learn something new). Vibeke's explanation, that the new quality of children does not allow her to reach her ideal teacher's image, is clearly one of defence – not mainly against any management demand or formal requirement, but against the vision; or a utopian drive inherited in the professional identity, against which Vibeke has to defend her position. Right now Vibeke needs to be relieved of some burdens or feeling of responsibility that she might have taken up in another situation of her life. We do not know enough to evaluate whether she will resign from her professional self-definition or enter into a learning process about the new demands and developing new responses.

The relation of the individual to developments in work, to learning and to continuing education is deeply interwoven in meaning universes of life history. The amalgamation between loving and caring father, "literate worker", and school subjects could possibly have been differentiated by class, history, relation, etc. Life history may assign specific meanings and ambivalences to experiences and so shape the tension between defence reactions and learning potentials, that are available in the situation in the form of institutional discourses and other people's experiences. This is the subjective dynamic of identity. A life history approach to professional learning provides

one way – among others – to enter into the historical and subjective process of professions' crossroads of development, with the implications drawn in the introduction of this article.

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