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# **“Work? I Have Learned to Live with It”: A Biographical Perspective on Work, Learning and Living... ...More than Just a Story**

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**Abstract:** *A biographical perspective on living and learning is more than an outgrowth or continuation of current individualisation processes. Stories of women about work and life, show that the notion of biography holds possibilities to create other meaningful connections between individual and society than those nowadays judged problematic or at loss.*

## **Biographies Fixing Lives**

“Biography” is often used as a category to describe and analyse the impact of complex social processes on the lives of individuals. Moreover, it suggests something about the way people (have to) deal with the changing characteristics and demands of life in society today. Concepts such as “selfreflexive biography” (Giddens, 1991) and “learning biography” (Alheit, 1992) point to the fact that nowadays, when collective guidelines and frames of reference lose their power to give shape and meaning to individual and social life, individuals are both free and obliged to make proper decisions to create and make sense of their life.

In ever new and changing circumstances individuals “fix their lives.” This term, introduced by Fischer-Rosenthal (1998), articulates well the ambivalent significations of biography. The dominant conception refers to the “restoration” of what has been lost as a result of the destandardisation of the life course. While the blueprint of the normal life course is fading, people are being held personally responsible to keep up with and adapt to the fast social developments. The lifelong learning discourse tries to persuade them to acquire the qualifications necessary for a good position in the labour market. Moreover, they have to look for alternative and convincing ways for personal meaning giving. The notion of “fixing life” as a necessary survival reaction to current processes of individualisation, tends to reinforce the negative and estranging effects of these processes. We want to stress another way of understanding “fixing life,” namely in the sense of

“activating and creating anew” different possibilities for meaningful connections between individual and social life. Biographies can indeed be considered as personal answers to the current social situation, thereby bearing witness to agency. They show that individuals succeed in leading their life, making justifiable choices and handling new challenges in serendipitous relation to their social context and the given opportunity structures (Alheit, 1995; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

From this point of view, the concept of biography has a surplus value in social research. For it holds the promise to do justice to the variety and multiplicity of concrete life practices, in contrast with the normative and unifying model of the institutionalised life course. The biographical approach is in fact popular in feminist research because it aims to explore and develop alternative views of and experiences with reality. It is also attractive for adult education research, in view of understanding the learning and action of individuals in relation to their social context. This biographical perspective on agency and biographical approach towards research inspire and guide our work.

## **Biographical Research on Women Learning for Work**

Our research project is situated against the background of analyses of the present-day society and starts from the presupposition that both the relation between individualisation and labour market participation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Geldof, 1999) and between individualisation and

lifelong learning (Born, 1999) apply differently to men and women. While paid labour is still conceived of as the pre-eminent way towards self-development and social integration, the current organisation of our labour market seems to have reached some limits. It can no longer realise the cherished emancipatory expectations. New opportunities and liberties for women are restricted. Lifelong learning pretends to open up other possibilities, yet it simultaneously does not fulfill the emancipatory ambitions. Lifelong learning practices today are mainly geared towards the labour market and to a large extent reproduce the dominant mechanisms, thereby neglecting other domains or ways of learning. For women, standardised pathways of life and work do not make real sense any longer. Women today have to make their own choices, give their own meaning to acquired rights in a desirable and responsible manner and create and appropriate new life styles. From this point of departure, we are primarily interested in knowing how women learn to handle the multiple and ambivalent realities of work in their lives, while relating meaningfully their biography to broader social issues. Next, we want to learn about the role adult education and training play in (stimulating and supporting) these learning processes.

In order to obtain a grounded understanding (Strauss, 1987) of these issues, we conducted a qualitative research in different stages. After a literature study, we empirically explored current social perspectives on women, labour and emancipation in Flanders, Belgium. We had interviews with representatives of different organisations covering all relevant social fields. This exploration of the public debate on women and labour shed light on the context in which individual learning processes of women take place. Later, we had biographical narrative interviews with eight women. Each of them experiences work as a crucial element in the reorientation of their life and they all seek support in various adult education practices to realise this change. As a final stage of the research, we will discuss our results in focusgroups with adult educators and engage in a joint reflection on adult education practice.

An important aspect of our research is the continuous interplay between our empirical

interview data, our sensitising concepts and the developing theoretical insights. While illustrating this constant and iterative interpretation process, we focus in this paper on the biographies of two (out of the eight) women telling us their life story as part of our research. We give meaning to their lives from a biographical perspective and make a distinction between biographical reflectivity and biographical agency in relation to the work and learning women do. Adult education initiatives are understood as providers of particular social practices (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997) in which these learning processes can, amongst others, come about.

### **The “Work” Women Do**

#### *Magda’s Story: A Standard Life Course ... or Biographical Agency*

Magda grows up as the youngest in a family of merchants with nine children. It is her child’s dream to have one day a shop of her own. After the school years, she gets married, has a son and stops working as an office assistant. A daughter is born. She takes the role of mother and housewife to heart. When her husband sets up his own business in their home, it feels as if he is penetrating her world. While taking up the book-keeping task next to all other activities, she loses control of her doings. As the children grow older, she feels more and more restricted. She looks for a way to break free from the “patterns” that limit her actions. Magda decides to attend evening-classes orienting her towards the baker business. Two years after having finished this training, she opens her special shop for the hobby baker. New horizons are opening up.

At first sight Magda’s life course resembles the normal work biography of women: a period of work is interrupted by a period of family care, leading to new activity in the work force later on (Born, 1999). When focusing on her life story however, on the sense she makes of the events and choices in her life, several aspects and multiple layers of meaning appear. For Magda, work is a way of proving herself, of realising her potentialities. It is something she wants to do on her own, taking full responsibility, independently from both her brothers and sisters who have set an example and her husband. She considers and discusses alternative options to reorient her life in the intimate sphere of

her family, takes a decision and succeeds in making it come true, in due time. In this light, attending the baker's training can be considered as a multi-layered strategy. It is a way to exercise her hobby (fitting her role as a housewife), to get qualified in book-keeping (useful for her "job" as cooperating spouse), and to keep the possibility open to start her own business (and realise her dream). This multitude of meanings also characterises her final re-entry into the labour market. Her shop is not only a means to realise herself and to be independent. She tries to relate her own project and development to a particular view on labour in our society. Individually, her hobby becomes her job. Socially, she brings together the world of work and the world of leisure, while contributing to meaningful leisure time activities. In this way Magda makes a meaningful connection between her self, her life project and life story on the one hand and opportunities on the labour market on the other.

*Denise's Story: A Fragmented Life Course ... or a Selfreflexive Biography*

Denise is a single woman without children. As a young girl she loses her father and becomes her mother's "partner". After finishing school, she goes to university. When obtaining her diploma, she doesn't feel able to meet the demands related to someone with a university degree. She finds a job in the sector which she is qualified for, yet it is below her university degree level. She does not like the job and is relieved when the contract ends. She gets involved in the socio-cultural sector as a volunteer. This she finds interesting and challenging, yet, it takes too much of her energy because she has not been professionally trained for it. Denise decides to participate in a training for polyvalent employee and gets a job as a secretary. This routinised job does not suit and frustrates her, while pushing her to person oriented courses and even to therapy seeking for help. Her participation to an international seminar on work and a stay abroad give her back her basic trust. Back home, she has difficulty in taking up the thread. She starts working in a flower shop, but is dismissed soon. Ever since, she has been out of a regular job. She attends another vocational training programme which does not bring her more luck on the labour market. Denise is back

in therapy, signs up for several career counselings, takes in interim jobs. Meanwhile she is in another training programme.

Denise's life course is very capricious. At first sight, it seems like a messy, tangled succession of periods of working, unemployment, training, counseling, therapy,... She herself calls it "drifting". Nevertheless, her life story witnesses a certain continuity and coherence, relating different choices and experiences to each other and to her own self. Denise considers her life as a search for the self, for the person she really is. Work is very important for her in this respect. It is the most important way to participate in society. At the same time, she is very critical of the current flexible and stressful labour market and does not want to be part of it. She wants to find herself a suitable job, while also countering the labour market. On the one hand, Denise identifies herself with paid labour. On the other hand, she tries to (and because of her negative work experiences, has to) develop a strong personality apart from work. Denise stresses that she has gained insight in her relation to work, via therapy, from the confrontations of her work aspirations with the real work offers. She feels work does not create opportunities for her. On the contrary, it makes her get stuck, because it is either too easy and frustrating, or too difficult and challenging. Denise reflects on and analyses several options for training and work, but has not yet made a real choice to go for.

*Working on the Self*

Interpreting the life stories of Magda and Denise, we came across some ambiguities. Central in the two biographies is the development of the self. The multiple meanings, ambivalences and contradictions in the different story themes and threads however, raise questions about the existence of such an authentic self.

*An authentic self.* It is striking that both women are, in their own way and rhythm, (re)constructing their self/selves in relation to society. According to Fenwick, women see work as "a journey to identify, uncover, release, invent, nurture and struggle with an inner core that they clearly thought of as 'the' self" (1998, p. 200). This seems indeed to be true for Magda and Denise. In the present stage of their

life, they are both relating work to the development of and the search for the self. Magda wants to manifest herself as an independent and responsible woman who can realise her dreams and take care of a business, next to being a wife and mother. Denise tries, in search of work, to get in touch with her own real self, her inner strength.

*The illusion of coherence.* Noticing the continuously changing meanings of work and the multiplicity of ambivalent selves in the stories these women told us, we wonder whether a coherent authentic self is not an illusion (Bloom, 1996). Do complexes of interweaving story threads point to fragmentation and incoherence? Or can they be understood as other, alternative, but meaningful representations of conflicting roles, perspectives and selves? Do they represent another kind of narratives which can contribute to make non-dominant realities and experiences visible and acceptable? And aren't we exactly interested in these alternative, self-willed ways of giving shape to work, biography and the self? From this point of view, Magda's biography should not be understood as the classic story of a successful re-entry. This would wrongly simplify her particular decision making process and mixed aspirations in different social fields. And the story of Denise is perhaps not just confusing and deviating. Maybe it reflects a specific logic to combine real ambiguous and contradictory events, feelings, experiences and situations.

*Biographical reflectivity and agency.* The striking difference between the two stories can be better understood when we make a distinction between biographical reflectivity and biographical agency. Magda has not only taken her time to change something in her situation, considering and discussing several options. She has eventually made a decision and carried it out. Denise on the contrary, is still looking for ways to develop her self in relation to meaningful work. Except for her commitment in counseling and training courses, she has not really taken any biographical action. At this moment in her life, Magda seems to have found a balance between the reconstruction of past choices and events and the construction of a project for the future. She has realised one of her dormant un-lived lives (Alheit, 1995). For Denise, the reflexive retrospection of past experiences takes a lot of her time and energy,

at the cost of prospective agency. She is thinking about and comparing her possible selves.

### **Biographical Learning in Social Practices**

#### *Participating in Social Practices*

Usher, Bryant, & Johnston (1997) look at learning as a social practice, a continuous interplay between the (re-)construction of subjectivity and the social reality. They distinguish four social practices in which learning processes of adults can be situated: vocational practices, lifestyle practices, confessional practices and critical practices. Returning to the stories of Magda and Denise, we can say that they engage in several of these practices: attending vocational training, taking up all sorts of courses, being in therapy, doing voluntary work, ... But how is their participation in these practices linked with the biographical development of their self on the one hand and adult education initiatives on the other? How does their learning come into being, and how is it supported and stimulated? We only have partial preliminary answers to these questions.

Magda does not only decide to participate in the baker's training with the intention to re-enter the labour market. It is a strategy serving several aims. Only in retrospect it becomes clear which option she was able to realise. It seems that the vocational training could only be successful because it made sense to Magda at a certain time, in combination with other developing aspects in her life and opportunities on the labour market. Moreover, she gives a wilful shape to the result of the training, connecting individual aspirations and social issues.

Denise participated in divergent kinds of training, counseling and educational practices. She herself perceives an evolution and meaning in this "consumption" of initiatives. First, she turned to courses directed to the transfer and acquisition of (general) knowledge. Afterwards, she was more interested in learning new skills. Finally, she needed initiatives which helped her on her way to personal growth and understanding. This evolution mirrors her learning: it is not knowledge or skill she is lacking, but she feels hindered by her (lack of insight in her) self. All educational practices Denise was involved in, are given meaning from this perspective and in view of Denise's personal search. In this way, the predetermined educational goals are not

reached. Not a single vocational training in Denise's biography has led to a more or less clear positioning on the labour market. Therapy on the contrary has resulted in a better understanding.

#### *Work for Adult Education Practices*

The relationship between adult education initiatives and individual learning processes is equivocal. Education plays an increasing role in the meaningful structuring and construction of people's biographies. Denise's story illustrates well the way in which a life story can (and has to) be made sense of as a learning and education biography. The other side of the picture is that an educational offer is always integrated in a particular life plan and life story, as the examples of Magda and Denise have shown us. "Education should not be conceived of as a mere "input" within a simple input-output model of teaching and learning, but more as "intakes," that is, as active constructions on the part of biographical subjects" (Dausien, 1996, p. 508). From this point of view, the intended impact of education cannot be foretold or guaranteed and seems to be rather limited. This is especially true when educational interventions are not inspired by the search for meaningful connections between individual's biographies and the opportunity structures in society.

#### **Back and Forth**

Confronted with ambivalent and changing perspectives on work, women more or less connect the construction of the self with work. They define their participation to the labour market in a specific way. The tensions between their life and work aspirations on the one hand and the opportunities and limitations of the labour market on the other hand, make that women live and perceive work (experiences) as either a threat or a challenge for their self in process. Depending upon women's competences to deal with this, through reflection and/or action, they succeed in giving their own meaning and direction to work in their lives and in society. The social practices they engage themselves in, including the practice of adult education, can play an important role in this learning process.

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