

# The potential of critical social psychology from a life course perspective for the understanding of subjectified work (Commentary on Höge)

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In an extremely knowledgeable article, Thomas Höge deals with the significance of „flexibilization“ for employee well-being. He paints a picture of fundamental ambivalence: On the one hand, flexibilization leads to increased working time autonomy and task-related control opportunities, on the other hand, the danger of self-overstrain increases and serious mental illnesses can occur. Accordingly, the consequences are described and evaluated in different empirical studies in very different ways, sometimes diametrically opposed. Thomas Höge succeeds in bringing together relevant literature from various disciplines. In this sense, the discussion of insecurity and dissolution of boundaries is particularly important. At the same time, the article is characterized by a clear red thread and a convincing line of argumentation. In this way, it not only provides a good overview of the current state of research, but also points the way for future research projects. Thomas Höge links the critical examination of the current state of research with a plea to devote more attention to the consequences of flexibilization from the perspective of life conduct than it has been done so far.

I would like to emphasize this demand. Because only from a life conduct perspective the Janus-face and its two at first glance contradictory consequences of flexibilization can be understood as an interwoven figure that shapes the framework conditions for human action in contemporary societies. I would like to explain this in the following and extend it by the proposal to combine the perspective of life conduct with an explicit focus on biographies and life course regimes. In the second part of my commentary, I would like to emphasize how important it is not to lose sight of the critical examination of the respective discourse logic, in which different sides of the Janus-face shown by Höge are brought to the fore. Otherwise, there is a danger that the findings of ambiguity with regard to empirical evidence will be associated with arbitrariness

and an uncertain research situation, and thus lose their critical potential to expose social inequalities and power differences that still exist or are even aggravated by social processes of change. In this sense, it seems reasonable to me to associate the findings and conclusions skillfully presented by Höge with critical social psychology and humanistic-psychoanalytical approaches based on Erich Fromm.

If one looks at social roles, such as those of the worker or the father of the family, connections that exist between different areas of life are quickly lost sight of. Under everyday life conduct, on the other hand, the connection between all activities in different areas of life such as gainful employment and family is considered. In this way, it is possible to identify, in particular, the contextual conditions of action that might be contradictory in themselves. The way of conducting one's life forms a specific framework that determines how and which options for action are subjectively perceived – Leithäuser et al. (1977) speak of the theme-horizon scheme in a similar manner. In order to understand subjective decisions and actions, therefore, it is important to reconstruct this framework through subject-oriented research. This is convincingly derived by Thomas Höge.

My suggestion is to combine the approach of life conduct research with life-course research. Research oriented towards life course theory explicitly focuses on the interplay of agency and social structures focusing on transitions between different points in time. Life conduct and life course are not contradictory, but complementary perspectives, which can be well connected with each other: From a dynamic process perspective, the focus is on the question of how individuals interact with social institutions and cultural orientation patterns and how this affects their actions (Heinz & Marshall, 2005). The Special Research Center „Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course“ at

the University of Bremen was groundbreaking in this respect. As an example, the typology of biographical agency modes („Berufsbiographische Gestaltungsmodi“, BGM) developed in this context by Andreas Witzel and Thomas Kühn provides insights how individuals react quite differently to increasingly flexible work conditions (Kühn, 2015).

With the help of this typology it can be shown, for example, that individuals do not necessarily present themselves as entrepreneurs of their own labor force in order to meet the demands of a society that is strongly influenced by models of the market and competition. People actively engage with their social environment and interpret social change processes based on their biographical experiences. This can lead to the development of an increasing reflexive distance from normative imperatives that are exclusively oriented towards competition, if this is subjectively associated with the danger of isolation. It also becomes clear that biographical uncertainty and a lack of long-term prospects do not necessarily lead to a limitation to short-term planning and tangible goals, i.e., to biographical short-sightedness. Rather, uncertain developments and open perspectives are also included in the assessment of options available in the present. In order to grasp the complexity of social change processes and to understand everyday life in late modern societies, it is therefore important that research becomes devoted more intensively to biographical processes and the associated orientation patterns of individuals linked to socially defined structures of life course regimes (Kühn, 2015).

In this sense, a critical social psychology (Kühn, 2015; Kühn & Langer, 2018) oriented towards the life course is also able to uncover invisible inequalities. This concerns in particular the understanding of and dealing with structurally conditioned ambivalences, which are clearly shown in Thomas Höge's contribution: Ambivalent initial conditions and the associated uncertainties for one's own life conduct and further biographical development are threatening one's own well-being. However, consequences of these structural ambiguities and ambivalences are often experienced within biographies as an individual failure to create a coherent and authentic identity. Mistakes are sought in oneself, the impossibility of, for example, developing a concrete biographical plan for realizing one's desire to have children is subjectively associated with one's own personality and with one's own decisions (Kühn, 2015). The main aim of one's own actions then becomes to optimize one's own biographical situation, for example, by searching for a niche or by developing a willingness to renounce certain demands for participation in public affairs. Many people on an individual level adapt to structures and do not make joint efforts for structural change, because they seldom reflect how

ambivalent starting conditions are fundamental for all citizens of contemporary societies.

In this sense, theoretical findings in the context of Humanistic Psychology and Psychoanalysis offer important starting points for dealing with the consequences of flexibilization. This applies in particular to the theoretical tradition of Erich Fromm. Fromm's contributions reflect the Janus-face sketched out by Höge. Fromm's critical analyses show how it can happen, that in the course of social change, individuals commit themselves to goals that are not developed autonomously, but actually correspond to social expectations from a capitalist logic. Following up on from Fromm, Rainer Funk (2011) sees in this identification with project-related goals as a readiness for self-exploitation, which he associates with depressive illnesses and „burnout“ syndromes (see also Tietel, 2009). Not only psychosomatic complaints, but also increasing indifference, cynicism, inner retreat, and the associated lack of social relations, as well as the adoption of an instrumental basic attitude, can be reactions to the described ambivalence, which in Fromm's sense can be understood as an expression of alienation. In this sense, Fromm distinguishes different social characters that could be used as references for further research in organisational psychology.

At the same time, however, Fromm also shows that dealing with an ambivalent initial situation is something essentially human. Fromm sees human knowledge as always context-bound and historically conditioned, since it is based on previous experiences. It is therefore always incomplete. Thus, Fromm assumes that human ambiguity can never be completely eliminated, but that within the framework of dialectical processes, society can become more human and free from the influence of irrational and unnecessary social pathology (Kühn, 2017). In the sphere of work, Fromm sees an important space for the productive development of human potential. He understands human beings as essentially social – and it is precisely the sphere of work that offers the opportunity to experience cohesion and belonging. Therefore, it is important that social structures enable the development of human creative powers and, at the same time, promote the development of a self-image among the working individuals, which recognizes them as genuinely creative, rather than an object of market forces. In this sense, the flexibilization of work certainly offers the chance that people's creative potential will be taken more seriously (Kühn et al., 2019; Kühn, 2019 b). The high potential of Fromm's approach lies precisely in this combination of a critical analysis of society with a perspective oriented towards transformation against the background of taking into account ambivalent initial conditions (Kühn, 2019 a).

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