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Vsebina/Contents

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LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS, LEARNING, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

This special issue focuses on life course transitions and learning in the context of social change. Critical life course transitions – such as educational transitions, entry into the workforce, career changes, or transitions related to migration, retirement or the mitigation of social and environmental risks – are not merely social facts or stable phases with clear starting and ending points in an institutionalised life course. Transitions are interactive, relational, and emergent social processes that are structurally connected to broader changes in the life course.

From a relational perspective, transitions arise within a complex nexus of power relations between structures, actors, organisations, and pedagogical action. Transitions are thus being done through social practices and the interrelation of discourses, institutional regulations, and individual processes of learning, education, and coping (Keil et al., in press; Walther et al., 2022). The "doing" of transitions can therefore be characterised by periods of uncertainty that represent both a need and an impetus for learning. Learning, in turn, can support individuals or collectives in dealing with change, forming new relations, and building horizons for action (Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Walther et al., 2022). The importance of learning during transitions is increasingly recognised in adult education, not only in formalised settings but also beyond, where individuals face complex social change.

In late modernity, transitions have emerged as pivotal processes that shape the trajectories of adult education and learning. These transitions involve a wide range of formal, non-formal, and informal pedagogical practices that aim to assess, prepare or assist individuals in making decisions at junctures in their lives and for their future (Walther et al., 2022). In adult educational research, transitions have been discussed as critical life course events that foster learning and development (Merriam, 2005). They have been studied as movements within or out of the educational system into work (Larsen, 2022; Samaluk, 2021, 2023, 2025; Siivonen, 2016), as work-life transitions (Billett et al., 2022; Wildemeersch & Stroobants, 2018) and as social practices that stimulate, shape, and represent a framework for learning (Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Petrik, in press). When doing transitions, individuals are expected to *learn* to adapt to a new situation or fulfil the requirements of a new position, or learning can become an existential matter to cope with social risks and adapt to new environments or social positions (Samaluk, 2023; Walther et al., 2022).

Drawing on this scholarship, we understand learning both as an individual and a social phenomenon that is inherently embedded within social practices and their material and

symbolic power relations. This understanding also implies that we closely examine the *contexts* of learning. Therefore, this special issue explores how learning is shaped by transitions and how transitions are shaped by and through learning in the context of social change.

It has long been widely recognised that the way life course transitions are constituted, experienced, and perpetuated is closely linked to broader processes of social change (Elder, 1985). The contemporary rise of precarious jobs and transformations of the welfare state have contributed to a crisis of integration through work. This has gone hand in hand with the dissolution of the industrial society's "regime of temporality", once characterised by lifelong employment and continuous career paths (Guillemard, 2005, p. 134; Kohli, 2007; Samaluk, 2021, 2025). These shifts, along with recurring economic, political, and environmental crises, result in increasingly chaotic and destandardised biographical trajectories. They, too, intensify the social risks and emerging inequalities individuals face at various transitions. In the context of global societal, political, environmental, technological, and labour market transformations, transitions also become more diversified. These shifts raise pressing questions about how individuals navigate life course transitions and how learning is involved in these changes (Bernhard, 2024).

Contemporary globalised societies, shaped by various social risks, demand lifelong learning that encompasses all areas of life. While often promoted as empowering, lifelong learning has also been criticised as a discourse of individualisation and responsibilisation, in which individuals are expected to continuously adapt to shifting market demands and manage social risks on their own (Martin, 2003; Verger et al., 2016). These ongoing learning processes require continuous identity work, shaped by dominant ideological systems, and increasingly carry a socialising function once reserved primarily for youth (Ule, 2017). Transitions can thus be understood as processes of "doing difference" (Walther et al., 2022, p. 8), in which social inequalities based on class, gender, age, ethnicity, migration or their intersections are being (re)produced (Ingram et al., 2023; Petrik, 2022; Samaluk, 2025). This highlights the need to examine how transitions are gendered and gendering, racialised and racialising, classed and classing, and how they are influenced by age, migration status, disability, or their intersections.

While transitions are often misunderstood as being either solely individual experiences or mere outcomes of policies and structures, this special issue adopts both macro *and* micro perspectives to analyse learning at transitions as intersubjective, co-produced, shared, dependent, conditioned, constrained, and shaped by multiple actors. In this regard, we particularly emphasise the relational and collective dimensions of life course transitions. Transitions are not only experienced individually but always involve relationships with significant others as well as interactions with intermediaries and gatekeepers. These actors – such as counsellors, educators, employers, and institutional representatives – guide, support, assess, and prepare individuals at various transition points (Keil & Petrik, 2025; Petrik, 2025). They also shape individuals' agency by shaping the choices and strategies available to them in navigating transitions (Samaluk 2023, 2025; Walther et al., 2022).

Learning at transitions thus involves multiple actors and social relations and can have various transforming effects on individuals or groups.

Therefore, this special issue brings together contributions that explore the interplay between various life course transitions, learning, and social change, exploring both individual and collective dimensions of transitions, shedding light on diverse learning processes, pathways, mechanisms and relations of power amongst the diverse actors engaged in this process.

First, Michael Bernhard's paper entitled *Learning Through Life Transitions: Relational Perspectives on Migration, Family, and Community* examines the relational dynamics that shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration. Adopting a relational framework of "doing" transitions, the study investigates how the interplay between transitions, such as migration and transitions into parenthood, along with different actors impacts learning processes. The analysis is based on narrative interviews with those dubbed "skilled" migrants to Canada. The findings indicate that the relational dynamics at the personal and family levels play a critical role in shaping learning during life course transitions in the context of migration. The paper highlights the key factors that shape learning during migratory life course transitions, which indicate how family networks, cultural dislocation, belonging, agency, and gender roles function as both enablers and constraints in the learning process. Family support and the search for belonging, for example, can foster emotional resilience and adaptation, thereby facilitating learning. However, these same relational dimensions often impose constraints, where family obligations and cultural tensions restrict individual aspirations and professional growth. The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these relational factors is particularly evident in the intersection of traditional gender roles and personal agency. Although migration can create opportunities to renegotiate these roles, the analysis has shown that it may also reinforce those expectations that limit educational and career opportunities, particularly for women. The findings thus indicate the ambivalent and nuanced nature of family relationships that should also be considered in the provisions of adult education programs for migrants. Along with empirical insights, this paper offers important conceptual contributions that further differentiate a relational understanding of transitions that considers the significance of other actors and processes related to family and community. These can create indirect chains of activities with enabling or constraining effects, which also relate to normative gender roles. Bernhard's research thus challenges linear models of transitions and highlights the intertwined nature of personal and social dimensions in shaping learning experiences and educational opportunities.

Also looking at migration and transitions is Filiz Keser Aschenberger's paper *Unfolding Lives: Migration, Education, and the Gendered Journey of Turkish Women in Germany.* It examines the life course transitions of Turkish migrant women in Germany, focusing on how the interplay of migration histories, gendered roles, and educational trajectories has shaped their lives. The paper addresses gaps in feminist and critical research on migrant women by looking at the educational biographies and life course transitions of

second-generation Turkish migrant women. Employing a life course approach and in-depth narrative interviews, the research reveals the persistent challenges of navigating transitions. It shows that migration histories, gendered expectations, and structural barriers shape these women's educational and career trajectories. Their transitions are relational and nonlinear, often constrained by family responsibilities, the systemic barriers of the German context, and gendered life courses. The gendered expectations and familial responsibilities, compounded by structural barriers in education and the labour market, have profoundly shaped their educational attainment, career choices, and integration. Although education is often regarded as a pathway to empowerment, limited guidance, scarce social capital, insufficient institutional support, and gendered responsibilities can significantly constrain educational choices and hinder upward mobility. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of recognising second-generation Turkish women's educational trajectories as shaped by multiple layers of migration experiences, family dynamics, and structural constraints, contributing crucial insights into the intersectional understanding of gendered life course transitions. The paper thus shows that a gender-specific approach is needed to fully understand the complexity of migrant women's life course transitions and trajectories, which are not only structured at the initial point of migration but are continuously reproduced and negotiated across generations within migrant families. By focusing on these intersecting processes, the study advances a more nuanced, gender- and intergenerationally-sensitive perspective for understanding migrant women's transitions that also calls for more inclusive and targeted policies to address systemic barriers and promote equitable opportunities for migrant women.

Gender-sensitive perspectives on transitions also appear in Lukas Kammerlander's paper *Taking a Closer Look: Do Men in Germany Re- or Un-Learn Masculinity Before a Reduction in Working Hours?*, which explores transformative learning processes preceding work time reductions among men in Germany. By focusing on biographical case studies, the author seeks to understand the transformative learning processes that precede reductions in paid working hours and to explore how these relate to hegemonic masculinity. The paper draws on debates on transformative learning, work transitions, and masculinity, which have thus far rarely been brought together systematically. By focusing on re-learning and un-learning masculinity, it sheds light on a topic that has received little attention in adult education research on transformative learning and offers a deeper insight into the dynamics of male subjectivation in transition. The findings show that while all analysed cases comprise significant learning processes, the orientation and gender-political implications of these transformations vary widely. The examined cases are grouped along the processes of the hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity that allow symbolic distancing from the ideals of traditional masculinity without challenging structural privilege and more radical breaks with dominant norms. It becomes clear that a reduction in working hours is not per se an expression of gender-political transformation. Rather, it depends on how this decision is processed biographically, experienced affectively, and framed socially. In this sense, reductions in working hours present an ambiguous practice. By linking masculinity, transitions, and transformative learning, the article contributes to understanding how

men (un)learn masculinity in the context of life course transitions and shifting gender orders, in which both the transformational potential and limits of change in gender relations become visible.

In the next contribution, Karla Wazinski focuses on housing transitions at different ages and stages of life. In *Learning in Housing Transitions to Age-Specific Assisted Living Arrangements for Young and Older Adults,* Wazinski presents ethnographic research that compares relocations to youth and senior housing in Germany. While learning processes during transitions at different stages of life have already been examined in research, they have not focused on housing transitions to assisted living arrangements for both young and older adults. This paper addresses this gap by examining how learning is done in relocations through age-coded practice in the two contrasting cases of housing transitions to assisted living arrangements for young and older adults. When comparing relocations to youth and senior housing, it becomes evident that learning is done differently in each transition and is shaped by age-specific expectations and institutional frameworks. The findings highlight significant variations in how learning is approached and how age and the ideas and assumptions related to certain ages serve as differentiating features in (housing) transitions at different life stages. While youth housing emphasises learning as gaining independence, senior housing frames relocation in terms of "fitness" and adaptation rather than learning. This reflects broader life course structures, where learning is linked to youth, while older adults are presumed to already possess the necessary skills in relation to housing. The findings show that learning can not only be understood as age-coded, but point to the co-constitution of learning, housing, and age in its simultaneity: age-specific housing has to be learned and age(ing) is also learned through housing. Relocations are often seen as something older adults either learn to handle over time or experience repeatedly, making peer support or special attention in senior housing seem less necessary. This reflects the ideal of an autonomous, independent adult, who, as a "complete" individual, is presumed to have no further learning needs related to housing in old age. The paper thus acknowledges the potential ambivalences and subtle distinctions between and paternalism that can arise from interventions in assisted living. As such, the article expands existing research on learning during housing transitions by introducing a practice-theoretical perspective and by systematically examining how differentiation in learning processes is done by age.

Age related transitions are also a theme in our next contribution, *Affective Practices in Transition(s) – Learning as Becoming in the Transition Into Retirement*. In this paper, Anna Wanka explores how affective practices shape transitions into retirement and the ways individuals learn and change through this shift. The article shows how life course transitions – particularly work-related changes in later adulthood, such as unemployment, retirement or encore careers – can be understood as affective and open-ended processes of becoming. Drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study of older adults in Germany, Wanka investigates how transitions unfold through shifting self-world relations, and how these are shaped by affective dynamics. The contribution illustrates how feelings such as

exhaustion, restlessness, calm, and joy are not merely internal states but emerge within transitional assemblages. Learning in transitions thus emerges as a complex configuration of people, practices, temporalities, and spaces. In these constellations, affects serve as connective tissue: they link practices and practitioners, co-producing not just meaning but subjectivities. Rather than treating transitions as rational or goal-oriented events, Wanka foregrounds the role of affective practices in shaping how people learn and change in later life. In doing so, she connects concepts of transformative learning and becoming to argue for a more nuanced understanding of how transitions are lived, felt, and embodied. Her work calls for a deeper engagement with affect in (adult) educational research, especially as it relates to learning processes in later life. The study expands existing research by demonstrating that learning during retirement transitions is deeply embedded in socio-material and gendered contexts, and by advancing a broader conceptualisation of learning as an affective and processual phenomenon in later life.

Turning to current environmental and social changes, Elisa Thevenot's paper *Biographical Learning in the Context of Sustainability Transitions: Conceptual Reflections and Methodological Insights* offers a conceptual and methodological exploration of how biographical learning unfolds in relation to sustainability transitions. The paper argues that sustainability should not only be understood in normative terms but also as a lived, biographically negotiated experience. Drawing on a biographical learning approach, it advances the idea that narrating and reflecting on one's life course within the context of socio-ecological transformation can itself be a meaningful site of learning. The author critiques the dominant instrumental framings of sustainability education – often embedded in top-down agendas and behavioural expectations – and instead posits that learning emerges when individuals biographically appropriate sustainability discourses in relation to their own transitions. Through two illustrative case narratives, the paper demonstrates how individuals reframe sustainability, transforming an external societal demand into a personally meaningful orientation. The paper highlights how individuals learn from experiences of dissonance, disruption or transformation, and how these experiences are retrospectively made meaningful through narrative. Methodologically, the paper offers insights into the use of life history interviews to explore how sustainability discourses are internalised and reinterpreted over time. The contribution connects sustainability transitions with personal life transitions such as a career change, foregrounding the potential of adult education research to account for the complex, situated, and ongoing nature of learning in times of planetary crisis. By distinguishing between learning *from* rather than *for* sustainability, the paper advances a critical perspective on sustainability education that foregrounds subjectivity, reflexivity, and the biographical dimensions of change. In this way, the article contributes both to the conceptual development of biographical learning and to the methodological toolkit for researching learning in the context of societal transitions linked to environmental changes.

The final contribution, *Practices of Becoming: What and How Do First-Generation Students Learn When Transitioning to University?* by Flora Petrik, explores educational transitions

with a particular focus on the shifting role of social class. Drawing on case studies from Austria and Germany, the article examines how first-generation students experience and make sense of their transition into higher education, highlighting learning as a socially-situated and classed process. Moving beyond a deficit-oriented or performance-based lens, it investigates how and what these students learn through biographical processes during this critical phase. The article combines biographical and practice-theoretical perspectives to reconstruct three key "practices of becoming" that shape their learning: collective peer practices, practices of engagement, and practices of pedagogical accompaniment. These situated and relational practices foster biographical learning and the acquisition of "play-ability" within academic contexts. The findings show how learning during transitions is both transformative and reproductive, revealing how first-generation students navigate institutional cultures, seek recognition, and develop new subject positions in higher education. The paper thus contributes to a deeper understanding of learning as a social practice marked by both inequality and possibility.

This special issue also features two book reviews. The first is Carlos Palma Amestoy's book review of Ingram et al.'s book *The Degree Generation: The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives*, published in 2023 by Bristol University Press. The book charts the complexities involved in the transition from university to the labour market in the UK. It challenges the normative view of higher education as a driver of social mobility by showing that graduates' expectations of their educational investments are not being met, as many face underemployment and intersectional inequalities persist among diverse graduate groups. Based on a longitudinal qualitative study involving (follow-up) interviews with diverse young people during their time at university and after graduation and a Bourdieuian conceptual framework, the book shows how the resources individuals accumulate over time are converted (or not) into symbolic capital. The book draws on the idea of symbolic recognition to highlight the fact that, in the context of diploma inflation, rather than the accumulation of capital, what becomes more important is the construction of value, i.e. how graduates are able to make their own capital valuable or recognised on the graduate labour market. The book thus shows that inequalities in terms of class, gender or race/ethnicity are being (re)produced and that privilege plays a key role in successful education-to-work transitions. The authors' main argument in this respect is that luck, or serendipity, is just another manifestation of privilege linked to the possession of different forms of capital.

The second book review is by Lena Mazurkiewicz, who reviewed *Doing Transitions in the Life Course: Life Course Research and Social Policies*. Edited by Stauber, Walther, and Settersten, and published in 2022 by Springer, the volume advances a praxeological and reflexive approach to studying life course transitions, arguing that transitions are not simply stages to be passed through but are actively constituted through social practices. In contrast to traditional linear models of the life course, the volume conceptualises transitions as dynamic, relational, and contextually embedded processes. This perspective is particularly relevant to adult education, as it foregrounds both formal and informal learning processes involved in navigating transitions across the life span. Organised into three sections

– Institutions and Organizations; Times and Normativities; and Materialities – the book brings together empirical and theoretical contributions that explore how transitions are enacted, governed, narrated, and embodied. These include discussions on welfare systems as transition regimes, biographical narration, age norms, the materiality of bodies and spaces, and the negotiation of deviance and normality. Mazurkiewicz highlights the volume's relevance for adult education and learning research, particularly in its attention to the interplay of agency and structure and its capacity to link micro-level practices with broader institutional and societal dynamics.

Barbara Samaluk and Flora Petrik,

Editors of the Thematic Issue

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ŽIVLJENJSKI PREHODI, UČENJE IN DRUŽBENE SPREMEMBE

V tokratni tematski številki se osredotočamo na življenjske prehode in učenje v kontekstu družbenih sprememb. Kritični življenjski prehodi – na primer izobraževalni prehodi, vstop na trg dela, spremembe na poklicni poti ali prehodi, povezani z migracijami, upokojitvijo ali blaženjem socialnih in okoljskih tveganj – niso zgolj družbena dejstva, niti niso stabilne faze, ki bi imele jasno opredeljen začetek in konec znotraj institucionaliziranega življenjskega poteka. Prehodi so interaktivni in relacijski družbeni procesi, ki so strukturno povezani s širšimi spremembami življenjskega poteka.

Z relacijskega vidika se prehodi pojavljajo v okviru kompleksno prepletenih odnosov moči med strukturami, akterji, organizacijami in pedagoškim delovanjem. Prehodi se torej »opravljajo« prek družbenih praks in medsebojno povezanih diskurzov, institucionalnih predpisov ter individualnih procesov učenja, izobraževanja in obvladovanja (Keil idr., v tisku; Walther idr., 2022). Za opravljanje prehodov so lahko značilna obdobja negotovosti, ki prinašajo tako potrebo po učenju kot tudi spodbudo za učenje. Učenje je tisto, ki lahko posameznikom ali skupinam pomaga, ko se soočajo s spremembami, vzpostavljajo nove odnose in obzorja možnosti za delovanje (Hof in Bernhard, 2025; Walther idr., 2022). V izobraževanju odraslih se vse bolj priznava pomen učenja ob prehodih, in sicer ne le v formaliziranih izobraževalnih okoljih, temveč tudi izven njih, kjer se posamezniki soočajo s kompleksnimi družbenimi spremembami.

Življenjski prehodi so se v pozni moderni dobi izkazali za ključne procese oblikovanja izobraževalnih in učnih poti odraslih. Vključujejo širok nabor formalnih, neformalnih in priložnostnih pedagoških praks, katerih cilj je posameznike evalvirati, pripraviti in jim pomagati pri odločitvah na križiščih življenja, ki bodo oblikovale njihovo prihodnost (Walther idr., 2022). Raziskave na področju izobraževanja odraslih obravnavajo prehode kot ključne dogodke v življenju, ki spodbujajo učenje in razvoj (Merriam, 2005). Predmet preučevanja so bili že prehodi znotraj izobraževalnih sistemov ali prehodi iz izobraževalnega sistema na trg dela (Larsen, 2022; Samaluk, 2021, 2023, 2025; Siivonen, 2016), prehodi v poklicnem življenju (Billett idr., 2022; Wildemeersch in Stroobants, 2018) in prehodi kot družbene prakse, ki spodbujajo, oblikujejo in postavljajo okvir za učenje (Hof in Bernhard, 2025; Petrik, v tisku). Na življenjskih prehodih se od posameznikov pričakuje, da se bodo *naučili* prilagajati novim razmeram ali izpolnjevati zahteve novega delovnega mesta, učenje pa je lahko tudi eksistencialnega pomena pri soočanju s socialnimi tveganji, prilagajanju novemu okolju ali družbenemu položaju (Samaluk, 2023; Walther idr., 2022).

Na podlagi zgornjih ugotovitev učenje razumemo kot individualni in družbeni pojav, ki je vpet v družbene prakse ter posledično v materialne in simbolne odnose moči teh praks, kar pomeni, da je potrebno natančno preučevati *kontekste* učenja. Avtorji prispevkov v tej številki raziskujejo, kako prehodi vplivajo na učenje in kako učenje vpliva na prehode v kontekstu družbenih sprememb.

Že dolgo je znano, da je način, kako se življenjski prehodi konstituirajo, doživljajo in ohranjajo, tesno povezan s širšimi procesi družbenih sprememb (Elder, 1985). Porast prekarnih delovnih mest in preoblikovanje socialne države sta v današnjem času prispevala h krizi integracije preko zaposlitve, hkrati pa je razpadel časovni režim industrijske družbe z neprekinjeno karierno potjo in zaposlitvijo, ki je trajala vse življenje (Guillemard, 2005, str. 134; Kohli, 2007; Samaluk, 2021, 2025). Skupaj z nizom gospodarskih, političnih in okoljskih kriz ti premiki vodijo v vse bolj kaotične in destandardizirane biografske poti ter stopnjujejo družbena tveganja in neenakosti, s katerimi se posamezniki soočajo pri različnih prehodih. V kontekstu globalnih družbenih, političnih, okoljskih, tehnoloških in tržnih preobrazb postajajo tudi prehodi vse bolj raznoliki. Opisane spremembe odpirajo pereča vprašanja o tem, kako se posamezniki soočajo s prehodi na svoji življenjski poti in kakšno vlogo pri tem igra učenje (Bernhard, 2024).

V sodobnih globaliziranih družbah, kjer je lahko posameznik izpostavljen vrsti družbenih tveganj, vseživljenjsko učenje sega na vsa področja življenja. Čeprav se vseživljenjsko učenje pogosto spodbuja v imenu opolnomočenja, pa je bilo tudi tarča kritike kot diskurz individualizacije in prenosa odgovornosti, kjer se od posameznikov pričakuje, da se nenehno prilagajajo spreminjajočim se tržnim zahtevam in sami obvladujejo družbena tveganja (Martin, 2003; Verger idr., 2016). Ti učni procesi zahtevajo nenehno delo na sebi, ki ga oblikujejo prevladujoči ideološki sistemi, vse bolj pa nosijo socializacijsko funkcijo, ki je bila nekoč rezervirana predvsem za mlade (Ule, 2017). Prehode lahko tako razumemo kot procese »ustvarjanja razlik« (ang. *doing difference*; Walther idr., 2022, str. 8), kjer se (re)producirajo družbene neenakosti, ki temeljijo na družbenem razredu, spolu, starosti, etnični pripadnosti in migracijah ali na njihovih presečiščih (Ingram idr., 2023; Petrik, 2022; Samaluk, 2025). Prav zato je potrebno preučevati rasno in razredno pogojenost življenjskih prehodov ter kako nanje vplivajo starost, migracijski status, invalidnost in presečišča teh identitet.

Prehodi so pogosto napačno razumljeni zgolj kot individualne izkušnje ali pa zgolj kot rezultati politik in sistemskih struktur. Zato so v člankih v tematski številki pri analizi učenja ob prehodih, ki je intersubjektivno, soustvarjeno, soodvisno, pogojeno, omejeno, deljeno in oblikovano z več akterji, uporabljene tako makro kot mikro perspektive. Prispevki še posebej poudarjajo relacijske in kolektivne razsežnosti življenjskih prehodov, saj se ti ne doživljajo le individualno, temveč vedno vključujejo odnose z drugimi ter interakcije s posredniki in nadzorniki. Ti akterji – svetovalci, učitelji, delodajalci, predstavniki institucij – usmerjajo, podpirajo, ocenjujejo in usposabljajo posameznike na različnih točkah v procesu življenjskega prehoda (Keil in Petrik, 2025; Petrik, 2025). Prav tako vplivajo na izbire in strategije, ki so posamezniku na voljo pri krmarjenju skozi prehode

(Samaluk 2023, 2025; Walther idr., 2022). Učenje ob prehodih torej vključuje več akterjev in družbenih odnosov ter lahko na posameznika ali skupine transformativno učinkuje na različne načine.

Tematska številka združuje prispevke, ki raziskujejo medsebojno vplivanje in prepletenost življenjskih prehodov, učenja in družbenih sprememb, obravnavajo individualne in kolektivne dimenzije prehodov ter osvetljujejo različne učne procese, poti, mehanizme in odnose moči med različnimi akterji, ki sodelujejo v tem procesu.

Najprej Michael Bernhard v prispevku *Učenje na podlagi življenjskih prehodov: relacijski pogledi na migracije, družino in skupnost* obravnava relacijsko dinamiko, ki oblikuje učenje na življenjskih prehodih v kontekstu migracij. Na podlagi relacijskega okvira »opravljanja« prehodov raziskuje, kako medsebojno součinkovanje prehodov, kot so migracije in prehodi v starševstvo, skupaj z različnimi akterji vpliva na učne procese. Analiza temelji na narativnih intervjujih s t. i. usposobljenimi migranti v Kanadi. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je relacijska dinamika na osebni in družinski ravni ključnega pomena za učenju ob prehodih v kontekstu migracij. Avtor izpostavi ključne dejavnike, kot so družinska mreža, kulturna dislokacija, pripadnost, sposobnost delovanja in spolne vloge, ki vplivajo na učenje ob migracijskih življenjskih prehodih oziroma lahko učni proces spodbujajo ali omejujejo. Tako lahko družinska podpora in iskanje pripadnosti spodbujata čustveno odpornost in proces prilagajanja, s čimer podpirata učenje, vendar pa lahko iste relacijske dimenzije učenje tudi omejujejo, ko družinske obveznosti in kulturne napetosti na želje, prizadevanja in karierni razvoj posameznika vplivajo negativno. Kompleksna in včasih protislovna narava teh relacijskih dejavnikov je še posebej očitna na presečišču tradicionalnih spolnih vlog in sposobnosti delovanja. Medtem ko lahko migracije ustvarijo priložnosti za ponovno pogajanje o tradicionalnih spolnih vlogah, je analiza pokazala, da lahko tudi okrepijo tista pričakovanja, ki zlasti ženskam omejujejo izobraževalne in karierne možnosti. Ugotovitve tako kažejo na ambivalentno in raznoliko naravo družinskih odnosov, kar je pomembno upoštevati tudi v programih izobraževanja odraslih za migrante. Članek prinaša tako empirična kot pojmovna spoznanja na področju relacijskega razumevanja prehodov. Upošteva pomen drugih akterjev in procesov, povezanih z družino in skupnostjo, ki lahko ustvarijo posredne verige dejavnosti, ki učenje bodisi podpirajo ali omejujejo, nanašajo pa se tudi na normativne spolne vloge. Bernhard tako pod vprašaj postavi linearne modele prehodov in poudarja prepletenost osebnih in družbenih vidikov, ki vplivajo na izkušnjo učenja in izobraževalne priložnosti.

Naslednji prispevek prav tako obravnava življenjske prehode na področju migracij. Filiz Keser Aschenberger v članku z naslovom *Odvijanje življenj: migracije, izobraževanje in spolno zaznamovane življenjske poti turških žensk v Nemčiji* preučuje življenjske prehode turških migrantk v Nemčiji, s poudarkom na vplivu zgodovine migracij, spolnih vlog in izobraževalnih poti. Pri tem avtorica naslovi vrzeli v feminističnih in kritičnih raziskavah o migrantkah, saj obravnava izobraževalne biografije in življenjske prehode turških migrantk druge generacije. Na podlagi koncepta življenjskega poteka in analize poglobljenih narativnih intervjujev v članku razkriva izzive, s katerimi se te ženske soočajo pri

življenjskih prehodih, ter pokaže, da na izobraževalne in karierne poti turških migrant v Nemčiji vplivajo strukturne ovire, njihova zgodovina migracij ter pričakovanja, vezana na spol. Analizirani prehodi so relacijski in nelinearni; pogosto so omejeni zaradi družinskih obveznosti, sistemskih ovir nemškega konteksta in vpliva spola na življenjski potek. Pričakovanja, vezana na spol, in družinske odgovornosti, ki jih še stopnjujejo strukturne ovire v izobraževanju in na trgu dela, so močno vplivali na izobraževanje, karierne možnosti in integracijo teh žensk. Čeprav je izobraževanje pogosto videno kot pot do opolnomočenja, lahko omejeno usmerjanje, skromen družbeni kapital, nezadostna institucionalna podpora in spolne vloge znatno omejijo izobraževalne možnosti in ovirajo družbeno mobilnost. Pomembno je razumeti, da izobraževalne poti turških žensk, priseljenk druge generacije, oblikujejo večplastne migracijske izkušnje, družinska dinamika in strukturne omejitve, vse to pa nam omogoča boljše presečno razumevanje s spolom pogojenih življenjskih prehodov. Za poglobljeno razumevanje kompleksnosti življenjskih prehodov in poti migrantk je nujen pristop, ki upošteva spol, saj spolne vloge ne obstajajo zgolj v začetnih točkah migracij, temveč se skozi generacije nenehno reproducirajo in so vedno znova predmet pogajanj. Osredotočenost na te medsebojno prepletene procese spodbuja bolj niansiran pogled na razumevanje prehodov migrantk, ki upošteva tudi vidik spola in medgeneracijskih vplivov, hkrati pa s tem opozarja na potrebo po bolj vključujočih in ciljno usmerjenih politikah, ki bi odpravljale obstoječe sistemske ovire in izboljšale dostop do enakih možnosti za migrantke.

Vpliv spola na življenjske prehode obravnava tudi Lukas Kammerlander, ki v prispevku z naslovom *Podrobnejši pogled: se pred skrajšanjem delovnega časa moški v Nemčiji ponovno učijo ali odučijo moškosti?* raziskuje transformativne učne procese, do katerih prihaja pred skrajšanjem plačanega delovnega časa med moškimi v Nemčiji. Avtor na podlagi biografskih študij primerov poskuša razumeti, kako so ti procesi povezani s hegemono moškostjo. Tematike transformativnega učenja, življenjskih prehodov na področju dela in moškosti so bile doslej redko sistematično združene na enem mestu. Z osredotočanjem na ponovno učenje in odučenje moškosti Kammerlander osvetljuje temo, ki je bila doslej na področju raziskovanja transformativnega učenja v izobraževanju odraslih deležna le malo pozornosti, in ponuja globlji vpogled v dinamiko moškosti in življenjskih prehodov. Čeprav vsi analizirani primeri vključujejo pomembne učne procese, ugotovitve kažejo, da so usmerjenosti preobrazb in njihovih posledic z vidika politike spola zelo raznolike. Preučeni primeri so razvrščeni glede na procese hibridizacije hegemone moškosti, ki posamezniku omogočajo simbolično distanciranje od tradicionalnih idealov moškosti, ne da bi pri tem pod vprašaj postavili strukturne privilegije in zahtevali bolj radikalne prelome z dominantnimi normami. Samo po sebi torej skrajšanje delovnega časa ni izraz spolnopolitične transformacije. Odvisno je, kako posameznik to odločitev razume na biografski ravni, doživlja na afektivni ravni in kontekstualizira na družbeni ravni. V tem smislu skrajšanje delovnega časa ne daje jasnih odgovorov. Članek s povezovanjem moškosti, prehodov in transformativnega učenja prispeva k razumevanju, kako se moški (od)učijo moškosti v kontekstu življenjskih prehodov in spreminjajočih se spolnih okvirov, kjer postanejo vidni tako potenciali kot meje sprememb v odnosih med spoloma.

Naslednji prispevek se osredotoča na prehode v novo stanovanjsko okolje pri različnih starostih in v različnih življenjskih obdobjih. Karla Wazinski v članku *Učenje pri stanovanjskih prehodih v starosti prilagojene oblike bivanja za mlajše in starejše odrasle* predstavi etnografsko raziskavo, v kateri primerja selitve mladih in starejših odraslih v Nemčiji. Raziskava o prehodu v oskrbovano stanovanjsko okolje in o učenju na primeru dveh različnih, kontrastnih starostnih skupin prinaša novost in odpravlja vrzel na področju raziskovalne dejavnosti o učnih procesih med prehodi v različnih življenjskih obdobjih. Ob primerjavi postane očitno, da učenje pri teh dveh starostnih skupinah poteka drugače zaradi vpliva starostno specifičnih pričakovanj in institucionalnih okvirov. Ugotovljene so izrazite razlike v načinu pristopa k učenju in kako starost ter z njo povezane podobe in predpostavke služijo kot razlikovalne značilnosti pri (stanovanjskih) prehodih v različnih življenjskih obdobjih. Medtem ko je pri učenju, ki spremlja selitve v stanovanjska okolja za mlade, poudarjeno razvijanje neodvisnosti, je selitev pri starejših odraslih videna z vidika ohranjanja sposobnosti in prilagajanja, ne pa kot učenje. To odraža širše strukture življenjskih potekov, kjer je učenje povezano z mladostjo, pri starejših odraslih pa se domneva, da potrebne veščine že imajo. Ugotovitve kažejo ne le, da je lahko starost vpeta v naše razumevanje učenja, temveč opozarjajo, da se v svoji sočasnosti učenje, bivalni prostor in starost sovzpostavljajo: bivanja v prostoru, ki je specifično namenjen ljudem glede na njihovo starost, se je treba naučiti, starost (in staranje) pa je nekaj, česar se prav tako učimo preko prostora, kjer bivamo. Selitve se pogosto obravnavajo kot nekaj, kar starejši odrasli sčasoma obvladajo ali kar so že večkrat doživeli, zaradi česar se zdi, da sta vrstniška podpora ali posebna pozornost ob tovrstnih prehodih manj potrebna. To odraža tudi ideal avtonomne, neodvisne odrasle osebe, za katero se domneva, da v starosti ob selitvi nima nadaljnjih potreb, povezanih z učenjem. Članek tako izpostavlja potencialna protislovja in subtilne razlike med podporo in paternalizmom, do katerih lahko pride v povezavi z oskrbovanim bivanjem. Praktično-teoretična perspektiva in sistematično preučevanje učnih procesov različnih starostnih skupin tako prinašata nova dognanja na področju raziskav o učenju med stanovanjskimi prehodi.

Prehodi, povezani s starostjo, so tudi tema prispevka Anne Wanka, ki v članku z naslovom *Afektivne prakse v prehodu(-ih) – učenje kot postajanje na prehodu v upokojitev* raziskuje, kako afektivne prakse oblikujejo prehode v upokojitev in kako se v tem procesu posamezniki učijo in spreminjajo. Avtorica pokaže, kako lahko življenjske prehode – zlasti spremembe na področju dela v poznejši odraslosti, kot so brezposelnost, upokojitev ali nova kariera na drugem področju – razumemo kot afektivne in odprte procese postajanja. Na podlagi kvalitativne longitudinalne raziskave med starejšimi odraslimi v Nemčiji raziskuje, kako se prehodi odvijajo skozi spreminjajoč se odnos jaz-svet in kako te odnose oblikuje afektivna dinamika. V prispevku ponazarja, da občutki, kot so izčrpanost, nemir, mirnost in veselje, niso zgolj notranja stanja, temveč se pojavljajo znotraj prehodnih sklopov. Učenje v prehodih je tako kompleksna konfiguracija ljudi, praks, časovnosti in prostorov, afekti pa služijo kot vezivno tkivo, ki povezuje prakse in izvajalce, ter soustvarjajo ne le pomen, temveč tudi subjektivnosti. Namesto da bi prehode obravnavala kot racionalne ali ciljno usmerjene dogodke, avtorica izpostavlja vlogo afektivnih praks pri tem, kako se starejši

ljudje učijo in spreminjajo. Povezuje koncept transformativnega učenja s konceptom postajanja, tako pa zagovarja poglobljeno razumevanje tega, kako se prehodi živijo, čutijo in utelešajo. V svojem delu se zavzema za ukvarjanje z afektom v raziskavah izobraževanja (odraslih), zlasti ko gre za učne procese v poznejšem življenju. Z raziskavo pokaže, da je učenje ob prehodu v upokojitev globoko vpeto v družbeno-materialne in spolno specifične kontekste, ter podpira širšo opredelitev učenja kot afektivnega in procesualnega pojava v poznejšem življenju.

Elisa Thevenot se v svojem prispevku osredotoča na sodobne okoljske in družbene spremembe. V članku *Biografsko učenje v kontekstu trajnostnih prehodov: pojmovne refleksije in metodološka spoznanja* predstavi raziskavo o biografskem učenju v povezavi s prehodi v trajnostni razvoj. Argumentira, da trajnosti ne smemo razumeti le v normativnem smislu, temveč tudi kot doživeto, biografsko pogojeno izkušnjo. Na podlagi biografskega učnega pristopa zagovarja pripovedovanje in refleksijo o lastni življenjski poti v kontekstu družbeno-ekološke preobrazbe kot samo po sebi smiselno mesto učenja. Avtorica je kritična do instrumentalnih pristopov, ki prevladujejo v izobraževanju za trajnost, saj pogosto vsebujejo vedenjska pričakovanja, ki so posredovana »od zgoraj navzdol«. Namesto tega trdi, da do učenja pride, ko posamezniki biografsko ponotranjijo diskurze o trajnosti v odnosu do lastnih prehodov. Na podlagi dveh primerov ponazori, kako posameznik trajnost iz družbene zahteve preoblikuje v usmeritev, ki je smiselna zanj osebno. V članku poudari, da se ljudje učimo iz izkušenj disonance, motenj ali preobrazbe, izkušenj, ki retrospektivno postanejo smiselne na podlagi pripovedi. Predstavljena raziskava temelji na intervjujih o življenjski zgodovini, preko katerih avtorica raziskuje, kako posamezniki diskurze o trajnosti ponotranjijo in sčasoma na novo interpretirajo. Prispevek povezuje prehode na področju trajnosti s prehodi v osebnem življenju (npr. ob menjavi poklica) in poudarja potencial, ki ga imajo raziskave na področju izobraževanja odraslih, za razlago kompleksne narave učenja v času planetarne krize. V članku razlikuje med učenjem *iz* trajnosti in učenjem *za* trajnost, s čimer zagovarja vzpostavljanje kritičnega pogleda na izobraževanje o trajnosti, v ospredje pa postavlja subjektivnost, refleksivnost in biografske dimenzije sprememb. S člankom tako prispeva h razvoju koncepta biografskega učenja in k naboru metodoloških orodij za raziskovanje učenja v kontekstu družbenih prehodov na področju okoljskih sprememb.

V zadnje tematskem članku Flora Petrik raziskuje izobraževalne prehode s poudarkom na spreminjajoči se vlogi družbenega razreda. V prispevku *Prakse postajanja: kaj in kako se študenti prve generacije učijo ob prehodu na univerzo?* se opira na študije primerov iz Avstrije in Nemčije. Preučuje, kako študenti prve generacije doživljajo in razumejo svoj prehod na visokošolsko izobraževanje, pri čemer poudarja vpetost učenja v družbo in družbene razrede. Avtorica onkraj vprašanj primanjkljajev in dosežkov raziskuje učenje študentov prve generacije na podlagi biografskih procesov v tej kritični fazi. Združuje biografske in praktično-teoretične perspektive, na podlagi katerih rekonstruira tri ključne »prakse postajanja«, ki oblikujejo učenje teh študentov: kolektivne vrstniške prakse, sodelovalne prakse in prakse pedagoškega spremljanja. Te prakse spodbujajo biografsko učenje in

prilagajanje življenju na univerzi. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je učenje ob prehodu na univerzo tako transformativno kot reproduktivno, raziskava pa pokaže tudi, kako se študenti prve generacije znajdejo v institucionalnih kulturah, se uveljavljajo in kot subjekt razvijajo znotraj visokošolskega izobraževanja. Članek tako prispeva h globljemu razumevanju učenja kot družbene prakse, za katero so z vidika družbenih razredov značilne tako neenakosti kot nove priložnosti.

V reviji objavljamo tudi dve recenziji. V prvi Carlos Palma Amestoy razpravlja o knjigi *The Degree Generation: The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives* (Generacija z diplomo: ustvarjanje neenakosti v življenjih diplomantov), ki je bila leta 2023 izdana pri založbi Bristol University Press. Nicola Ingram in njeni sodelavci v delu obravnavajo kompleksnost prehoda z univerze na trg dela v Združenem kraljestvu. Avtorji izpodbijajo normativni pogled na visokošolsko izobraževanje kot gonilno silo družbene mobilnosti, saj pokažejo, da pričakovanja, ki jih imajo diplomanti na podlagi svoje naložbe v izobraževanje, niso izpolnjena. Mnogi se namreč soočajo z podzaposlenostjo, intersekcijske neenakosti pa vplivajo na življenje več skupin diplomantov. *The Degree Generation* temelji na longitudinalni kvalitativni raziskavi, v kateri so bili opravljeni intervjuji z mladimi v času univerzitetnega študija in po tem, ko so diplomirali. Knjiga je zasnovana na konceptualnem okvirju po vzoru Bourdieuja in prikazuje, kako se viri, ki jih posameznik nabira skozi čas, pretvorijo (ali ne) v simbolni kapital. Na podlagi ideje simbolnega priznavanja avtorji izpostavijo dejstvo, da postane konstrukcija vrednosti, torej kako diplomanti dosežejo, da je njihov kapital na trgu dela prepoznan in viden kot dragocen, bolj pomembna kot kopičenje kapitala kot takega. Tako se neenakosti z vidika družbenega razreda, spola in rase/etnične pripadnosti (re)producirajo, pri uspešnem prehodu iz izobraževanja na trg dela pa igra ključno vlogo privilegiranost. Glavni argument avtorjev v povezavi s tem je, da sreča ali naključje predstavljata le še eno manifestacijo privilegiranosti, ki je povezana s posedovanjem različnih oblik kapitala.

V drugi recenziji pa Lena Mazurkiewicz pod lupo vzame knjigo *Doing Transitions in the Life Course: Life Course Research and Social Policies* (Prehodi v življenjskem poteku: raziskave življenjskega poteka in socialne politike), ki je pod uredništvom Barbare Stauber, Andreasa Waltherja in Richarda A. Setterstena leta 2022 izšla pri založbi Springer. V delu je predstavljen prakseološki in refleksivni pristop k preučevanju prehodov v življenjskem poteku, kjer ne gre zgolj za prehajanje skozi različne faze, temveč so prehodi aktivno konstituirani na podlagi družbenih praks. Prehodi so v nasprotju s tradicionalnimi linearnimi modeli življenjskega poteka zastavljeni kot dinamični relacijski procesi, ki so odvisni od konteksta. Ta perspektiva je še posebej pomembna, ko gre za izobraževanje odraslih, saj v ospredje postavi tako formalne kot priložnostne učne procese, ki posamezniku vse življenje pomagajo navigirati življenjske prehode. Knjiga je razdeljena na tri dele: »Institucije in organizacije«, »Časi in normativi« ter »Materialnosti«. Vsebuje tako empirične kot teoretične prispevke o tem, kako se prehodi izvajajo, upravljajo, pripovedujejo in utelešajo. Obravnava sisteme socialnega varstva kot režime tranzicij, biografske pripovedi, starostne norme, materialnost teles in prostorov ter opredeljevanje odklonskega in normalnega.

V recenziji je poudarjen pomen dela za raziskave na področju izobraževanja in učenja odraslih, zlasti zaradi pozornosti, ki je namenjena prepletenosti sposobnosti delovanja in institucionalnih struktur, izpostavi pa tudi uspešno povezovanje praks na mikro ravni s širšim kontekstom na institucionalni in družbeni ravni.

Barbara Samaluk in Flora Petrik,

tematski urednici

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Michael Bernhard

LEARNING THROUGH LIFE TRANSITIONS: RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRATION, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relational dynamics that shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration. Adopting a relational doing transitions framework, the study investigates how the interplay between transitions, such as migration and transitions into parenthood, along with different actors influences learning processes. Data were collected through 20 biographical-narrative interviews with those dubbed "skilled" migrants to Canada and analysed using the documentary method. The analysis empirically underscores that learning is co-produced through complex social interactions, rather than being an isolated individual process. The findings suggest that aspects such as family roles, cultural dislocation, and gender norms can both enable and constrain learning during transitions. This research challenges linear models of transitions, highlighting the intertwined nature of personal and social dimensions in shaping learning experiences and educational opportunities. The paper concludes by emphasising that adult education practices must consider these relational factors to better support persons navigating transitions during times of societal change.

Keywords: *transitions, learning, migration, family, community, gender*

UČENJE NA PODLAGI ŽIVLJENJSKIH PREHODOV: RELACIJSKI POGLEDI NA MIGRACIJE, DRUŽINO IN SKUPNOST – POVZETEK

Članek obravnava relacijsko dinamiko, ki vpliva na učenje ob prehodih v življenjskem toku, zlasti v kontekstu migracij. Na podlagi relacijskega okvira življenjskih prehodov raziskava odgovarja na vprašanje, kako medsebojni vpliv med prehodi, kot so migracije in prehodi v starševstvo, skupaj z različnimi akterji učinkuje na učne procese. Podatki so bili zbrani z 20 biografsko-narativnimi intervjuji s tako imenovanimi usposobljenimi migranti, namenjenimi v Kanado, in analizirani z dokumentarno metodo. Analiza empirično prikazuje, da se učenje soustvarja v okviru kompleksnih družbenih interakcij, torej ne gre za izoliran proces na individualni ravni. Ugotovitve kažejo, da lahko dejavniki, kot so družinske vloge, kulturna dislokacija in spolne norme, tako spodbujajo kot omejujejo učenje med prehodi. V raziskavi je poudarjena prepletenost osebnih in družbenih razsežnosti pri oblikovanju učnih izkušenj in izobraževalnih priložnosti, s čimer kljubuje linearnim modelom prehodov. Prispevek se končuje s poudarkom, da morajo prakse izobraževanja odraslih upoštevati te relacijske dejavnike in v času družbenih sprememb osebam pri prehodih ponuditi kakovostnejšo podporo.

Ključne besede: *prehodi, učenje, migracije, družina, skupnost, spol*

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INTRODUCTION

Times of societal, technological, and environmental change are associated with an increasing diversity of transitions with which individuals are compelled to engage. These transitions can serve as opportunities for learning (Ecclestone et al., 2009; Hof & Bernhard, 2022, 2025; Merriam, 2005) but may also act as a requirement that is imposed upon individuals (She & Bernhard, 2025). Learning in the context of transitions has been studied in different life course domains, such as worklife transitions (Billett et al., 2021), transitions between educational contexts (Field & Lynch, 2015) or in the context of migration (Bernhard, 2023a, 2023b; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Although these studies address the relationships between the individual and the social to a certain extent, the relationships among different subjects whose transitions are linked are often relegated to the background. Although learning is acknowledged to be inherently socially situated (Lave, 2019; Lave et al., 2026), there is a need to further empirically analyse and theoretically conceptualise this situatedness. This paper addresses this need by focusing on the relationships among various actors to analyse learning during transitions as relational and co-produced. Thus, the question guiding this paper is: How do the relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration, and what role do these dynamics play in co-producing and influencing learning processes? This lens will drive a deeper analysis of how norms associated with family roles and gender, community ties and institutional interactions shape learning opportunities.

This paper draws on a research project involving 20 adults who moved to Canada as "skilled" migrants, having obtained a post-secondary level education prior to arrival. Earlier findings from this project point to different ways in which the interviewed migrants learn to engage with migration-related challenges associated with boundary-making processes (Bernhard, 2022), structural discrimination in the labour market (Bernhard, 2023a) and with regard to the temporal dimensions of migration (Bernhard, 2023b). Building on these prior studies, this paper focuses on the *linkages* between different life course transitions, for example, migration and the transition into parenthood, and the relationships between different actors that participate in the transition, such as family members, migration regimes or societal norms.

After a review of the literature pertaining to learning and the relational dimensions of migration, the theoretical perspective of *doing transitions* adopted in this study will be elaborated upon. I will then describe the research design before presenting and discussing the findings with a focus on their conceptual and procedural implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW: LEARNING THROUGH MIGRATION

Transitions in the life course can serve as an impetus for learning, understood not solely as an individual transformation of orientations, frames of reference, mindsets, and meaning perspectives, but as a socially situated phenomenon (Bernhard et al., in press;

Hof & Bernhard, 2025). Of particular interest for the study of learning in transitions are thus not only the individual responses to disruptions and dilemmas but also the social dimensions. After all, "people make and have experiences in and of the social world. They interpret and reflect on these experiences against the backdrop of perspectives and expectations deemed relevant in this social world" (Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 9). One particular transition during which such active and socially embedded interpretation of experiences can be investigated is migration in adulthood (Bernhard, 2024; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Previous studies have explored learning how to integrate into the labour market (Kloubert & Hoggan, 2021; Liu & Guo, 2021; Nohl et al., 2014), the potential for and the challenges of transformative learning (Eschenbacher, 2020; Morrice, 2012), the temporal dimensions of learning in migration (Bernhard, 2023b), the skill regimes to be navigated (Bernhard, in press; Shan & Fejes, 2015), and learning how to deal with barriers to the recognition of prior learning and experience (Bernhard, 2023a; Guo & Shan, 2013).

Shifting the focus beyond the individual processes of dealing with the challenges of migration, a body of research emphasises the linkages among migration, family, and gender. According to Apitzsch (2013, p. 99), it is thus more appropriate to speak of a "dialectics of family-migration" rather than of individual migration pathways. Migration and gender are deeply interconnected, with gender dynamics influencing migration patterns and outcomes (Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Mora & Piper, 2021). As Lutz and Amelina (2017) argue, a gender-focused approach in migration research sharpens the analysis by focusing on gendered occupational sectors, the unequal distribution of domestic and care work, and the changes in the welfare regimes within both countries of destination and of origin.

Haas et al. (2020) have observed a feminisation of migration, driven by shifts in labour migration patterns. While in the past labour migration was predominantly associated with male-dominated professions, and women's migration was largely categorised under "family reunification", the authors note an increasing demand for labour in the service and care sectors in many regions, such as the rapidly growing Gulf region, which is predominantly met by female migrants (Haas et al., 2020, p. 180). In this context, Parreñas (2000) highlights a complex international division of care work which has given rise to "global care chains" (Hochschild, 2014) and has expanded the career opportunities of many middle-class women in destination countries:

> Ironically, women in industrialized (Western) countries are often assumed to be more liberated than women are in developing countries. Yet, many women are able to pursue careers as their male counterparts do because disadvantaged migrant women and other women of color are stepping into their old shoes and doing their household work for them. As women transfer their reproductive labor to less and less privileged women, we can see that the traditional division of labor in the patriarchal nuclear household has not been significantly renegotiated in various countries in the world. (Parreñas, 2000, pp. 577–578)

The objective of this paper is to cast a spotlight on the interplay of migration with different life course transitions and to elaborate on how the relationships between different actors enable and constrain learning during transitions. The primary focus of this paper will be on learning processes – broadly understood as changing participation in everyday practice (Lave, 2019, p. 1) – particularly outside of formalised arrangements. However, as will be shown, the data and analysis indicate that transitions and relations also impact opportunities and constraints in formal education, commonly understood as contexts in which "responsibility for developing the knowledge, skills, and identity of students rests with the educator or the educational institutions" (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 98).[1]

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: DOING TRANSITIONS RELATIONALLY

To bring into view the interplay between individual and social dimensions of transitions, I take a *doing transitions* perspective, which posits that transitions are formed and influenced by social practices and continually evolve through the interplay of discourses, institutional regulation, and individual learning and coping processes (Walther et al., 2022, p. 5). This perspective further holds "that transitions are not individual as much they are relational – constantly co-produced or shared with, conditioned by, or otherwise involving multiple others who are constructing and enacting roles and relationships and interpreting behavior in a social world" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 237). The authors point to the limitation posed by common perceptions of linear, choice-based, and isolated transitions: for instance, person A decides to migrate from country B to country C:

> However, in contrast to the normativity underlying an 'institutionalized' life course, transitions most often are not linear and unidimensional but are instead complex and involve interpersonal and nonlinear processes. Linear conceptualizations of educational, occupational, or other types of life trajectories too often attribute or reduce those trajectories to individual choices, obscuring the complexity of life course transitions. (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 239)

Instead, transitions are to be seen as intertwined with other people (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 239), which prompts discussion of *linked lives* (Elder, 1994; Settersten, 2015) and *linked transitions* in space and time (Nägler & Wanka, 2022). Moreover, transitions occur in larger socio-political contexts and are shaped by "institutional regulation that reinforces genderism, bodyism, racism, classism, and ageism" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 240).

A relational perspective of transitions further brings into view "patterns of relationality", which is to say that different configurations, strengths, or directions of the relationship

1 For further discussions on the conceptual relationship among learning, education, and everyday life, see Dreier (2011), Kemmis et al. (2024), Laros et al. (2017), and Lave et al. (2026). Arguing against a notion that limits learning to educational institutions and practices, Billett et al. (2023, p. 424) propose the concept of *educative experiences*, which comprise not only intentional arrangements in educational institutions but more broadly any affordances provided to individuals by communities and in the course of daily living.

which, rather than constituting distinct forms, may operate simultaneously or interactively (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 241). These patterns include *determination*, understood as "activity that directly affects changes in the world" or *coincidence* as a temporal relation without the claims of causality associated with determination (Settersten et al., 2022, pp. 242–244). Further, relationality may emerge as an *interactive spiral* which "refers to the diversity of actors and processes involved and their effects over time, creating loose relationships or indirect chains of activities" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 244). More complex than this interactive spiral is the relationality of *genealogy*, as it "brings a longer time frame into view and involves more institutionalized rules, leaving power even more dispersed across a greater variety of actors, dimensions, and times" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 245). Lastly, the pattern of demarcation points to the marking of boundaries, and differentiation as well as processes of inclusion, exclusion, and othering associated with transitions (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 247).

This relational notion of transitions – as will be argued in this paper – is central to understanding learning processes in the context of migration. As migrants transition into new environments, their learning is influenced by their social relationships and networks, turning learning into a co-constructed process rather than an individual one. These relational dynamics influence how migrants adapt, negotiate their identities, and acquire new skills, often determining the success of their integration into their new environments. Conceptually drawing on relationality allows for a deeper analysis of how family roles, community ties, and institutional interactions either facilitate or constrain learning opportunities. This perspective underscores that learning during migration is deeply interwoven within social contexts, where the interplay between personal agency and social structures becomes critical.

In this paper, I will empirically explore these relational dimensions by drawing on the research design described below.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data and Sample

This study's findings stem from a larger research project examining learning processes throughout adult migration. Data were gathered between February and August 2021 through biographical-narrative interviews (Chase, 2018; Schütze, 1983) with 20 individuals who had moved to Canada as adults from the following countries: Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Germany, France, India, Cameroon, Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. I chose narrative interviews as I am interested in individual meaning-making and the re-construction of the transition experience and learning processes, including relationships with other actors. Biographical-narrative interviews offer "a way of empirically capturing the diversity, complexity, and transformational character of migration phenomena and of reconstructing them" (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007, p. 3).

As this study is interested in post-arrival processes and the ways in which persons deal with the (non-)transfer of previously acquired skills and experiences, I selected participants based on their having moved to Canada three or more years ago and on having obtained a post-secondary level of education outside of Canada before their initial arrival. This focus on so-called "highly skilled migrants" aims to bring into view the ambivalences of ostensible desirability – as expressed through skills-focused migration regimes – and the challenges faced by this group of migrants. These challenges include precarious employment (Ellis & Triantaphyllidu, 2023), discounting of previously acquired skills and experience (Nohl et al., 2014; Reitz et al., 2014), and subtle yet persistent forms of discrimination that have been described as "racism without racists" (Ku et al., 2018, p. 291). Thus, choosing to conduct the interviews three or more years after arrival allowed the interviewees to share their experiences regarding settlement and integration processes which may take several years.

The study participants were recruited through iterative opportunity sampling, assisted by organisations that employed or worked with migrants, with the goal of including participants from different countries of origin, genders, and occupations. At the time of the interview, the research participants were between 27 and 62 years of age and had arrived in Canada between 3 and 21 years prior. Whereas the commonality of the sample is the circumstance of having been born outside of Canada and having moved to that country, it shall be noted that from a relational and intersectional perspective, the migration experience is but one dimension that shapes individual experiences. In addition, and as has become clear in the analysis, the research participants carry other roles and potential markers of difference, such as those related to family and caregiving responsibilities, gender, and age.

The interviews were conducted following the approach to narrative interviews as outlined by Schütze (1983), encouraging participants to "speak off the cuff about a part of their everyday life that is of interest to the researchers, be it their entire life story or just their working life" (Nohl, 2010, p. 196). The interview participants were asked to narrate their stories with the following prompt: "To begin, could you please tell me your life story? I will listen and make some notes, and I will not interrupt you until you have finished. Please take as much time as you feel necessary and tell me all the details you remember that, in your opinion, are connected to your living in Canada." After the initial narrations, follow-up questions were asked regarding topics raised by the interview participants, as well as questions from the interview guide that had not yet been addressed. These topics included challenges encountered by the interview participants, their ways of dealing with them, as well as the role and actions of others involved in the transition.

Analysis

The data were analysed using the documentary method (DM; Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2010), which originated in Mannheim's (1936/1982) sociology of knowledge and distinguishes between communicative or theoretical knowledge, and practical or conjunctive knowledge. The latter can be understood as meaning perspectives based on "implicit or

tacit knowledge which guides our practical action" (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 220). Applied to the analysis of interviews, DM presupposes that "what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied" (Nohl, 2010, p. 200). Put differently, the narrations document different patterns of experience, orientation, and action that are to be reconstructed. Thus, I interpreted not only what was being said but also reflected on how it was being said. Of interest were modes and figures of speech, such as positive or negative images, or counter-horizons, which point to participants' implicit knowledge and frames of orientation.

Following this approach, I first identified thematically dense passages by initial coding. I then conducted analyses of individual cases through formulating and reflecting interpretation, followed by comparisons across different cases. The goal was to reconstruct and contrast different forms of experiencing and processing transitions with particular attention to the role of other social actors and societal norms and their enabling and constraining effect on learning.

FINDINGS

The interview analysis points to several relational factors which enable and constrain learning during transitions in different ways. These are personal and family-level factors, belonging and cultural dislocation and issues of personal agency, as well as gender roles. In the following section, these factors will be elaborated upon more thoroughly by drawing on interview excerpts.

Personal Factors and Family Dynamics

The process of migration presents individuals with multifaceted challenges that are deeply embedded in social and relational contexts. The relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions significantly shape the ways in which learning occurs during these life course transitions. Particularly at the personal and family level, these dynamics manifest in both enabling and constraining factors, influencing how migrants navigate their new environments and integrate into their host societies. By clustering key themes from the interviews, this section explores how family roles, cultural tensions, personal agency, and gendered responsibilities shape learning processes in the context of migration.

Family is often the primary unit through which migrants experience both support and constraint during their transitions. The dual role of the family as both a source of emotional and practical support as well as a potential limitation of individual opportunities is evident in the participants' narratives. Families serve as crucial support systems that help migrants manage the disruptions and challenges associated with moving to a new country. The collective resilience of the family unit can mitigate the stresses of migration, enabling smoother transitions and facilitating learning. For example, this interviewee reflects on how her family's collective effort helped them cope with the initial shock of relocation:

> We started to slowly adapt to [the] Canadian way of life: very few people on the road, a sense of isolation, and people would tell us, 'Oh, during summer you'll see a lot of people outside', except that we never ever really saw that many people as we expected. So, there was all this adjusting initially. Thankfully because we were immigrating as a unit of a family, we were able to sort of, I think, absorb that shock within ourselves and were busy at the same time. (A. B.)

This shared experience of navigating a new environment can foster a sense of unity and mutual support, which the interview participants experience as essential for adapting to new social norms and learning the unwritten rules of their new society. In another instance, a different interviewee highlights the importance of extended family support in helping his immediate family through tough times, illustrating the crucial role that the extended family network plays in the adaptation process:

> And these moments of my layoffs were very painful for me. But I was trying to show my children resilience, even my daughter, which is a very down to earth person. She said, 'What's going on with you, they laid you off for a second time?' So, of course, we're very lucky at the end that we had the support of my wife's family. They're really amazing people. So we felt supported. (B. Y.)

However, the responsibilities associated with family life can also act as significant constraints, particularly when these responsibilities conflict with individual aspirations. For many migrants, the need to prioritise family stability often means delaying or forgoing personal educational or career goals. This interviewee's experience of postponing her plans to ensure her children's well-being is a poignant example of this:

> The longer I stayed there, the longer I worked, the more it became clear to me that I would need at some point go back to school to be able to take a new direction. […] At the same time our family grew, we had another baby. So, we had to recalculate our … the things that … originally, I was going to do school, for instance. I put that on the backburner because now I had, you know, a family that needed me. (A. B.)

This tension between personal aspirations and family responsibilities can lead to feelings of frustration and sacrifice, where the individual's opportunities for learning and professional development are curtailed. Another interviewee's narrative further illustrates how the decision to prioritise family needs led to a more settled, yet constrained, lifestyle:

> So, when they eventually came over, my son … when they came over, I think he was almost two months shy of two years and he was a walking stand up baby, so he came there and when he was two, three, walking around and it was a pleasure seeing him grow. And I thought, 'Okay, now I have somebody I have to work for: my family. I need to do something for them, I'm not going to be a nomad

> my whole life, looking for one place or the other', probably that's what settled it for me. (A. I.)

Cultural Dislocation and Intergenerational Search for Belonging

The experience shared by the interview participants indicates that migration often entails a profound sense of cultural dislocation, where the familiar cultural practices and social norms of their prior country of residence clash with those of their new environment. This cultural tension is particularly acute at the family level, as migrants strive to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to a new environment. This paradox of belonging – where one feels torn between different cultural worlds – both enables and constrains learning.

For many migrant families, the dislocation is most strongly felt in the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. This interviewee discusses the challenge of raising children in a cultural context that is vastly different from their own upbringing, which complicates the preservation of cultural heritage:

> I was raised as a Hindu, and I have that South Indian culture which is a very specific type of an environment. And when we all moved here, my brothers, my siblings and my family and my cousins, everybody moved here [at] once. A big struggle that we go through is the next generation, right, the next generation is growing up in an environment that is not similar to the one that we grew up in, part of our cultural values part of our background, the language, values that we picked up from our world, the rituals that we do. They were … they are all lost, and the other challenge that I'm finding is, as they grow up, they grow up in this environment and they're not compatible with their counterparts in India, and they think that they can't find a partner or a spouse. (N. K.)

This disconnection from their cultural roots can lead to a sense of loss and identity fragmentation, particularly for the younger generation, who may find it challenging to align their parents' cultural expectations with their new social realities. This cultural dislocation not only affects personal identity but also complicates learning processes, as the norms and values underpinning education and social interaction may differ significantly from those in their prior country of residence. Yet, as this excerpt indicates, this challenging intergenerational family dynamic may also stimulate learning precisely by becoming aware of the cultural disconnection and identity fragmentation as the younger generation grows up.

Conversely, the establishment of a family in the new country of residence can facilitate a deeper sense of belonging, which in turn enhances the learning experience. Having a family can anchor individuals in their new environment, providing them with a sense of purpose and connection that eases the transition and fosters social integration. A different interviewee's narrative reveals how her sense of belonging in Canada deepened not through obtaining formal education but only after starting a family, which also marked the point at which she began to feel more integrated into Canadian society:

I actually started feeling at home when I actually had a family here in Canada. Because when I came to Canada, I was single. Basically, when you don't have the responsibility of family you are just … you are basically like a free bird, like a bachelor, right? You don't have anything else to do, you just enjoy what is there, what is the environment you're in because you chose to be there, so you enjoy that you … you have your focus on getting your degree and get everything done and then get a job, so I kept doing that. So, I actually started feeling [at] home when I actually had my family, I got married, I had my kid, and that's when I actually started feeling home in Canada. (M. J.)

As the interviews indicate, this process of establishing a home and family life in a new country can be seen as a form of social integration, where the family unit becomes a microcosm of the larger society, helping individuals to learn and internalise the social norms and practices of the new country of residence. The excerpts also point to the situated nature of learning and the significance of others who are joined and linked to the transitioners in different ways.

Personal Agency and the Impact of Family Decisions

The decisions made within the family unit – such as who pursues employment and who manages household responsibilities – have significant implications for individual learning and educational opportunities. These decisions often reflect broader social norms and power dynamics within the family, which can either empower or constrain personal agency, learning, and educational aspirations.

Family decisions often require individuals, particularly women, to make sacrifices that prioritise the needs of the family over personal aspirations. This interviewee's narrative highlights this dynamic, in which her husband's career took precedence, and she assumed the role of the primary caregiver, delaying her own educational and professional development:

> And then I was really focused on getting the kids settled, so we agreed that I wouldn't look for a job immediately in a new space like that. We wanted to make sure that our kids were as well adjusted as possible. So we agreed that my husband would look for a job first and I would help the kids transition to the new way of life throughout the summer. (A. B.)

Such decisions underscore the gendered nature of agency within the family, where traditional roles may limit the opportunities available to women, forcing them to defer their ambitions in favour of fulfilling family obligations.

Similarly, a different interviewee reflects on how her children's needs influenced her decision to settle in Canada despite her personal adaptability and willingness to live in other countries. This decision, driven by the desire to provide a stable environment and better educational opportunities for her children, constrained her ability to pursue her own aspirations:

> And I was thinking, maybe for my kids growing up and my kids settling in comparison, I started comparing the two countries, and I was starting to feel in a long-term basis Canada was a better place for my kids. Not necessarily me, I can live anywhere, I can live here, I could live in the UK, I could go back to Kenya. But I started feeling, in terms of settling down for my kids, Canada would be a better country education-wise. (A. O.)

This illustrates how family decisions, while necessary for ensuring stability, support, and opportunities for children, can also limit the scope of personal agency and constrain individual learning and career opportunities.

Gendered Constraints on Learning and Education

Gender roles within the family context significantly influence learning opportunities, particularly in how responsibilities are distributed between partners. Often, greater caregiving responsibilities are placed on women, which may restrict their ability to engage in learning, education, and professional development.

Among the interviewees, traditional gender expectations constrain women's opportunities for learning and education by placing the burden of caregiving and household management on them. This interviewee's experience exemplifies this, as her role as a mother and wife dictated her professional and educational choices, leading her to delay her career aspirations in favour of her family's needs:

> So I went back to Germany. But, of course, I cannot stay there by myself, but at that time I was [a] student. I changed my status from dependent to a stud– … that I can study. That's the only thing I can do. And then, because my first child was born, so I think, 'That's not good,' so I moved from Germany, give up my study and to Japan. Again, when I went to Japan, I became a dependent again, so my status is dependent on my husband's status, and I don't feel I can work. (L. K.)

This interviewee's moves were brought about by her husband's studies and academic work, which took him first to Germany, then to Japan and finally to Canada. As the excerpt indicates, she was able to leave the status of a "dependent" behind by taking up formal education, only to lose that independence again upon having a child and following her husband to Japan. This contrasts with the interests she developed in China, her country of birth:

> And in China you are educated as [a] woman, [it] is the same as [a] man … the women get the same opportunity of education, work, every- … so in my mind I cannot depend on my husband and the feeling of wanting to work is so strong, especially in China, especially when you have [a] very good education. […] So I thought, 'Why should I stay at home as a …', because at that time I didn't value

> mother to stay at home but now I changed my mind. After, in Canada, now I changed my mind, I regretted … I actually enjoyed the time staying home, staying home [as a] mother, taking care of two kids. (L. K.)

Here, the interviewee experiences and processes the tension between her original expectations regarding gender relations, her work aspirations, and the roles she now inhabits. While she initially did not value being a stay-at-home mum, her perspective shifted and she learned not only to embrace but to enjoy taking care of her children.

This narrative highlights the internal conflict that many women face between fulfilling traditional gender roles and pursuing their own professional and educational goals. The pressure to conform to these roles often results in the postponement or abandonment of personal aspirations, limiting the potential for learning, education, and career development.

However, migration can also provide an opportunity for renegotiating gender roles within the family, as the new social context may offer different opportunities and challenges. The narrative of another interviewee illustrates how migrating to Canada allowed her to eventually pursue further education and career development, although this was initially delayed due to family responsibilities:

> My ex-husband at that time was planning to do his Master's in Canada, so I came with him. So while he was studying, I was at home, a stay-at-home mum. And when we got our permanent resident status, then I was able to go for applying for OSAP [student assistance loan] and I had more resources and I took more education after that, after I got my permanent residency. So coming to Canada, it was mostly my ex-husband's education plan, but we really enjoyed living here … and financially and education-wise, we can offer more for our kids, so we decided to stay long term. (D. A.)

This renegotiation of roles, while gradual, reflects the potential for migration to open up new avenues for learning and professional development, particularly for women who may have been constrained by traditional gender roles in their prior countries of residence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that the relational dynamics at the personal and family levels play a critical role in shaping learning during life course transitions in the context of migration. Families act as both enablers and constraints, providing support systems that facilitate adaptation while also imposing responsibilities that can limit personal agency and learning opportunities. Cultural dislocation and the search for belonging further complicate these dynamics, as migrants navigate the tension between maintaining their cultural identity and integrating into their new society. Gender roles within family structures introduce additional complexity, frequently restricting women's opportunities for learning and

career progression. Understanding these dynamics is essential to more fully understand learning processes in adulthood during times of change.

Table 1 summarises the findings by categorising the key factors that shape learning during life course transitions, particularly within the relational dimensions of migration and family dynamics. This matrix highlights how family networks, cultural dislocation, belonging, agency, and gender roles function as both enablers and constraints in the learning process. Family support and the search for belonging, for example, can foster emotional resilience and adaptation, thereby facilitating learning. However, these same relational dimensions often impose constraints, where family obligations and cultural tensions restrict individual aspirations and professional growth.

The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these relational factors is particularly evident in the intersection of traditional gender roles and personal agency. While migration can create opportunities to renegotiate such roles, the analysis has shown that it may also reinforce expectations that limit educational and career opportunities, particularly for women. The table thus provides a framework for understanding the ambivalent ways in which relational dynamics may both enable and constrain learning and education during complex life transitions.

Table 1
Social dimensions that enable and constrain learning and education in migratory transitions

Dimension	Enabling	Constraining
Family as a source of support and constraint	Emotional and practical support, collective resilience, shared experience	Delayed personal goals, prioritisation of family over individual aspirations
Cultural dislocation	Sense of unity through shared challenges, establishment of belonging	Identity fragmentation, generational cultural disconnection
Search for belonging	Deeper sense of belonging through family establishment	Tension between cultural identity and social realities of the new environment
Personal agency	Agency in navigating and adapting to new roles	Sacrificing personal aspirations for family stability and children's educational opportunities
Gender roles	Opportunity for renegotiating traditional roles in a new context	Traditional roles limiting learning and professional development

Conceptually, the empirical findings of this study further differentiate a relational understanding of transitions that takes into account the significance of other actors (Settersten et al., 2022). Through interactive spirals, actors and processes related to family and community may create indirect chains of activities, sometimes at once enabling and constraining learning. Further, the findings – particularly on the enabling and constraining effects of gender roles – point to relationality in the sense of genealogy, which draws attention to longer timeframes, rules, and norms that have an effect on shaping the transition.

The social dimensions investigated in this paper thus identify different ways in which the precarity and contingency of transitions can have enabling and constraining effects on learning. Although the social aspects of learning are inherent in common adult learning theories such as pragmatism or transformative learning, they have often been relegated to a secondary position in interpretations that focus primarily on individual reflection and the processing of experiences (Hoggan, 2018; Strübing, 2017, pp. 44–45). The social dynamic of transitions – with particular regard to family arrangements and gender roles – discussed in this paper supports the view that learning during transitions should be understood as a social practice, and the relational nature of individual experience processing is fundamental to this understanding (Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 9). Learning thus appears not merely as a reaction to teaching but as a socially, culturally, and politically situated part of everyday life (Lave, 2019, p. 129; Lave et al., 2026). Moreover, the findings better illuminate the modes in which the "dialectics of family-migration" (Apitzsch, 2013, p. 99) affect learning opportunities both positively and negatively. The findings also differentiate the community contributions to learning in transitions (Billett et al., 2023), where community is broadly understood to encompass "affordances outside of the person such as family and familiars, ethnic/cultural affiliates, workplaces, opportunity, societal sentiment, or happenstance" (p. 428). As the findings of this study show, the learning of the individual and their community is linked in particular configurations that are of either an enabling or a constraining nature.

Procedurally, the findings indicate the ambivalent and nuanced nature of family relationships that are to be considered in the provisions of adult education programming: while mandating full attendance in language classes may in some cases exclude participants with childcare responsibilities, it may in other cases be a strong argument for reconfiguring childcare responsibilities within and beyond the family. However, as "government and public discourses are too often individualized and translated into questions of individual competencies and responsibility" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 250), the relational approach taken in this paper serves to elaborate upon the ways in which transitions are entangled in ever-changing relationships and subject to varying societal norms, power structures, and cultural expectations.

While this research provides detailed insights into aspects of learning during life course transitions, the analysis is based on narrative interviews conducted at a certain point in time. Therefore, the narrated life stories are situated co-constructions created through the interaction between interviewee and interviewer (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The co-construction of narratives between interviewer and interviewee may introduce biases, such as the potential influence of the interviewer's questions on the responses, or the tendency for participants to present their experiences in a more coherent and socially acceptable manner. These biases could be addressed by employing longitudinal studies that track changes in learning processes over time, or ethnographic methods that allow for more in-depth observation of learning practices. Building on the analysis of social dimensions and their enabling and constraining effects on learning presented here, continued work could

study the implications of these dimensions further to better understand and support adult learning during times of change.

This paper addressed the question of how the relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration and societal change. Adopting a relational doing transitions perspective, this study brought into view the relationships between different actors that participate in the transition, such as family members and the broader community. The findings provide a more differentiated and empirically founded picture of learning during life course transitions as co-dependent and intertwined with the actions and roles of other actors. Of the social dimensions discussed in this paper – family, cultural dislocation, the search for belonging, agency, and gender roles – most have been shown to have the potential to either enable or constrain learning and educational opportunities in transitions during times of societal change.

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UNFOLDING LIVES: MIGRATION, EDUCATION, AND THE GENDERED JOURNEY OF TURKISH WOMEN IN GERMANY

ABSTRACT

This study examines the life course transitions of five Turkish migrant women in Germany, focusing on the interplay of migration histories, gendered roles, and educational trajectories in shaping their lives. Employing a life course approach and in-depth narrative interviews, the research reveals the persistent challenges experienced in navigating transitions, significantly influenced by intergenerational migration and education. Gendered expectations and familial responsibilities, compounded by structural barriers in education and the labour market, profoundly shaped their educational attainment, career choices, and integration. Limited guidance, language barriers, and family influences created obstacles, further impacted by marriage, motherhood, and caregiving. This research extends the understanding of the lasting influence of migration history and education on the gendered life courses of Turkish women in Germany, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that address systemic barriers and promote equitable opportunities.

Keywords: *education, migration history, life course transitions, gendered trajectories, integration*

ODVIJANJE ŽIVLJENJ: MIGRACIJE, IZOBRAŽEVANJE IN SPOLNO ZAZNAMOVANE ŽIVLJENJSKE POTI TURŠKIH ŽENSK V NEMČIJI – POVZETEK

Članek povzema preučevanje življenjskih prehodov petih turških migrantk v Nemčiji, pri čemer se osredotoča na vpliv, ki ga je v njihovem življenju imelo prepletanje osebne migracijske zgodovine, spolno zaznamovanih vlog in izobraževalnih poti. S pristopom življenjskega poteka in poglobljenimi pripovednimi intervjuji raziskava razkriva stalne izzive, ki so jih doživljale pri življenjskih prehodih in na katere so pomembno vplivali medgeneracijske migracije in izobraževanje. Spolno zaznamovana pričakovanja in družinske odgovornosti so skupaj s strukturnimi ovirami v izobraževanju in na trgu dela močno vplivali na doseženo stopnjo izobrazbe, odločitve na poklicni poti in integracijo. Nezadostna pomoč pri usmerjanju, jezikovne težave in vpliv družine so ustvarili ovire, ki so jih dodatno povečali tudi dejavniki, kot so zakonska zveza, materinstvo in skrb za družinske člane. Raziskava razširja razumevanje trajnega vpliva migracij in izobraževanja na spolno zaznamovane življenjske poti turških žensk v Nemčiji ter poudarja potrebo po vključujočih politikah, ki odpravljajo sistemske ovire in spodbujajo pravične možnosti za vse.

Ključne besede: *izobraževanje, migracijska zgodovina, življenjski prehodi, spolno zaznamovane življenjske poti, integracija*

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INTRODUCTION

Migration is a generational process that reshapes identities, socio-economic mobility, and opportunities over time (Griffiths et al., 2013). It extends beyond geographic relocation, influencing individuals and their descendants through complex interactions with social structures, educational institutions, and labour markets. Migration presents both challenges and opportunities for learning, inclusion, and identity transformation, which are shaped by factors such as gender, family structure, and educational background (Jõgi & Ümarik, 2022). The intersection of education, migration, and gender is central to individual experiences and broader social integration processes, making it a key area of inquiry in educational research and sociology (Shan, 2015). However, despite an increasing body of feminist and critical research on migrant women, gaps remain concerning the educational biographies and life course transitions of second-generation migrant women (Apitzsch, 2019; Christou & Kofman, 2022). This study addresses these gaps by examining the life course transitions of Turkish migrant women in Germany. Specifically, it explores how their educational trajectories intersect with migration histories and gendered roles and shape their life course transitions in Germany.

Life Course Transitions, Migration, and Gender

The concept of life course refers to the sequence of events or transitions experienced by individuals over time (Elder, 1985). Similar to migration, life course is anchored to specific temporal and spatial contexts. Consequently, individual life trajectories and mobilities are influenced by historical conditions and geographical settings (McCollum et al., 2020). Transitions, defined as movements or processes of crossing from one point to another (Walther et al., 2022), are key in life course studies. These significant changes occur through different life stages, mapping experiences across domains like work, family, and education (Schatzki, 2022). Examples include starting school, entering university, beginning work, marriage, having children, divorce, and retirement. Walther et al. (2022) highlight that these events are interwoven, relational, and occur within broader social contexts. Following a "linked lives" perspective, transitions are actively negotiated with others (Walther et al., 2022). They are socially constructed, embedded, and multi-layered. Bernhard (2023) emphasizes that transitions are relational processes shaped by social practices and learning experiences. Transitions in one individual's life can lead to transitions in others, especially within families (Walther et al., 2022), making them intergenerational as well. This intergenerational dimension is particularly relevant in the context of migrant families, where second-generation migrants navigate life transitions shaped by their parents' migration histories.

Migration is a critical life transition, requiring a reconfiguration of identity, social roles, and professional pathways for migrants and their descendants. The life course paradigm contextualises migration decisions and their long-term consequences for migrants and their families in both origin and destination countries (King et al., 2006). Migration influences key life events such as education, career choices, and family formation

(Bernhard, 2023). The sequence of these life events is shaped by the spatial and temporal aspects of migration, creating periods where migrants navigate new social, cultural, and institutional landscapes (King et al., 2006; Schatzki, 2022). The impacts of migration extend beyond individuals, intertwining with the sociocultural and institutional structures of host societies. Walther et al. (2022) argue that transitions can reinforce existing inequalities, particularly for migrants facing social exclusion, non-recognition, and marginalisation (Beck & Gelard, 2022; Bernhard, 2023).

Migrant women face compounded barriers due to gendered expectations, economic constraints, and systemic discrimination in power-imbalanced contexts (Anastasiadou et al., 2024). Their life trajectories are often nonlinear and shaped by complex negotiations between cultural heritage and societal pressure (Levy, 2013). Levy's (2013) concept of "gendered life courses" underscores the extent to which gender influences all aspects of social interaction and mobility, particularly in relation to education and employment, reinforcing existing disadvantages. Levy (2013) explains that gender as a status results in the dominant assignation of women to family work and men to paid work. This gendered division allows for participation in other fields only to the extent that it does not interfere with these primary assignments. Along with the institutionalisation of gendered life courses, he emphasizes that gender uniquely differentiates life courses beyond other ascribed traits because it defines the social characteristics of individuals commonly linked to couples or families. This makes the family a crucial institution in life-course gendering, although not an autonomous one, through relating, task distribution, and being a coordination centre for life. According to Levy (2013), family plays a crucial role in reinforcing and perpetuating gendered life courses, often reflecting and reproducing broader societal gender norms and expectations within the intimate sphere of family life.

Therefore, to fully understand the complexities of migration, a gendered approach is essential, as the drivers, spatial and temporal scales, and processes of migration differ significantly for individuals of different gender groups (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Understanding migration as both shaped by gender and as actively shaping gender is crucial for studying the civil, social, and political rights of migrants in any new society (Christou & Kofman, 2022). Migration can both reinforce and challenge existing gender relations, requiring an exploration of how masculinities and femininities are constructed and negotiated in various aspects of migrant lives (Erel, 2007).

Migration research was "gender-blind" until the 1980s (King et al., 2006), but feminist theories have since revealed its gendered dynamics, highlighting the distinct experiences of migrant women (Lutz & Amelina, 2021; Marinucci, 2007). Scholars have explored how migrant women navigate transnational identities and citizenship constraints (Kofman, 2020; Mahler & Pessar, 2006), while also critiquing the undervaluation of their roles in care work and advocating for protective policies (Parreñas, 2012). Feminist migration research also addresses vulnerabilities like gender-based violence and exploitation (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Nawyn, 2019). Moreover, intersectional approaches explore how

overlapping identities – such as race, class, and sexuality – interact with gender to produce diverse migration experiences (Amelina & Lutz, 2018; Yazdankhoo et al., 2025).

Most research concerning gender in migration focuses on first-generation migrants, who have experienced migration themselves. It deals with gendered labour/domestic care, family migration, labour migration, transnational migration, and other gender dimensions throughout the migration cycle (International Organization for Migration, 2024; King et al., 2006). Moreover, migrant women's depictions fail to capture the complexity of their lives and the active roles they play in their own integration and development, especially today, where women strive for equality and empowerment (Chin, 2010; Erel, 2007). While feminist migration research has widely focused on first-generation women, second-generation migrant women navigate distinct challenges, including negotiating hybrid identities and systemic education and labour market barriers (Apitzsch, 2019), especially in countries like Germany.

Migration and Educational Challenges in Germany

Germany, as a post-migration society (Apitzsch, 2019), is home to 23.8 million individuals with a migration background as of 2022, representing 28.7 percent of the population (Federal Statistics Office of Germany, 2023). This group includes both first-generation immigrants and their descendants. Among them, 2.5 million individuals are of Turkish origin (Federal Statistics Office of Germany, 2023). The migration of Turkish families to Germany began in the early 1960s with the labour recruitment agreement between Germany and Turkey. Although initially expected to return, many Turkish "guest workers" (*Gastarbeiter*), who were male, settled permanently by bringing their families to Germany, shaping the socio-economic and educational landscape for subsequent generations (Crul & Schneider, 2009). Most of the first guest workers built their lives around a "transnational space", planning to go back to Turkey while creating difficulties for the second generation, which is considered as more disadvantaged than the first generation (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2014).

A significant body of research has explored the educational and labour market integration of second-generation Turkish migrants in Germany (Acar, 2018; Brinker, 2016; Çelik, 2011; Crul & Schneider, 2009; Hartmann, 2016; Kogan, 2011; Liu, 2023; Salikutluk et al., 2020; Söhn & Özcan, 2006; Verdugo & Mueller, 2009). These studies highlight the persistent inequalities in educational attainment and professional opportunities often rooted in systemic barriers within the German education system. Institutional arrangements, such as early tracking, limited permeability between educational pathways, and vocational training structures, significantly impact the second-generation migrants' opportunities for upward mobility (Crul et al., 2012). Language teaching policies further influence access to learning and integration within the education system. Thus, despite decades of migration history, the German educational model has been described as an "exclusionary integration" system, creating significant obstacles and significant inequalities for children, especially those from lower socio-economic and migrant backgrounds

(Crul et al., 2012). Multiple risk factors, including migration history, socio-economic background, and low parental education, contribute to this disparity, impacting school dropout rates and academic success especially for Turkish migrants (Crul et al., 2012; Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport, and Culture, 2022; Zaussinger, 2024). These inequalities are often intergenerational, limiting social mobility (Apitzsch, 2019).

The European Second Generation Compared Study (TIES; Crul et al., 2012) and Acar's (2018) German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) show that Turkish-origin individuals in Germany face social disadvantages marked by isolation, limited German language use, and restricted social capital. These challenges are especially acute for second-generation Turkish women. Despite achieving higher educational levels than their parents, they encounter systemic barriers to career advancement and integration (Hartmann, 2016; Salikutluk et al., 2020). Gendered factors such as marriage, motherhood, and caregiving further constrain their labour market participation, highlighting the intersection of personal aspirations and structural limitations.

Based on this context, this study aims to explore the transitions in the life courses of Turkish migrant women in Germany, examining how their educational trajectories intersect with migration histories and shape their personal lives during their life transitions. The following research question guides my study: How do migration histories, educational trajectories, and gender related roles and responsibilities shape the life course transitions of Turkish migrant women in Germany?

METHODOLOGY

Utilising a life course approach (Wingens et al., 2011), this study employs in-depth narrative interviews with Turkish migrant women in Germany. Biographical research provides a powerful lens to examine how individual experiences intersect with broader structures of gender, class, and ethnicity. Personal biographies often reflect shared societal dynamics (Merrill & West, 2009), highlighting the interplay between subjectivity and structural conditions. Christou and Kofman (2022) and Erel (2007) advocate the use of biographical methods for capturing the complex, relational, and emotional dimensions of migration. It is a vital resource for comprehending the experiences of migrating women since it fosters reflexivity and provides sophisticated insights into the complexities of their life (Erel, 2007). Following these insights, the article focuses on the life stories of 5 migrant women in Germany, including second-generation women who were born in Germany and whose parents were migrants, allowing for a detailed examination of each participant's personal history and educational journey, which includes formal and non-formal education.

I recruited all of the participants during my research stay in Germany in autumn 2023 by approaching Turkish non-governmental organisations in the Bonn and Frankfurt area through internet searches and personal contacts, using the snowball method. Of the five interviews conducted, three took place in person, while the remaining two were conducted online via Zoom. The interviews lasted between 90 minutes and 150 minutes, and all

were carried out in the Turkish language. As a Turkish migrant myself, I shared a common linguistic and cultural background with the participants. This facilitated trust-building and enriched the depth of response. Table 1 gives an overview of the main characteristics of the participants (all participants are given pseudonyms).

Table 1
Participant characteristics

Participant	Age	Education level	Occupation	Family	Country of birth	Formal education country	Participation in LLL
Ayse	47	University (Medicine)	Paediatrician (currently on leave)	Married 2 children	Germany	Germany	Yes
Fatma	60	IVET[1] and CVET[2]/ Sales & Commercial Training	Beauty expert/ Aesthetician / Accounting assistant / After-school assistant	Married 2 children	Turkey	Germany	Yes
Hatice	49	*Abitur*[3]/CVET (Audiology Education) /University (Medicine) dropout	Audiologist /Social entrepreneur	Married 1 child	Germany	Germany	Yes
Selma	49	University (Geology) dropout	Unemployed (previously Consultant at City Municipality)	Marriedno children	Turkey	Germany	Yes
Seyda	49	Primary School	Unemployed	Married 3 children	Turkey	Turkey	Yes (online courses from Turkey)

In the following, I describe the participants using short vignettes that focus on their educational paths and life transitions:

- Ayse: Born in a small German village to Turkish migrant parents, Ayse attended a Catholic girls' school as one of the few Turkish students. After initial language struggles, she graduated secondary school, studied medicine, and worked as a paediatrician. Later, she moved into public health. Marriage to a German Muslim marked a new transition, and she paused her career to raise her children. Ayse now pursues lifelong learning in alternative medicine and homoeopathy.

1 IVET (Initial Vocational Education and Training) refers to education and training programmes that prepare young people aged between 14 and 25 for direct entry into the labour market.

2 CVET (Continuing Vocational Education and Training) refers to education and training activities that occur after initial education and training, aimed primarily at adults who are already in the workforce or are seeking re-entry to employment.

3 *Abitur* is the final examination and qualification awarded to students completing their secondary education at a *Gymnasium* (Academic Secondary School) in Germany. It serves both as a school-leaving certificate and a university entrance credential.

- Fatma: She moved from Turkey to Germany as a baby after her father migrated as a guest worker. She faced early language barriers but completed secondary and technical school. She attended vocational school to become a beautician. After marrying and staying in Germany, she shifted to office work and accounting. Family care duties dominated her life, and she now volunteers to support immigrant children's education.
- Hatice: Born in Germany to Turkish guest worker parents, Hatice grew up biculturally. At the *Gymnasium*, she faced isolation and discrimination but completed her *Abitur*. Though accepted into medical school, she chose audiology training due to family obligations. She later founded her own practice and was active in community work, focusing on women's empowerment. Married during her studies, she balanced work, family, and activism.
- Selma: She was born in Turkey and moved to Germany as a baby. She struggled with German in school but completed the *Gymnasium* and began studying geology. Finding it misaligned with her interests, she dropped out and pursued Islamic studies and vocational courses. Marriage, illness, and a growing focus on health shifted her priorities. She has since engaged in volunteer work and political activism.
- Seyda: Born in Turkey, she completed primary school but couldn't continue due to poverty. After marrying, she moved to Germany in 1992, where she faced hardship following her husband's death. After remarrying and raising three children, she resumed her education, completing German courses and Islamic studies. She studied alternative medicine from Turkey and continues participating in lifelong learning, aiming to support her community.

I used a thematic analysis approach to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After transcribing the interviews verbatim in Turkish, I followed an inductive approach, identifying recurring themes, coding, and categorising the data into broader life course transitions and structural barriers. The themes that emerged during the analysis are related to major life events, transitions, educational experiences and successes, the challenges of integration, the role of education for empowerment, and the influence of gender roles.

FINDINGS

The biographies of these five Turkish migrant women offer a rich understanding of the transitions they have experienced in the course of their lives in Germany. Each woman's migration history and educational trajectories intersect with their personal lives in unique ways and have deeply shaped their life transitions. The key findings of the study suggest that navigating the transitions in their life course has been a struggle for all of them, while their migration history and educational trajectories significantly shaped their life course. I present the key findings under the following main themes: migration history, educational trajectories and transitions, and gendered life courses.

Migration History

The women's migration stories, deeply influenced by their parents' decisions, highlight the intergenerational effects on their life transitions. Four women's families migrated to Germany for work, making them part of the second generation of migrants raised there (Selma and Fatma arrived when they were babies, and Hatice and Ayse were born there) and facing societal integration struggles. Seyda moved later for marriage and persevered despite hardship. Their narratives revealed key experiences of "living in limbo" and "being the odd one out".

A significant experience included in the participants' migration narratives is the idea of returning to Turkey and creating their transnational space, especially in the first 5-10 years of migration. This led to a feeling of "living in limbo" which refers to uncertainty concerning the length of stay and place of stay. The families initially intended to return to Turkey, which had a lasting effect on the women's lives, especially in terms of educational and career choices, as can be seen in the case of Fatma. Her parents' ongoing plans to return to Turkey influenced her decision not to pursue university studies. Her family influenced her educational path during her initial vocational training by emphasizing that it should also be valid in Turkey:

> I received a lot of support from family, and I completed *Realschule* [which offers a more practical, career-oriented education compared to the *Gymnasium*] and then went to *Fachschule* [vocational school]. I wanted to continue with university. At that time, my family started saying, 'We're going back to Turkey, we're going back to Turkey.' They said if I started university, I would have to leave it unfinished. This narrative kept on for many years, and we stayed in the end. Anyway, they put me in a situation of uncertainty like that. (Fatma)

Selma and Ayse also described the difficulties of growing up in an immigrant household with ambiguous plans for the future:

> Because my family lived with the enthusiasm that we would return to Turkey and we had to be a little more careful financially, […] and it affected my social and educational activities, such as going on school trips or to extracurricular activities. (Ayse)

"Being the odd one out" also emerged as an important concept in the migration narratives of the migrant women in different contexts and areas in education, work, and politics. It is closely related to social integration and exclusion. The women who had participated in formal education in Germany emphasized that they felt a sense of otherness at school at almost all levels, including at university, especially for those who were first-in-family university students. Ayse sees this in connection with her social class and migration background:

> I was one of the very few Turkish girls there […]. But of course, when you come from a working family, you cannot spend your time in the same way as other children. I was a little different in that regard. I mean, my parents supported us as much as they could, but we did not have the opportunities of the other kids, who were coming from academic families, like going to camps or music classes. (Ayse)

For Selma and Hatice, being the odd one out had to do with religion, specifically their headscarf. Selma still remembers the otherness she felt at university. After the 2001 collapse of the Twin Towers in the USA, she underlined that she had to face more struggles. Hatice felt like the odd one out during her secondary-school years, being the only student with a headscarf, and later, when she was elected as a member of the city parliament, she recalls how much she struggled as the first and only woman with a headscarf:

> At that time, I was recognised as the first woman wearing a headscarf to enter a German city parliament. That was of course a great achievement and lucky for me. […] But it was also a very heavy burden. They wrote so many things, but of course, terribly negative things were written about me by the right-wing party. (Hatice)

In the hospital where she completed her internship, she was mistaken for a nurse many times or sometimes even for the cleaning staff, as there were no Turkish female students with headscarves studying medicine in her environment. So there were several occasions when these women felt they were out of place.

In contrast, when speaking about her migration experience, Seyda did not feel like the odd one out in her life in Germany despite being discriminated against, often struggling in social and legal terms, and having little knowledge of the language. She stated that she accepts these challenges and does not complain about the circumstances. This is probably related to her resilient personality and positive educational experiences in Germany and Turkey, which brings me to the next theme.

Educational Trajectories and Transitions

The women's educational trajectories show early exposure to the German education system, reflecting integration in childhood, except for Seyda. The other four participants all completed their primary education and formal training in Germany, which formed the foundation for further studies. Three pursued higher education with varying degrees of success, reflecting a shared aspiration for advanced qualifications. Additionally, three of the women engaged in vocational training, which played a key role for two, particularly Hatice, who first completed her vocational training before returning to university.

Seyda, with only a primary school qualification and no German proficiency, did not pursue further education or training beyond German language courses in Germany. However,

she did join several training programmes as online courses from Turkey. All participants showed a commitment to lifelong learning through various educational activities.

This commitment stems from the high value placed on education and higher aspirations (Hadjar & Scharf, 2019), which are seen as essential for personal and professional growth. This belief extends beyond the women themselves to their families, emphasizing intergenerational importance, especially for first-generation graduates like Hatice Ayse, and Fatma. Fatma recalls her parents' encouragement, reinforcing the role of education in securing better opportunities:

> My mum was always paying attention to our school life, lessons, and notes. When I received a 3, she would ask why it is not a 2 or a 1. She monitored all of us carefully even though she did not speak German. My dad also supported our education, he always stressed the importance of studying, and not to be dependent on anyone in life. (Fatma)

Education is seen as a critical pathway toward integration into German society and serves as both an empowering and transformative force. Ayse underlined how education empowered her:

> I mean, it was a great gain for me to enter the medical department. I felt more self-confident in this way. For my development and for my life here, this is a self-confidence and a freedom for me. Exactly, it was freedom. […] [I]it gave me strength. […] I knew that if I could achieve this, then I could achieve almost everything. I can achieve anything I want, whether material or spiritual. (Ayse)

Seyda, on the other hand, who was only able to complete primary school in Turkey, explained how sad and disappointed she was when she could not continue studying. When she recalled the reasons for starting her continuing education, she revealed her desire for learning:

> It wasn't for work; it was an inner desire in myself. I couldn't get an education. I can't suppress it because it's something I could not fulfil. I need to do something with a pen. I need to write. I mean, when you are hungry for a meal, you love food. I also love education because I am hungry. […] Even my husband is sometimes surprised, I mean, after this age. I guess it's a desire that has remained since childhood that pushes me constantly. (Seyda)

Although four of the participants grew up in Germany, completed their formal education in Germany, and were motivated to learn, they had to deal with a number of struggles and challenges that arose due to both structural and individual reasons.

One major struggle was the "lack of guidance in navigating their education", a systemic issue noted in previous research (Crul et al., 2012). As first-generation German-raised and

German-born migrants, all four participants faced difficulties in making educational decisions due to a limited understanding of the system and the available options. Selma's reflection on her lack of awareness of viable future aspirations illustrates this challenge well:

> I could pass the *Abitur* [secondary school completion test]. But I didn't know what to do after that. Because there's no example of a profession for us. Because we don't know any Turks who did not work in factories but were in other professions. If there are any, they are in big cities. […] [W]ith limited connections to German friends, you can't really get to them, ask around and find out what your father is doing, what your mother is doing. I don't know what a profession is. I was thinking, oh, where did most of the girls work? Hairdressers or as care personnel. There are also handicrafts, the bakery, flower shop or clerks in the offices. (Selma)

Fatma underlined that she did not have any support concerning school and education, and she even organised her own tutors for the subjects she was not good at. Moreover, in Hatice's and Fatma's case, their families encouraged them to participate in vocational training. Hatice's brother advised her to complete the vocational training: "My brother told me, 'You should have a profession. Then you can go to university; if you don't go, he said, you'll have a job.' I was fine with that, I said, 'Okay.'" This also indicates that families attach more importance to vocational training and the transition into the labour market than to studying at a higher education institution.

A major challenge for all five women was the language barrier they encountered upon entering the German education system. Raised in non-German-speaking households, most started primary school with little to no German, as they did not attend preschool – except for Ayse, who improved her language skills there. The others required tutoring or extra support.

Selma struggled academically and felt isolated due to language difficulties. Hatice and Ayse eventually overcame these challenges but initially faced setbacks in performance and confidence. Fatma's limited German skills influenced her decision to pursue vocational training over higher education. Seyda was unable to complete an apprenticeship for the same reason. These language barriers delayed their social integration, shaped their academic paths, and affected their long-term opportunities:

> I started first grade with no German. I don't speak German at all. My sisters, brothers, of course, their German is not so super either. That school had a kindergarten, and the teacher sent me there. I learnt German there for a year. I remember that. After that, I continued from the first grade. Then I entered the *Gymnasium*. (Selma)

Another problem that affected the acquisition of language was the social context in which they lived. Those who did not grow up in a large Turkish community emphasized that

they had to speak German in any case, as there were no friends or family members with whom they could communicate in Turkish. Fatma complained about the last generation of Turkish people/children who were born in Germany but still cannot speak German properly because an increased number of social spaces allows them to speak Turkish: "I observe Turkish children in class now. He/she doesn't speak German even though they are born here. Why is that? They have a Turkish grocery. They have Turkish lawyers. There's a Turkish female doctor and Turkish dentist."

In the transition to higher education, three of the women (Ayse, Hatice, and Selma) could access university but faced challenges due to limited social support and networks as first-in-family university students. Unfamiliarity with the university system and culture and being away from family were major obstacles. Ayse recalls her first semester as the hardest, while Selma struggled with both the subject content and academic system:

> The beginning was a little bit, how can I put it, exciting and challenging, because I was out of school, everything was given to us in the school and what you will do. And when the university starts, the system is a little bit different. And I think it was a bit of a different struggle at first. (Selma)

Hatice, on the other hand, did not enrol in university after secondary school despite being offered a place at the Faculty of Medicine as it was far away from home and she would have to leave her family: "I wanted to study medicine. Medicine also requires a certain grade; I had the necessary grade. And although I was placed at the university, it was not the one I wanted. It was far away."

Gendered Life Courses

It becomes evident in the analysis that traditional gender roles, particularly related to marriage, caregiving, and household duties, often took precedence over personal aspirations. These roles intersected with broader structural barriers, such as migration status and limited institutional support, to influence critical life decisions and educational and professional goals.

Reflecting the significant influence of gendered roles and responsibilities, the subsequent life course transitions of these Turkish migrant women, particularly concerning their educational and career paths, were often shaped by expectations and commitments related to marriage, childcare, and eldercare. For example, *the transition to the labour market*, a major life event, was smooth only for Hatice and Ayse, thanks to their education. Hatice built a successful career, opening her own audiology business and later becoming a trainer. Ayse became a paediatrician, working in hospitals, private practice, and later in public health. Selma and Fatma delayed entering the workforce due to *marriage* during or just after their studies, later working short-term and outside their fields. Selma primarily took on part-time and volunteer-based social work, while Fatma briefly worked as a beautician before training in office administration. Seyda, facing

legal and structural barriers, had to work for her residence permit, taking on unskilled labour and cleaning jobs. As a single mother and migrant woman with no support in Germany, this was particularly challenging:

> On duty at 6am until 8pm. I had to drive an hour to Düsseldorf every day. I left my child with the childminder at 5am. I had to travel for an hour, start work at 6am. I had to clean, go into the kitchen at 8.30am and work until 8.30pm. This continued like this for 3 and a half years. At the end of those 3 and a half years, I was really exhausted. It was so difficult, but all the paperwork was done [for the residence permit]. (Seyda)

As already touched on above, *marriage and family relations and responsibilities* clearly influenced the educational and career trajectories of these women (Levy, 2013), starting from what and where to study, to which job to take and whether to drop out. The influence of their primary families on their educational and career choices is significantly evident in the women's narratives. Families, consciously or unconsciously, determined the early trajectories of education and work in the life courses of these women. Seyda could not continue to pursue her education after primary school as her parents did not want her to continue; Fatma could not attend university because her family wanted her to have a job soon; Hatice did not go to university because it was far away from her parents, who were sick, and started vocational training on the suggestions of her family:

> I was placed to a university, but it turned out to be far away. […] I didn't want to go there either. My parents were getting a bit old. I didn't want to leave them alone. Then I thought I'd better wait for a year. […] [M]y brother encouraged me to participate in vocational training and get a job. (Hatice)

Marriage was the most pivotal transition in their lives. Hatice, Selma, and Ayse married German men who later converted to Islam, while Fatma married a Turkish man in Germany. Seyda migrated to join her husband, later remarrying after his passing due to the challenges of single motherhood. For Hatice and Selma, marriage disrupted their education, leading to shifting priorities and ultimately dropping out of university.

> I got married, we were both studying medicine and working at the same time. It was not an easy life. We finished the first semester, but my work as an audiologist was going fine. Then I told my husband: 'You stop working, and you just focus on the university. […] I'll pay for our costs.' (Hatice)

Fatma gave up her job to support her husband's business, and Seyda had to start working to be able to stay in Germany after her husband's death. After her second marriage, however, she stopped working. The birth of children also impacted the women's working lives. Fatma, Hatice, and Ayse took long maternity leaves to look after their children.

> I was a key-child [she explained this as a nickname for children who have no one waiting for them at home after school and whose home keys hang around their neck]. […] I did not want my children to experience this, and I stopped working. (Fatma)

Ayse has taken long breaks from work to bring up her two children and is now even trying to reduce her work hours further, as her husband's work hours are not compatible with hers.

The last major life events to affect transitions and educational trajectories were *health problems and deaths*. Care-giving responsibilities have significantly shaped their life transitions, as nearly all of the participants have experienced family health issues involving parents, husbands, and/or children. Serious health problems faced by the women themselves (like Selma's) or the death of a family member (in Seyda's case) played a crucial role in their decisions. For instance, Seyda prioritised her child's future by remaining in Germany and postponing her educational aspirations despite personal hardships, while Selma could not join any educational activities. Analysis of the data clearly shows that it was a challenge to reconcile traditional gender roles with their aspirations and career trajectories, as all of the women changed their educational and career trajectory due to family responsibilities and commitments, sometimes to the point of self-sacrifice.

The findings presented in the results section underscore the powerful and enduring impact of migration history and educational trajectories on the life course transitions of these Turkish migrant women. Furthermore, the analysis clearly demonstrates how deeply embedded gendered roles and familial responsibilities frequently intersected with and often redirected their personal and professional pathways within German society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study offers new insights into how Turkish migrant women's educational and career transitions are shaped by the interplay of migration histories, educational trajectories, and gender-related roles and responsibilities in Germany. Building on the concepts of life course, migration, and gender, the findings highlight how these factors interact to produce relational, nonlinear, and constrained life trajectories. In this part, I interpret the findings in relation to existing scholarship, identifying both points of convergence and where the study extends the current understandings of migrant women's life course transitions and the broader implications of their lived experiences.

The results clearly demonstrate that the life transitions of migrant women are deeply embedded in their cultural, social, and economic environments interwoven with their migration history. Migration history emerges as a key factor influencing the social embeddedness of transitions, relationality and temporality as well as gendered life courses, while also shaping educational trajectories.

Consistent with Walther et al. (2022), the findings emphasize that migrant women's educational and career pathways are strongly influenced by their social networks, cultural

ties, and institutional contexts, highlighting the social embeddedness of migrant women's life transitions. In the context of migration, social embeddedness is particularly prevalent in this study as it underscores how migrants navigate their lives within the intersecting spheres of family, community, and institutional structures, as also shown in the work of Apitzsch and Siouti (2014). The women's biographies illustrate that family expectations, peer influences, and community support played both enabling and constraining roles in their educational and professional transitions. This corroborates Crul et al.'s (2012) findings that strong familial encouragement to pursue vocational training and limited access to academic role models and professional networks reinforce existing inequalities in educational trajectories. Moreover, these women also encountered institutional and societal barriers that restricted their full participation, reinforcing the notion that social embeddedness is not always an equalising force but can also reproduce social stratification (Faist, 2000). This duality suggests that although social networks can support migrants in navigating education and integration, their impact is shaped by broader structural inequalities and power hierarchies in both migrant communities and host societies.

The study further confirms that life transitions are highly relational, embedded in family and social networks (Walther et al., 2022). From an early age, family relationships and social surroundings shaped the participants' educational and career decisions. The concept of "linked lives" (Settersten, 2015) is evident in how parents, spouses, children, and friends influenced their life transitions and educational pathways. The findings emphasize that these relational dynamics both supported and constrained individual agency especially in the context of gendered expectations.

Temporality and uncertainties also played crucial roles in shaping transitions. Consistent with Dennler (2021) and Bernhard (2023), the participants' narratives highlight how uncertainties related to their migration histories, such as a potential return to Turkey, introduced significant ambiguity into educational and career planning. The concepts of "living in limbo" and "being the odd one out" resonate strongly with previous literature on migrant experiences (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Weichselbaumer, 2020) and Çelik's (2011) concept of liminality in migration experiences. Living with uncertainty influenced critical educational decisions, career aspirations, and even daily interactions and social integration. This aligns with existing research emphasizing how transnational lives affect migrants' psychological well-being and decision-making (Anthias, 2012). This study shows that for many women, delayed decision-making about education and career pathways was not only a personal choice but a response to migration-related uncertainties imposed by family and policy environments.

Non-linearity in transitions emerged as another significant theme in this study. In contrast to conventional life course models that often assume a linear progression from education to work, the narrative of the women in this study revealed patterns of disruptions, reversals, and re-entry into education and work. These findings align with and extend Moen's (2016) work, which highlights the prevalence of interruptions, indirect transitions, and nonlinear trajectories in contemporary life courses. In this specific context of

second-generation migrant women, it is especially evident in how some participants returned to education later in life after fulfilling family obligations. However, their ability to exercise agency was often constrained by their migration status, economic pressures, and gender norms.

The study supports previous research on gendered transitions (Haasler, 2014; Hostetler et al., 2007; Levy, 2013) and contributes to broader feminist migration scholarship (Anthias, 2012; Levy, 2013) that recognises gender as a crucial factor determining migrants' opportunities and trajectories. It illustrates that migrant women's life trajectories are shaped by the intersection of gender, migration policies, and socio-economic status, reinforcing structural inequalities that limit their professional and educational mobility. The participants repeatedly prioritised family responsibilities over education and career progression, reinforcing Levy's (2013) assertion that gender is a "far-reaching dominant status" structuring life course transitions.

While prior literature highlights the challenges of balancing work and family (Haasler, 2014) and the embeddedness of work careers in family careers (Moen, 2016), this study suggests that many women in migrant communities do not perceive this as a balance, but rather as a complete prioritisation of family over self-actualisation. Women such as Fatma and Hatice postponed or gave up their career aspirations due to caregiving responsibilities. Seyda, despite her powerful desire to pursue education, postponed her learning aspirations for the sake of her children. These findings suggest that gendered life course constraints are reinforced in the migration context, intensifying the tension between aspirations and structural barriers.

The final critical theme concerns the dual role of education – both as a site of empowerment and a site of exclusion. While education facilitated self-development, employment, and social integration, systemic barriers (e.g., lack of guidance, language difficulties, and limited social capital) constrained the participants' access to higher education and professional advancement. Consistent with Morrice (2011), the findings reveal that education was perceived as a vital tool of empowerment and a route for establishing an identity. However, their agency was not fully realised, as the participants remained structurally constrained by their migration background, gender roles, and social class positioning (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Pallas, 2003). Even women who successfully navigated the system (Apitzsch, 2019) often lacked the same opportunities and professional networks as their German peers.

Conceptually, this study advances the understanding of life course transitions by highlighting how migration-related liminality, gendered expectations, and intergenerational transmission intertwine to shape the life trajectories of second-generation migrant women. While existing research emphasizes the relational and socially embedded nature of transitions (Walther et al., 2022), this study shows how migration histories create persistent temporal uncertainties that influence decisions across life domains, adding on to Bernhard's (2023) research. Moreover, gendered life courses (Levy, 2013) are not only

structured at the initial point of migration but are continuously reproduced and negotiated across generations within migrant families. By focusing on these intersecting processes, the study advances a more nuanced, gendered, and intergenerationally sensitive perspective of understanding migrant women's transitions, responding to calls for a contextual and intersectional approach to migration and integration as identified by Anthias (2012).

Methodologically, the study highlights the value of narrative biographical approaches for uncovering the relational, contextual, and structural dimensions of migrant women's life course transitions. Biographical methods, as identified by Erel (2007) and Merrill and West (2009), are particularly suited to capturing the lived complexities of migration, gendered life courses, and aspirations over time as in this study. By focusing on Turkish migrant women, an under-researched group in qualitative migration studies, this study offers an important methodological contribution to gendered migration research (Christou & Kofman, 2022).

In conclusion, this study shows that migration histories, gendered expectations, and structural barriers shape Turkish migrant women's educational and career trajectories. Their transitions are relational and nonlinear, often constrained by family responsibilities, the systemic barriers of the German context, and gendered life courses. While education is seen as empowering, limited guidance, social capital, and institutional support restrict their upward mobility. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of recognising second-generation Turkish women's educational trajectories as shaped by multiple layers of migration experiences, family dynamics, and structural constraints, contributing crucial insights into the intersectional understanding of gendered life course transitions. Hence, targeted policies on mentorship, career counselling, and flexible education pathways are needed to improve their inclusion in education and the labour market.

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TAKING A CLOSER LOOK: DO MEN IN GERMANY RE- OR UN-LEARN MASCULINITY BEFORE A REDUCTION IN WORKING HOURS?

ABSTRACT

This article explores transformative learning processes preceding work time reductions in men in Germany. Drawing on qualitative data from biographical case studies, it investigates how men narrate and make sense of reducing their working hours, and how these learning processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. Building on Hoggan's (2016) transformative learning framework, the analysis examines the depth, breadth, and relative stability of the narrated transformations as well as their affective, epistemological, and behavioural dimensions. The findings show that while all analysed cases comprise significant learning processes, the orientation and gender-political implications of these transformations vary widely. The examined cases are grouped in relation to the processes of the hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity that allow symbolic distancing from traditional masculinity ideals without challenging structural privilege and more radical breaks with dominant norms. By linking masculinity, transitions, and transformative learning, the article contributes to understanding how men (un)learn masculinity in the context of life-course transitions and shifting gender orders.

Keywords: *transformative learning, biographical learning, men and masculinities, hybrid masculinity, work transitions*

PODROBNEJŠI POGLED: SE PRED SKRAJŠANJEM DELOVNEGA ČASA MOŠKI V NEMČIJI PONOVNO UČIJO ALI ODUČIJO MOŠKOSTI? – POVZETEK

V članku so predstavljeni transformativni učni procesi, do katerih prihaja pred skrajšanjem delovnega časa pri moških v Nemčiji. Na podlagi kvalitativnih podatkov iz biografskih študij primerov avtor raziskuje, kako moški pripovedujejo o skrajšanju delovnega časa in kako ga razumejo ter kako so ti učni procesi povezani s hegemono moškostjo. Analiza gradi na temeljih, ki jih je za transformativno učenje zastavil Hoggan (2016). Preučuje globino, širino in relativno stabilnost transformacij ter njihove afektivne, epistemološke in vedenjske dimenzije. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vsi analizirani primeri vključujejo pomembne učne procese, vendar se usmerjenost in spolnopolitične posledice teh transformacij med seboj zelo razlikujejo. Analizirani primeri so razvrščeni glede na procese hibridizacije z vidika hegemone moškosti. Ti procesi posamezniku sicer omogočajo simbolično distanciranje od tradicionalnih idealov moškosti, ne izpodbijajo pa strukturnih privilegijev in ne prinašajo radikalnih prelomov z dominantnimi normami. S povezovanjem moškosti, življenjskih prehodov in transformativnega

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učenja članek prispeva k razumevanju, kako se moški v kontekstu življenjskih prehodov in spreminjajočih se spolnih redov (od)učijo moškosti.

Ključne besede: *transformativno učenje, biografsko učenje, moški in moškosti, hibridna moškost, prehodi na področju dela*

INTRODUCTION

In Germany, part-time work is relatively normalised and common compared to many other countries. There exists a legally guaranteed right to reduce working hours under certain conditions (e.g., company size, §8 TzBfG[1]). The proportion of part-time employees among all employees has increased sharply, rising from 14.0% in 1991 to 30.9% in 2023. However, the share of men and women employed on a part-time basis continues to differ massively: while 49.9% of all employed women were working part-time in 2023, only 13.3% of employed men were (Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation, 2024). Especially in middle age and among parents, the roles in the worlds of family and work are still widely assigned according to gender (Lott & Klenner, 2016). There are different reasons and explanations for these phenomena: Germany represents a conservative welfare regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the breadwinner-housewife marriage became the hegemonic and most frequently actualised family model in the middle of the 20th century (and has continued to have effect in the form of the modernised breadwinner model to this day; Keller & Kahle, 2018), and the gender pay gap as well as institutional contexts also contribute to this part-time gender gap. Essentially, full-time work is still the most common employment model for men in Germany, and the role of gainful employment in masculinity discourses and male life concepts remains significant despite changing economic conditions. Middle-aged men's self-initiated working hour reductions can therefore be considered non-normative transitions that might represent symbolic breaks with hegemonic orders of masculinity and notions of a normal, institutionalised life course. Against this backdrop, this article looks at reductions in men's working hours as non-normative transitions.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the work time reductions of men in Germany from the perspective of transformative learning. In this way, it seeks to understand the transformative learning processes that precede reductions in paid work hours and to explore how these relate to hegemonic masculinity. The paper argues that the empirical reconstruction of such learning processes can contribute to a better understanding of how masculinity is (un)learned and reconfigured in life course transitions. It draws on and contributes to debates on transformative learning, work transitions, and hegemonic masculinity – fields that have so far rarely been brought together systematically.

1 The German *Gesetz über Teilzeitarbeit und befristete Arbeitsverträge* (TzBfG; Bundesministerium der Justiz und für Verbraucherschutz, 2022) regulates part-time work and fixed-term contracts.

The paper first provides the theoretical background on transitions, masculinities, and transformative learning. A description of the methodological approach and the data used is followed by three empirical case studies. In these, the life history events and learning processes of men leading up to their work hour reduction will be examined. In a comparative analysis of these learning processes and a critical discussion informed by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, the paper explores what these cases reveal about transformative learning in the context of gender and work transitions.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING, NON-NORMATIVE WORK TRANSITIONS, AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

As stated in the introduction, this paper understands the work time reductions of middle-aged men as transitions that are regularly marked as non-normative, and assumes that this ascribed non-normativity has to do with gender orders and masculinity. Following the concept of *doing transitions* (Walther et al., 2022), transitions are not understood as natural "social facts" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 50), but as being constantly produced in social practices. Transitions are not stable entities with clearly defined and fixed starting and ending points, but discursively, institutionally, and biographically framed processes. This focus on the emergence of transitions makes it possible to look at the discursive framework of (not) marking something as a transition, but also at the biographical genesis, the processes that lead to the actualisation of certain transitions. This is precisely what this paper attempts to do by seeking to reconstruct transformative learning processes leading up to work time reductions from the biographical narratives of men who have performed the above-mentioned transition.

Research on the relation between gender and work is long-standing and multifaceted. In the German context, qualitative studies have examined masculinity in relation to atypical fields of occupation for men (Buschmeyer, 2013), downshifting and part-time work (Buschmeyer, 2008; Gruhlich, 2023), and new fatherhood (Possinger, 2013). Quantitative research has analysed parental leave choices (Reimer, 2020; Schober, 2014), wage and career opportunities for men exercising their right to paternal leave (Bünning, 2016), part-time work over the life course (Althaber, 2022), working and care time budgets (Klünder & Meier-Gräwe, 2017; Walper & Lien, 2017) and many more issues.

Since Elliott's (2016) theoretical outline of "caring masculinities", which she characterises as "masculine identities that exclude domination and embrace the affective, relational, emotional, and interdependent qualities of care" (p. 252), a body of research dealing with transformations in the performance of masculinity away from exclusion and domination has emerged (e.g., Elliott & Roberts, 2024; Lee & Lee, 2018), always with the implicit thesis that such changes entail a transformation of gender relations.

However, the link between individual-level changes and macro-level transformations of gender relations often remains vague. Transformative learning as a concept has rarely been employed to analyse changing masculinity performances over the life course, and

the few attempts that exist (e.g., Eschenbacher & Weber, 2023) remain theoretical. Also, when learning masculinity is the subject of research, studies mostly deal with the processes of socialisation in adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., Harding, 2022; Harris & Struve, 2009; Sherriff, 2007; Waterman et al., 2020). This paper aims to address these gaps by reconstructing processes of (un-/re-)learning masculinity in adult male biographies preceding the non-normative transition of a work time reduction. In contrast to Bernhard (2024), who reconstructs learning processes during and after transitions in the form of migration processes, this article therefore looks for learning processes ahead of a transition. In doing so, it makes use of transformative learning theory as a theoretical link between the observation of the changing practices of men and the question whether these changing expressions reflect a weakening of hegemonic masculinity.

To this end, masculinity is conceptualised as a relational practice in this paper, following Connell (2005), who understands hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (p. 77; see also Carrigan et al., 1985). Connell (2005) differentiates between hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised, and complicit masculinities. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed type of "classical masculinity" but a contested position within the gender order, adaptable and historically contingent. In this way, Connell's (2005) theoretical proposal is more advanced than many instances of its reception that merely understand hegemonic masculinity as a modern, Western, aggressive or "loud" form of masculinity. Recent debates question whether changes in men's practices represent a dissolution or an adaptation of hegemonic masculinity. Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009) describes a decline of homohysteria and an emergence of more emotionally open, egalitarian masculinities. However, critics (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993) argue that such changes often represent hybrid masculinities – strategic borrowings from marginalised forms that symbolically distance men from domination without changing structural power relations. Three mechanisms are central: discursive distancing, strategic borrowing, and fortifying symbolic boundaries (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This paper aims to shed light on the (re-/un)learning of masculinity in adulthood by reconstructing the processes and outcomes of transformative learning ahead of work time reductions, thus allowing for these learning processes and their outcomes to be discussed against the backdrop of hegemonic masculinity.

Transformative learning is understood here, following Hoggan (2016), as a process that results in significant, broad, and relatively stable changes in how people experience, conceptualise, and interact with the world. In adult education research, various concepts have been developed under the term "transformative learning", which aim to bring about far-reaching changes in relationships with the self and the world. While Mezirow (2000) works with a focus on cognitive changes in perspective, his approach has been increasingly criticised for its emphasis on rationalism and lack of embedding in social contexts (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). More recent approaches (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020; Hoggan, 2016; Lange, 2018) understand transformative learning processes as holistic,

experience-based, and contextually embedded. Transformative learning, in this view, is not limited to formal education but unfolds across the life course, especially in response to disruptions and critical events. Transitions, especially non-normative ones, will therefore often be preceded by comprehensive learning processes. This is echoed in biographical learning theory (Alheit, 2018), which emphasizes learning as life-spanning transformation shaped by social structures and personal histories.

Based on these theoretical developments, the empirical part of the article makes use of a meta-theoretical understanding of transformative learning processes, as proposed by Hoggan (2016). He provides a metatheoretical framework for analysing such learning processes, focusing on the depth, breadth, and stability of change as well as outcomes such as identity shifts, new epistemologies, and relational competencies. His proposal to analyse transformations on the basis of the three dimensions of depth, breadth, and relative stability serves as an analytical grid. Here, breadth refers to the range of the areas affected by the change (e.g., thinking, feeling, acting, body, relationships), depth describes the hierarchical location of the change within the structure of subjective experience (e.g., behaviour vs world view), and stability refers to the sustainability of the change. In addition, Hoggan (2016) proposes a differentiated systematisation of learning outcomes in order to better capture the quality of transformative learning processes. He distinguishes between different levels at which changes can take place: worldview, self, epistemology, ontology, behaviour, and capacity. According to Hoggan (2016), learning processes that go beyond purely cognitive reinterpretations and also include affective, identity-related, and social dimensions are particularly significant. In this way, transformative learning processes can be understood not only as individual rethinking, but also as a comprehensive reorientation in relation to the world. These differentiations allow for a concise description and evaluation of learning processes.

Drawing on these perspectives, this article examines how life history events leading up to work time reductions are processed by men as learning experiences, and how these learning processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. It asks: *What kinds of transformative learning processes and outcomes can be reconstructed from the biographical narratives of men who have reduced their working hours? How do these learning processes and their outcomes relate to hegemonic masculinity?*

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Hoggan's (2016) meta-theoretical definition that "[t]ransformative learning refers to processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualises, and interacts with the world" (p. 71) serves as a heuristic device in the empirical part of this paper. The various criteria of this definition (depth, breadth, stability, and typology of learning outcomes) were used as analytical guidelines for the case reconstructions.

For the purpose of empirically answering the overarching research question of this article, according to the principle of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 2006), three cases

were selected from a dissertation project. The narrative structure of the selected cases allowed for the learning processes to be reconstructed particularly well, and the cases also show a number of contrasts with each other in relation to the reasons given for the reduction in working hours, in relation to the remaining working hours, and in relation to the agency ascribed to the protagonists in the process of reducing their work hours.

The data collection and analysis took place within the framework of a qualitative-interpretative research design and is oriented towards the principles of grounded theory methodology (GTM), in particular towards reflexive GTM as proposed by Breuer et al. (2019). The interpretation for this paper followed a multi-stage procedure. Firstly, a dense case description was created, which reconstructed the life events biographically marked as relevant for the transition of reducing work hours. Building on this, a sequential interpretation of the central text passages was carried out with a view to identify and examine learning processes in Hoggan's (2016) sense. The analysis focused on the following empirical questions: Which narrated life history events prior to the reduction in working hours can be conceptualised as transformative learning processes that are directly or indirectly linked to the transition of the reduction in working hours? In what ways are the considered life history events changing the participants' ways of thinking and existing and their behaviour? How significant (deep and broad) and irreversible (not just temporary) are these changes?

Following this reconstruction, presented below in the form of three case studies that illustrate the respective life history events, learning processes and content, a critical reflection on these learning processes in relation to the concept of hegemonic masculinity is carried out. This part attempts to answer the question: What do the reconstructed learning processes and their outcomes tell us about work time reductions in terms of (the changing forms of) hegemonic masculinity?

All of the transcript excerpts used in this article have been translated into English, and all of the interviewees' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

HELMUT: UNLEARNING WORK WITHOUT RELEARNING MASCULINITY

Helmut, who was 45 years old at the time of the interview, had run his own supermarket before selling it shortly beforehand. The wealth he has accumulated by running this business will allow him to live without an income from work for the foreseeable future. Helmut originally embarked on his career in order to be able to financially provide for his family after becoming a father in a rather unplanned manner at the age of 22. For years, working in the supermarket was a strong source of identity for him. In recent years, however, Helmut had become increasingly weary of what he saw as the weakening work ethic of his employees. His heavy workload had also taken its toll on his health and led to burnout. Finally, and crucially, the death of Helmut's son (one of two children) from a congenital autoimmune disease at the age of 19 raised profound questions about the meaning of work. He therefore decided to sell the supermarket and live on his own terms and, at the time of the interview, was enjoying his newly gained leisure time.

Helmut's life story is characterised by professional success, family obligations, and a change triggered by personal experiences of loss. In his narrative retrospective, it becomes clear that his professional development was characterised by the classic idea of performance and responsibility: "In the end, it always turned out to my liking [...] I just did a good job". His role as the family breadwinner was central to him for a long time: "It was always family before me". His previous family-centred outlook ("My wife got pregnant, so I went to my boss and told him that I needed to advance professionally and earn a bit of money for my family") changed slightly towards a more self-centred perspective when his wife temporarily left him for another man when he was in his mid-30s:

> At the end of the day … you're always alone. You're even more likely to have a mate stand by you than your family. [...] So with every decision I've made in my life since then, the question has always been: 'Is this the right decision for me?'

This increased focus on his own needs was fortified by disappointments in social relationships with co-workers ("I thought they were friends [...] and then they didn't look at you with their arses") and employees in his supermarket ("People used to enjoy working. But the current generation has changed"). These repeated experiences contributed to a growing disillusionment and a retreat into the private sphere. Helmut "learnt somewhere along the way that the only person you can rely on is ultimately yourself".

The most profound biographical turning point in Helmut's narrative, however, is his son's death. For his son, "there was simply no tomorrow at some point", Helmut reflects, realising that "normal life might pass you by". In this existential experience, a process of realisation occurs that places the value of health and time above material goods: "No amount of money in the world [...] will keep you alive […] [and] the most valuable thing you have is health and time". These realisations form the basis for Helmut's later complete abandonment of gainful employment.

He says that the experience of burnout deepened this change: "I found it difficult to motivate myself to work for weeks [...] it was really an effort of will". One particular moment of being completely overwhelmed – unable to decide between "pissing, answering the phone, accepting a delivery of goods and getting coffee" – marks a tipping point as Helmut experiences the limits of the functioning on his own body. The decision to stop working is therefore presented as the result of cumulative emotional and physical exhaustion.

The framework within which Helmut makes his decision to give up his job nevertheless represents an *iteration* of the idea of autonomous male decision-making rather than a drastic reorientation in regard to the performance of masculinity. He keeps the traditional gender roles in his relationship in place ("I'm the boss at the company, she's the boss at home"), and it is an important element of the narrative that Helmut's role as a male breadwinner is not affected at all by his withdrawal from paid work. The material wealth that his work has provided is explained in detail, and emphasis is put on the fact that the income from these assets will also provide material security for his family in the future:

> I've organised it in a way that the properties I have can or will be inherited, and the financial means I have at my disposal will be enough to provide for me until retirement age and the day I kick the bucket.

In conclusion, Helmut's learning processes ahead of giving up work are formed by the existential impact of the loss of his son on the one hand, and are built upon the idea of unrestricted individual agency on the other. Grief and exhaustion but also disappointment and anger are emotionally present and accompany his change. Helmut learns that health and time are invaluable yet unavailable commodities, and that his previous self-image as an inexhaustible provider is reaching its limits. However, these feelings do not lead to a fundamental reconfiguration of gender roles, but rather to withdrawal, simplification, and traditional re-anchoring. Helmut has given up work completely but continues to arrange his life based on rather traditional ideals of masculinity and a hardly challenged gendered division of work.

STEFFEN: RELEARNING MASCULINITY THROUGH ADAPTATION

Steffen was 35 years old at the time of the interview and worked as a social worker, providing support to families in their everyday lives. His biography is characterised by a clear break with the conservative influences of his childhood. He describes his socialisation in a pietistic environment dominated by strict moral views: "no sex before marriage and homosexuality isn't cool". This early moulding initially remained unquestioned but was increasingly challenged by his own experiences and new values.

He studied social work, which led him to move to a larger city for the first time, representing the first important source of his reorientation. After his studies, Steffen briefly worked in a factory, where his colleagues – "sad people" – greatly alienated him by openly boasting about visiting brothels all over Germany or going on holidays to Thailand, where they would hire a sex worker for the duration. At the same time, Steffen got married and took his wife's surname, which is a rather unusual practice in Germany (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache, 2018), and he also presents as an unconventional move on his own part.

The most central motif of his transformation, however, is Steffen's becoming a father: "I don't want to work 100 per cent anymore [...] as long as the children are small". He marks the birth of his son as a turning point in his thoughts and actions, which led him to begin to reorganise his working life and actively shape family care. The reduction of his working hours to 85% is directly linked to this biographical transition. It is important to Steffen that he is fully able to look after his older son on his own for several days without the support of his wife: "My wife can be away for a weekend and everything works out, and I am able to manage on my own, even when he is sick or anything like that". In his view, this is also in his own interest, as he wants to be more involved in his children's upbringing than his own father was: "My father was not very present in my everyday life, but I want to be in my children's". The experience of taking care of the child on his own for entire days at a time has proved formative: "Realising how exhausting it is to have to focus on this

child all day long made me understand how hard it is at home". This concrete everyday experience led to a re-evaluation of care work and contributed to Steffen turning away from classic ideas of masculinity: "I don't want to define myself as a man by my name or how much I work, but [...] by how I fulfil my responsibilities in my family".

Social feedback stabilises this change in perspective: he regularly receives positive feedback, especially from women in his environment; they say "it's really cool how much work I do at home". The active confrontation with conservative attitudes in his family (e.g., in the WhatsApp family chat: "There's an extended family WhatsApp chat, and one aunt often shares stuff that's pretty right-wing, probably even AfD-related. […] I've spoken up about it – like, 'What's the problem if two men or two women live together?'") and the conscious decision to depart from traditional norms that have characterised his upbringing show the breadth and depth of his transformation: "I am able to depart from norms because I can look back on my earlier days". The following reflection on his working hours also shows how strongly anchored his new attitude is: "I don't live for the job [...] it serves my life". At the same time, however, a certain imbalance remains: Steffen continues to work in a 85% part-time position, while his partner works considerably less.

To sum up, Steffen has learned that caring is not a "female" area but is part of fatherhood. He has developed an attitude of responsibility and equality that goes against traditional role expectations. His transformation can therefore also be understood as an affective reorientation that encompasses care, empathy, and emotional labour – but within a setting that in part still reproduces hegemonic structures.

LARS: RE-/UNLEARNING MASCULINITY THROUGH FAILURE

Lars worked in a 50% part-time position as a project employee in public administration and was 34 years old at the time of the interview. He predominantly tells his life story as one of suffering and failure. His story begins with a deep biographical injury: he reports of systematic physical and sexualised violence and systematic bullying at school, being "the one who simply was the target of the violence in the end". A long-lasting feeling of weakness, non-belonging, and deficient masculinity developed from these experiences: "I was signalled in all parts of my life: You are worth nothing, you are a weak little boy".

At university, he developed new areas of thought and experience: "All of a sudden, completely new perspectives opened up". In his encounter with his first girlfriend, Malin, and by travelling, Lars experienced an expansion of his worldview both culturally and emotionally. His relationship with Malin and the confrontation with his own sexuality, emotional dependency, and fidelity led to a profound process of self-questioning and a re-localisation of the masculine. For the first time in his life, his own qualities as an "emotionally sensitive, process-oriented man, who is focused on social connection – someone who embodies traits that are stereotypically attributed to women" prove to be useful to him, and Lars also considers them useful for the community: "This kind of masculinity [...] is needed in our society".

However, Lars' doctorate, which initially began as a continuation of his intellectual self-discovery, led to a profound crisis. Conflicts with his supervisor, a lack of structure, and a loss of confidence led to an existential shake-up: "I was so completely depressed [...] I had no identity anymore". Through his own experience of failure and the despair he felt over it, Lars has realised how strongly patriarchal orders still prevail in the academic field, for example, in the way his mentor at the university gives jobs to his (male) friends under the table. In Lars' eyes, success in this system does not depend on academic excellence or even on the willingness to perform, but primarily on whether those involved are prepared to laugh at the boss's "chauvinistic jokes [...] in the evening, over a beer, eating a steak". In this way, Lars has confronted the end of his own academic career, and thus also attributes the collapse of his attempt to build an identity as an academic to male nepotism and structures of male domination that still exist at the university.

He has reduced his working time to 50% because, as he says himself, he is "not able to work more, because I am still […] picking up the emotional pieces from this experience". The reduction in working hours is therefore not a conscious strategic decision, but a necessary reaction to emotional overload and the loss of trust in the academic system. In the end, Lars' biographical crisis nonetheless has become the source of an active redesign. Lars has developed a new understanding of his own body by taking up a new sport: "I discovered that fitness is something that [...] every [...] normally developed person can learn to a certain degree". He engages in spiritual practices such as meditation, seeks out communities that affirm his being, and creates a counter-model to hegemonic masculinity that encompasses care, emotionality, and social responsibility:

> Via the internet [...] I can connect with people from all over the world [...] who are moving in the same direction. I can listen to podcasts and read articles, benefit from their experience and wisdom, and I can feel connected in a whole new way. It wouldn't work without this international community for me.

Lars' learning processes are highly transformative, ranging from changes in his worldview and self-concept to concrete behaviour and new skills. Depth, breadth, and stability are particularly pronounced: Lars has succeeded in developing a new relationship with himself and the world.

In Lars' case, fear, pain, disappointment, and ultimately hope structure his learning processes. He has learned that sensitivity, emotionality, and vulnerability are not weaknesses but central resources for connection and realisation. He is deconstructing the dominant images of masculinity, reflecting on structural inequalities in academic and social systems, and tapping into a new form of self-efficacy based on mindfulness, community, and reflexivity. His transformation is comprehensive: it affects thinking, feeling, acting, and the body in equal measure.

All three case portraits show profound biographical learning processes ahead of working time reduction. While all three participants have undergone learning processes that can

be understood as transformative in Hoggan's (2016) sense, they differ significantly in their structure, orientation, and dynamics as well as in the domains that they influence. These similarities and differences will be compared in the next section of this article.

COMPARING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING PROCESSES PRECEDING WORK TIME REDUCTIONS

All three cases show transformations of considerable *depth*. For Steffen and Lars, these are active, emancipatory learning processes that deal with questions central to their own identity, gender understanding, and social norms. Helmut, on the other hand, has been undergoing a transformation that is more strongly characterised by loss and resignation. While Steffen has realigned his relationship with himself and the world through the birth of his child and the associated experience of care work, Lars has undergone a complex chain of experiences: from early violence to emotional relationships, academic challenges, and spiritual practice. Helmut has been forced to reflect and change because of the death of his son, the experience of professional exhaustion, and a growing disillusionment in social relationships. The *breadth* of change varies. Steffen and Lars have experienced changes in every area of their lives: family and relationships, work, gender roles, political awareness, physical practice, emotion, and self-concept. For Helmut, the changes are more focused on values and occupation, so there is a certain breadth here as well, but it is less multidimensional. As for the *stability* of the changes, all three men have clearly integrated their new perspectives into their everyday thoughts and actions. Steffen has developed fixed routines for organising his family and career life in a partnership-based way, Helmut is selectively withdrawing from old patterns by reducing his working hours and living more health-consciously, and Lars' transformation is anchored in spiritual, physical, and communal practices.

Applying Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes, it becomes evident that the cases differ in characteristics and emphases of the impacted areas. With regard to their *worldview*, all three men show a turning away from their earlier convictions: Steffen turns away from conservative religious norms, Helmut recognises the illusion of material success, and Lars deconstructs heteronormative and patriarchal academic ideas. Lars in particular also places this transformation in a political context, for example, when he discusses the necessity of an emancipated image of masculinity. The *self-concepts* of all three participants are also subject to significant change: Steffen reinterprets his role as a father, Helmut begins to see himself as worthy of protection and not just as a functional resource, and Lars reconstructs himself as a sensitive, spiritual and connected man, who not only accepts his "female-connoted" qualities, but also understands them as socially necessary. *Epistemological changes* are reflected in the questioning of dominant patterns of knowledge and interpretation. For example, Steffen realises that care is not an exclusively "female" task or quality. Helmut relativises his idea of control and planning, while Lars explicitly analyses existing knowledge systems. *Ontological changes* – that is, new ways of relating to the world and one's own body – are particularly evident in Lars' practice of meditation, sports, and emotional mindfulness. For Steffen, the physical experience of

care seems noteworthy in this context. Helmut processes the death of his son as an existential experience that shatters his entire understanding of life. All three participants also introduce *behavioural changes* in their everyday lives. Steffen reduces his working hours, takes on more responsibility at home, and organises care work. Helmut withdraws and lives more consciously. Lars establishes new routines, seeks out new social environments, and gives up his academic career. Finally, their individual *capacities* (skills and abilities) evolve: Steffen develops social and communicative abilities, Helmut emotional resilience and boundaries, and Lars social, political, and spiritual self-efficacy. The following table summarises the contents of Helmut's, Steffen's and Lars' respective learning processes prior to their work time reductions.

Table 1
Interviewees' learning processes before work time reductions

	Helmut	Steffen	Lars
Worldview	Devaluation of material wealth; focus on health and time	Rejection of conservative norms; new understanding of care	Deconstruction of heteronormative norms and prevailing power structures in the academic field
Self	Increased self-centredness after separation and loss of his son	New self-image as a caring father; reflexive masculinity	New self-image as a sensitive, connected man
Epistemology	Insight into the limits of previous values (e.g., performance)	Openness to alternative interpretations	Criticism of gender, power, masculinity
Ontology	Processing loss and existential fragility	Emotional depth through father role	Integration of body, emotion, and spirituality
Behaviour	Reducing occupational stress	Reducing working hours; organising everyday life on an equal footing	New practices: meditation, sports, community
Capacities	Resilience, self-protection, boundary-setting	Competencies in care, communication, reflection	Self-efficacy, political awareness, community orientation

THE RECONSTRUCTED LEARNING PROCESSES AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

The learning processes reconstructed above make it clear that for men a reduction in working hours is not automatically accompanied by a rejection of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, it becomes clear how differently such decisions are biographically framed, emotionally processed and framed in terms of gender.

Helmut's learning process is characterised by massive biographical incisions, specifically the loss of his son and a burnout experience. These events interrupt his previously stable self-positioning as a capable provider. However, his reaction to them reveals a reactive

adherence to familiar patterns. Helmut's change is deeply anchored in affect – grief, exhaustion, and disappointment characterise his narrative – but does not lead to reflection on gender relations. In other words, Helmut's recognition of his own limits does not lead to a destabilisation of male privileges, but rather to their reorganisation in the private sphere.

Steffen integrates caretaking ("I rather define myself by how I am as a father") into a life model that continues to be characterised by the male as the primary breadwinner. This selective appropriation of elements of care work previously labelled as "feminine" allows for a symbolic distancing from hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) without structurally undermining it. Steffen receives social recognition for his behaviour, especially from women, a phenomenon which Messner (1993) described as "more style than substance", as emotionality and participation are performed while the economic position of power remains untouched. Steffen's learning processes are affective and show a certain depth, but ultimately they may signify little more than a new variant of male dominance in a more caring package.

Lars, by contrast, embodies an explicitly counter-hegemonic masculinity. His biography shows a critical engagement with the dominant patterns of masculinity: "This kind of masculinity [...] is needed". Experiences of violence, powerlessness, and alienation (e.g., at school or in the context of his doctorate) lead to comprehensive reflection on the structural norms of masculinity. Lars not only develops new affective competencies, but also alternative practices and self-images, for example, through meditation, athletic self-empowerment, and a clear positioning against these masculinity norms. Elements of explicit counter-hegemony can be identified in his transformation. Lars' learning encompasses not only a new practice but a fundamental questioning of gender order patterns.

In comparison, Steffen's case seems to adhere to Bridges' and Pascoe's thesis that hybrid forms of masculinity may create symbolic distance to traditional forms of masculinity, but at the same time institutionally stabilise male hegemony. Steffen stands for a reorganisation of hegemonic masculinity, a hybridised reformation of male subjectivity that combines proximity to care work with the structural reproduction of male power (see Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). His learning process before the reduction in working hours can be called *adaptive*. Helmut rejects change by withdrawal. His affective transformation, however, does not lead to any reflection on gender or questioning of hegemonic masculinity. The learning mode that he embodies is best described as *reactive*. Lars shows some signs of resistance against hegemonic masculinity by using his affective crisis as a resource for a critical transformation of masculinity that goes beyond hegemonic positions. His learning can be understood as *critical-transgressive*.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to explore transformative learning processes which men undergo before they reduce their working hours, and how these processes relate to hegemonic masculinity. In the three biographical case analyses, which draw on Hoggan's (2016)

meta-theoretical understanding of transformative learning, it was possible to work out that the transition is indeed preceded by profound learning processes in all three cases, but that these differ significantly in terms of structure, orientation, and gender-political implications.

All three cases show significant changes in the self-image and worldview of the interviewees. However, these reorientations differ significantly in terms of content and form. While Helmut's clear affective reorientation does not include any questioning of traditional gender roles (*reactive* learning), Steffen's case shows a selective appropriation of care practices previously connoted as feminine (*adaptive* learning). The relationship of these appropriations to hegemonic masculinity appears ambivalent: as his breadwinner status is only slightly adapted, it could be argued that Steffen primarily learns to symbolically distance himself from traditional notions of masculinity and to justify his lifestyle in terms of gender politics, a finding that can be read in the sense of a hybridisation of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Lars' explicit criticism of the hegemonic patterns of masculinity and his simultaneous establishment of alternative self and world relations, from political activism to spiritual practices, on the other hand, must be understood as a comprehensive transformation (*critical-transgressive* learning).

By focusing on the re- and unlearning of masculinities, this article sheds light on a topic that has so far received little attention in adult education research on transformative learning. With its empirical findings, it also contributes to critical studies on men and masculinities by illuminating the relationship between transformative learning processes prior to the non-normative transition of reducing work hours and hegemonic orders of masculinity. By conceptualising life events as transformative learning, both the potential and limits of individual transformation in gender relations become visible. It becomes clear that a reduction in working hours is not per se an expression of gender-political transformation. Rather, it depends on how this decision is processed biographically, experienced affectively, and framed socially. In this sense, reductions in working hours present an ambiguous practice: they can be the result of comprehensive transformation and reflection processes, but they do not have to be. Analysing them in the light of transformative learning processes therefore allows for deeper insight into the dynamics of male subjectivation in transition.

This paper is based on a small qualitative sample and is therefore explorative in character. By using biographical self-representations as empirical data, the emphasis of the study lies on subjective learning processes, while structural and institutional framework conditions are only marginally visible. In addition, the sample lacks diversity in terms of dimensions such as ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Future research could expand the sample and include longitudinal designs to better understand the stability and development of transformative learning processes over time. A stronger consideration of institutional and structural conditions – for example, in the education system or in the workplace – would also make it possible to better contextualise individual transformations. Finally, an intersectional perspective could provide deeper insights into how the processes involved in the (re)configuration of masculinity are shaped by social structures and differences.

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LEARNING IN HOUSING TRANSITIONS TO AGE-SPECIFIC ASSISTED LIVING ARRANGEMENTS FOR YOUNG AND OLDER ADULTS

ABSTRACT

The housing crisis increasingly complicates housing transitions for young and older adults. In response, relocation processes are increasingly supported pedagogically, making learning particularly relevant. These processes are structured differently depending on age. This study contrasts relocations to youth and senior housing in Germany, understanding age as a crucial category of difference which constitutes learning in housing transitions. Based on ethnographic research, it sets out to examine how learning is done in relocations through age-coded practices. The findings show that learning in housing transitions is shaped by age-specific expectations and institutional frameworks. While youth housing emphasizes learning as gaining independence, senior housing frames relocation as "fitness" and adaptation rather than learning. This reflects broader life course structures, where learning is linked to youth, while older adults are presumed to already possess the necessary housing skills. The concept of age-coded learning assemblages provides insights into the co-constitution of learning and age, informing pedagogical approaches to transitions.

Keywords: *assisted living, linking ages, learning, housing transitions, young and older adults*

UČENJE PRI STANOVANJSKIH PREHODIH V STAROSTI PRILAGOJENE OBLIKE BIVANJA ZA MLAJŠE IN STAREJŠE ODRASLE – POVZETEK

Stanovanjska kriza vse bolj otežuje stanovanjske prehode tako za mlade kot starejše odrasle. V odgovor na to so postopki selitve vse pogosteje pedagoško podprti, zaradi česar postaja učenje pri tem še posebej pomembno. Ti procesi so glede na starost različno strukturirani. V študiji primerjamo selitve v stanovanja za mlade in stanovanjske oblike za starejše v Nemčiji, pri čemer razumemo starost kot ključno kategorijo razlike, ki sooblikuje učenje v stanovanjskih prehodih. Namen je na podlagi etnografske raziskave proučiti, kako poteka učenje pri selitvah skozi starostno kodirano prakso. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je učenje v stanovanjskih prehodih oblikovano s starostno specifičnimi pričakovanji in institucionalnimi okvirji. Medtem ko stanovanja za mlade poudarjajo učenje kot pridobivanje samostojnosti, se v stanovanjih za starejše selitev razume kot vprašanje »ohranjanja sposobnosti« in prilagajanja, ne pa kot učenje. To odraža širše strukture življenjskega poteka, v katerih je učenje povezano z mladostjo, medtem ko se pri starejših domneva, da že razpolagajo z ustreznimi stanovanjskimi kompetencami.

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Koncept starostno kodiranih učnih sestavov (angl. learning assemblages) ponuja vpogled v sooblikovanje učenja in starosti ter prispeva k oblikovanju pedagoških pristopov k stanovanjskim prehodom.

Ključne besede: *oskrbovano stanovanje, povezovanje starosti, učenje, stanovanjski prehodi, mladi in starejši odrasli*

INTRODUCTION

Social changes in various sectors of society, including the labour market, demographics, and lifestyle, are closely interconnected with developments in housing and the housing market (Schader-Stiftung, 2001). One of the most intensely debated issues arising from these changes is the housing crisis, characterised by a shortage of affordable housing across Europe, including Germany. This crisis is particularly pronounced in urban areas and affects broad segments of the population (Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung [BBSR], 2024). Among those most impacted are young adults, who often have limited financial resources and are required to reside in cities for educational purposes. In these urban areas, they compete for scarce and costly housing with other demographic groups, such as retirees and young professionals (BBSR, 2023). Another group particularly vulnerable to these developments is the ageing population, particularly the cohort born in the 1960s, commonly referred to as "baby boomers". In 2023, the Pestel Institute estimated a shortage of 2.2 million age-appropriate housing units in Germany.

The effects of the housing crisis become particularly evident when individuals are required to vacate their current residence and relocate. Relocations, conceptualised as "(partial) transitions" (Meuth, 2014, p. 104), frequently occur during transitions in and out of the labour force in adulthood. This housing situation therefore often impacts young adults who must relocate for educational and work training purposes, as well as older individuals requiring age-appropriate housing. In light of this, housing transitions at various life stages are increasingly addressed and supported within pedagogical practice and research. As noted by Meuth (2017), the worsening conditions on housing markets and the social inequalities they entail are progressively being recognised as an issue within educational science research (e.g., Reutlinger, 2017). Housing transitions in young and older age are often facilitated by publicly funded organisations that provide professional assistance with assisted living arrangements for diverse groups, such as senior or youth housing. These organisations offer a range of services delivered by pedagogical staff, including counselling and the organisation of leisure activities, but they typically cater to specific age groups. Such assisted living facilities can be understood as key actors and enablers in non-formal learning processes in transitions: in living outside the parental home and becoming an independent, autonomous adult, or in becoming a resident in an assisted housing facility.

Given the age-specific division of assisted living facilities, it appears that age is of significance in how transitions and the associated learning processes are addressed in the context

of housing. Learning in the transition to assisted living thus appears to be age-coded (Krekula et al., 2017), meaning it is tailored to specific age groups. Although housing and housing transitions have been examined within educational science contexts in the past (e.g., Höblich & Meuth, 2013; Mangold & Rein, 2017; Meuth, 2014; Reutlinger, 2017), and learning in life course transitions is increasingly recognised as a relevant practice (e.g., Walther et al., 2022), research on learning and the constitution of learning during these housing transitions remains limited.

Against this backdrop, the article intends to contribute to a better understanding of learning in housing transitions by drawing on the example of relocations to age-specific assisted living arrangements. The article therefore asks the following research questions: How is learning done in the relocation transition to age-specific, assisted living arrangements? And how are those learning processes age-coded?

The paper draws on data from an ethnographic project that contrasts the relocation transition to two different forms of assisted living: the first case is the relocation to youth and trainee housing for young adults, while the second case involves the relocation to a senior housing complex.

First, the paper outlines the theoretical assumptions on learning at and in life course transitions as well as the state of the art of learning in housing transitions. Second, it presents the two empirical cases, the methods used, the data analysis, and the findings on learning in relocation transitions. Finally, learning is discussed as an age-coded practice in housing transitions to assisted living arrangements.

LEARNING AT AND IN LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS

This article adopts a perspective on learning that is increasingly being applied to researching life course transitions. According to Hof and Bernhard (2022, 2025), life course transitions can be understood as opportunities for learning and educational processes, as they are periods of uncertainty and change. From a research perspective that foregrounds the emergence and enactment – the "doing" – of transitions (cf. Walther et al., 2020), the social embeddedness of learning in transitions becomes particularly relevant. Hof and Bernhard (2025) understand "irritations in life course transitions as the departing point for learning, [therefore] one can ask *which* irritations come into focus, how people deal with them, and which further activities result from this engagement" (p. 15). Building on Hof and Bernhard's (2025) conceptualisation of learning in life course transitions as not merely a transformative process but as a social practice offers a productive perspective for examining housing transitions. They advocate for investigating transitions as a starting point for learning processes, which, from this perspective, necessitates an analysis of the (institutionalised) bundles of practice within transitions. From a practice-theoretical and neo-materialist inspired perspective, learning can thus be understood as constituted in practices within (transitional) assemblages (Phillips, 2006) comprising both human (e.g., residents) and non-human actors (e.g., spatial configurations). Adopting this perspective

raises the question of how learning is constituted within these practices. Understanding learning as constituted inevitably raises the question of how social differences, such as age or gender, are produced in these transitional assemblages.

While learning processes during transitions at different stages of life have been examined, studies on learning in housing transitions in educational science studies remain rare despite their potential to offer valuable insights into learning as an adaptation to a new social position or environment and its constitution (Walther et al., 2022). Housing and housing transitions have so far received little attention in transition research within educational science, with some notable exceptions. Studies on housing transitions have primarily focused on young adults, particularly in relation to leaving the parental home (Höblich & Meuth, 2013) or transitional housing for trainees (e.g., Meuth, 2018). While "learning housing" (Meuth, 2018, p. 15) has been explored as a normative interpretative pattern, learning in these transitions has yet to be systematically analysed as a socially constituted practice. Housing transitions and learning in later life have been examined by Krasemann (2017), who conceptualises communal living for older adults as a biographical learning process, emphasizing forms of housing that involve little or no professional support. However, similar considerations have not yet been extended to other housing contexts where learning and education take place, such as senior housing or assisted living for disabled individuals.

To contribute to a better understanding of the constitution of learning in housing transitions, two highly contrasting cases of relocations into assisted living arrangements have been selected. The advantage of maximising contrast lies in the potential to reveal new aspects of a concept as well as the constitution of a phenomenon more clearly (Strübing, 2021). Based on these criteria, for instance, examining housing transitions into multigenerational living in contrast to a relocation into accommodation for homeless individuals or refugees would be conceivable. Since age specificity serves as an organising principle in many assisted living arrangements, this study leans on research by Wanka et al. (2024),[1] who understand age as a crucial societal marker of difference, aim to bring childhood and ageing research into a dialogue, and try to deconstruct age categories. By adopting the perspective of "un/doing age" (Höppner & Wanka, 2021; Schroeter, 2012), Wanka et al. conceptualise age as a distributed assemblage produced through practice. Their perspective highlights age as a process of boundary-drawing throughout the life course. They are interested, for example, in the ways research (e.g., childhood and ageing research) or practices (like "play") are "age-coded", meaning the ways they are assigned to different age groups (Krekula et al., 2017), and the consequences of these differentiations. In doing so, the research connects to perspectives that problematise middle adulthood as an unmarked norm and that are expressed in concepts such as (middle) ageism or adultism (Crawford,

1 The article is an output from a dissertation project that is being developed as part of an Emmy Noether Research Group, funded by the German Research Foundation. The research group, called "Linking Ages – The Material-Discursive Practices of Un/Doing Age Across the Life Course", adopts and further develops the Linking Ages research agenda by Wanka et al. (2024).

2006; Liebel & Meade, 2023; van Dyk, 2019). Wanka et al. (2024) summarise these theoretical assumptions and the research agenda to research age as a category of difference across the life course under the term "Linking Ages" (p. 5). At the core of the Linking Ages research agenda lies a reflexive approach to comparison: the research agenda contrasts and contextualises at least two life phases through an iterative process, encapsulated by the term "linking" (Wanka et al., 2024). Freutel-Funke et al. (2022) argue that this perspective adds value to transition research by making the powerful age-coding embedded in the enactment of transitions visible. The approach holds potential for decoupling transitions and their associated practices from specific age categories.

In this paper, Wanka et al.'s (2024) Linking Ages and Hof and Bernhard's (2025) considerations of learning in life course transitions are brought together and applied to housing transitions at the edges of adulthood (for young adults and older adults). Given the age-specific structuring of assisted living arrangements, age serves as a productive contrast to understand the constitution of learning as a practice in relocations to assisted living arrangements. The paper sets out to engage in a fruitful discussion on the relation of age as a category of difference and learning in housing transitions. It presents findings from a project applying the Linking Ages research agenda from the start and tries to outline the constitution of learning as a practice "in the field" of assisted living. The paper therefore explores the following research questions:

I. How is learning done in the relocation transition to age-specific, assisted living arrangements?
II. How are those learning processes age-coded?

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This article draws on two contrasting case studies. The Linking Ages research agenda does not assume full comparability between the cases. Instead, differences in aspects such as financing structures and legal frameworks are integral to the perspective (Wanka et al., 2024). The selection of these two cases was guided by three main criteria. First, both forms of assisted living are age-specific, meaning that access is restricted by age thresholds. Second, both constitute institutionalised, semi-public spaces supported by pedagogically trained staff, such as social workers and pedagogues. Third, while both settings accommodate adults, the degree of independence in residents' living arrangements remains subject to negotiation.

The first case selected for this study is youth or trainee housing.[2] As described by Paz Martinez et al. (2012), this form of housing provides "support services for young people aged 14–27 who must leave their family homes due to training, employment, or

2 The German vocational training system is an alternative pathway to education outside university education. The dual system is characterised by cooperation between companies and publicly funded vocational schools. On average, vocational training takes three years and trainees alternate between phases of exclusively theoretical training and phases of practical training in their training companies (cf. Federal Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.).

mobility-related reasons and must organise their daily lives, schooling, and vocational training in a different location" (p. 145). This form of housing aims to provide affordable accommodation and socio-pedagogical support to trainees unable to live with their families, thereby preventing dropout and fostering a "successful course of training" (cf. Kolping Jugendwohnen, n.d.). This facility addresses the mobility needs associated with vocational training and supports the development of a skilled workforce (see Paz Martinez et al., 2012). It therefore serves as a transitional housing model, facilitating the shift to working and adult life.

The youth housing examined in this study accommodates 50 residents, primarily aged between 20 and 22. Most are legally adults, and the facility is part of a prominent and widely recognised German organisation providing assisted living for trainees. The resident population is diverse, representing various educational backgrounds, ethnicities, family situations, and prior living conditions. Prospective residents must demonstrate sufficient independence to manage their daily lives, as they live in group homes. The socio-pedagogical team comprises five professionals, all holding either a bachelor's or master's degree in social work or educational science. They act as supervisors and primary contacts for residents in both everyday matters and crisis situations. Their responsibilities include assisting residents with vocational training and career development, as well as providing support in other aspects of independent living, such as asylum procedures and interactions with authorities and bureaucratic institutions.

The second case study examines a senior housing complex for individuals aged 60 and above. The market for assisted living for older adults is more diverse than that for young adults, with significant variation in terms of facilities, services, and pricing, including both private and subsidised options. Senior housing facilities play a crucial societal role in alleviating pressure on care systems amid demographic changes and enabling older individuals to remain in their own homes for as long as possible (Teti & Höpflinger, 2020). They serve as an offer at the transition to (potential) dependence in later life. The senior housing complex accommodates approximately 80 residents, who live alone or in pairs in barrier-free, two-room apartments equipped with private kitchens and bathrooms. Various professionals oversee the senior housing complex and its residents, including social workers and facility assistants. Unlike youth housing staff, senior housing personnel come from diverse professional backgrounds. Facility assistants do not require formal training in nursing or social work. Their role involves assisting residents with daily matters, such as managing correspondence, facilitating medical referrals, and conducting home visits when necessary. Social workers, by contrast, are responsible for submitting applications, contesting decisions, applying for care levels, drafting care directives, providing counselling, and initiating legal care proceedings if there is a "decline". In this context, the term signifies a decline in the residents independence, resulting in the need for supplementary support services, such as cleaning services.

This article adopts a reflexive transitions research perspective (Walther et al., 2020), framing relocations as an open-ended process of becoming (Meissner, 2019). In empirical

terms, this means relocations lack a clearly defined starting or end point. Instead, the transition encompasses various practices, from decision-making and application to physical relocation and settling into the new home. The field visits conducted between February 2023 and February 2025 employed an ethnographic approach to examine the selection processes, preparation, implementation, and arrival in the relocation transition. The methods included attending property viewings and interviewing current and former residents as well as staff members. The empirical data comprises interviews with (prospective) residents, socio-pedagogical staff, and social workers, along with insights from observation protocols and collected documents. The entire dataset was utilised for field descriptions. To examine learning in these age-specific contexts, this article provides an analysis of the interviews conducted with the residents and the staff of the residential complexes. Insights into learning processes were primarily derived from spoken material rather than direct observation. In the first case, focusing on the transition to youth housing, data includes three semi-structured interviews with residents aged 19–20 (Denis, Marvin, and Emir) and two expert interviews: one group discussion with the socio-pedagogical team and one with the manager, Simon. The second case, studying the transition to senior housing, draws on a semi-structured interview with an 80-year-old resident (Gerda), an expert interview with the senior housing manager, and two field interviews: one with the head of the care association and one with a social worker, Maria. The data integration and analysis were conducted using NVivo (version 14.23.3), following the principles of social constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and Adele Clarke's (2005) situational analysis.

FINDINGS: LEARNING IN RELOCATION PROCESSES TO ASSISTED LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

The analysis begins by describing the relocation to youth and senior housing, respectively, and the learning processes in the transition. In the next step, the cases are contrasted, with similarities and differences analysed in relation to one another (Wanka et al., 2024).

Case 1: Relocations to Youth Housing

According to Simon, the head of the youth housing, the relocation transition begins once young adults secure a trainee position, usually a few months before their training starts. Most trainees commence their training in August or September. At this stage, they begin searching for suitable accommodation in the new city. They learn about youth housing through training companies, acquaintances, friends, or online searches. Prospective trainees contact the socio-pedagogical team at the youth housing facility and receive an invitation to visit and familiarise themselves with the facility. During their visit, they receive a tour and information about room financing. The socio-pedagogical team also assesses whether applicants meet the eligibility criteria. The assessment considers the applicants' level of independence, history of drug use, and financial stability. Eligible applicants join a waiting list and receive confirmation once a room becomes available. Successful applicants

typically move in during the summer. The majority arrive during the designated "move-in weekend". During this weekend, staff members are available to provide support. The following weeks include social activities, such as city tours, a "moving-in picnic", and other group events. A few weeks later, mandatory "move-in meetings" help ensure the well-being of new residents. During the initial months, new residents share double rooms with fellow newcomers on designated floors. The new residents, most of whom live in shared rooms for the first time in the youth residence, are supervised by a pedagogue in the context of regular group meetings. After approximately six months, they relocate to single rooms as soon as they become available.

The new residents of the youth housing facility (Denis, Emir, and Marvin) describe the relocation as highly stressful and overwhelming, marked by significant uncertainty and time pressure. At the time of the interview, Denis, a 20-year-old trainee, had been living in youth housing for approximately three months. He relocated independently by train from a small town in East Germany to a new city in the west. Denis reflects on the relocation with mixed emotions, finding it overwhelming and exhausting yet also exciting and positive:

> […] a real shock, because it's just so much. With this really big load, with being drained from the relocation [...] I've never been so exhausted in my life when I arrived here. But at the same time, it's never been so, well, cool. So, it was definitely an experience, this relocation. That was intense.[3]

Denis used the German colloquial term *Umzugsfertigkeit* [being drained from a relocation], which carries an ambiguity that effectively encapsulates the relocation process. Firstly, it reflects the translation and description of the situation: Denis perceived the relocation and its associated changes as highly exhausting and overwhelming, describing the experience as a "real shock". Secondly, *Umzugsfertigkeit* can also be interpreted as "relocation skills". The relocation is not only overwhelming but also facilitates numerous learning processes throughout the transition.

The transition from school to work, from the parental home to youth housing, and the anticipated challenges of this shift are addressed by the organisation through counselling, assistance, and control measures designed to ensure the completion of vocational training and support residents in becoming independent. However, in the relocation process, organisational support primarily begins after new residents have physically moved into youth housing. Yet the learning processes start significantly earlier. The way they unfold before the physical relocation vary depending on the individual circumstances of each relocation. In his interview, Denis describes the demands and preparations required for the relocation, which he had to navigate without prior experience. These included downsizing his belongings due to limited living space, preparing the documents for youth housing

3 The original quotes were translated from German by the author and edited by a language editing service provided by Goethe University.

and training, and relocating his possessions within a short timeframe. He reflects on his initial experiences in the new city and youth housing as follows:

> Constantly overwhelmed by everything. Before that, I really couldn't take care of myself either because I lived in [East German state], there was somehow no reason to. And you could say that I unlearned certain things. And here I have to learn them all over again, simple things. It was just the first time living on my own, taking care of myself first [...].

Denis describes his new living situation as a stark contrast to his previous home. Living with his mother left him dissatisfied, as he had little motivation to take care of himself. During that time, he gradually "unlearned" certain skills. The relocation to youth housing appears to have prompted him to relearn abilities he had once possessed. Denis perceives these skills as fundamental, "simple", or seemingly self-evident. He attributes this relearning process to "living alone for the first time" and "taking care of himself". Living in the parental home before proved to be a complication for the relocation transition.

For many of the trainees, family members play a key role in supporting the transition. Some parents accompany their children to viewing appointments and assist with transportation on moving day. Others rely on friends or must manage the relocation independently. This challenge is particularly pronounced for trainees from third countries moving to Germany for training or for those with little or no family support. Some trainees, like Marvin, receive assistance from large training companies when searching for accommodation, while others, like Denis, turn to AI assistants to help gather important documents for the move. Paul, a pedagogue who has worked in the youth housing organisation for two years, elaborates as follows:

> […] they [the residents] are also more independent because they are 19, [...] had to be independent and have had to do that for a year or two, and are more independent than Hans-Martin, who has been with his family for 19 years, has grown up there and who has completely different support needs. And perhaps doesn't know how to peel a potato.

The residents who had to learn how to relocate and live independently due to migration are often described as significantly more independent than their peers. Their adaptation to change differs from those who have lived in Germany with their families their entire lives and are moving out with family support for the first time. The varying support needs of residents are exemplified by seemingly simple tasks, such as peeling potatoes, which serve as informal markers of independence and learning progress. Paul acknowledges these differing needs but does not specify whether or how the youth housing addresses them. The youth housing organisation focuses on facilitating a smooth transition through on-site support during and after the physical relocation. Before the relocation, the youth housing is not involved in the relocation process. Other actors, like family or friends, are

relevant to facilitating the housing transition. This is despite the socio-pedagogical staff recognising the significant variation in the experiences and support among new residents.

In youth housing, learning processes during the transition of moving in are organised collectively. The interviewed pedagogue Paul suggests that moving in as a group helps to ease the adaptation to the changes:

> […] with the group that moved in at pretty much the same time, it went faster because they were all at the same point. And now, when someone joins and simply didn't have this initial process with the whole group, I think it takes longer for a person like that to complete the whole process than it did for those who practically moved in here as a community.

Paul distinguishes between a "fast" and a "slower" relocation process for new residents. The "initial process", which includes leisure activities and contact with other group members, is seen as a communal activity that helps ease the relocation for the trainees. However, Paul's observations appear to contradict his earlier statement. While the earlier quote emphasises that the entire transition is easier as a group since everyone is at "the same point", this may apply to the start of training and living in a new place. It does not seem to extend to developing relocation competencies and other skills deemed essential on the path to becoming an "independent adult".

Furthermore, learning processes during the transition into youth housing aim to help individuals navigate their new environment and understand the organisational dynamics. Denis also reports that his peers identified habits in communal areas that they felt needed improvement for better communal living. Other than that, he received support from the pedagogues throughout this process of adaptation and learning:

> Because the pedagogues are really a bit of a life helper, no shit, because you can come to them for any bullshit. They don't annoy you, but if you need help with documents, they'll do it. You can also ask them: 'Hey, how do I use this fucking washing machine?' I don't know how to use a washing machine because it's such a weird industrial thing there. It's just all there.

Denis describes the pedagogical support in youth housing as "life helpers", who assist him in managing new tasks without being intrusive or overbearing – reflecting his previous experiences with pedagogues. This support also extends to helping him navigate the structures of youth housing, such as dealing with the "really weird" industrial washing machines in the facility. This process not only involves learning to become an independent adult but also learning to adapt to a new form of housing and a new life situation.

In general, the relocation into youth housing and living there is framed as a process of learning to become an adult. The youth housing organisation and its pedagogical staff facilitate various learning processes, such as learning how to manage debt, participate in

decision-making, take responsibility for purchased household appliances, and navigate the transition to adulthood. Another pedagogue at the facility, Max, elaborates as follows:

> It's also part of growing up, like testing boundaries and to what point I can go without hurting or offending someone and where should I perhaps draw the line again. I think we learn that quite well here in such a big house with so many different people.

Max describes group homes and the spatial arrangements in youth housing, along with the diverse composition of its residents, as catalysts for learning the skills necessary for adult life. He identifies being considerate and setting boundaries as skills fostered by this form of housing. However, the use of "we" implies that Max views learning about boundaries not only as a process for the residents but also as one for the pedagogical staff.

Case 2: Relocations to Senior Housing

The transition to senior housing differs significantly from the transition to youth housing. According to the head of the care association, multiple actors make the decision regarding new residents, while social work staff at the senior housing facility itself are not involved in the selection process. Instead, the local housing authority and facility landlords make these decisions, prioritising financial criteria and formal care requirements over an assessment of whether a potential resident is a good fit for the community.

Maria, a social worker with four years of experience in senior housing, explains that assistance from the facility assistants and social workers begins only after residents arrive. Before the move, which is typically facilitated by moving companies, relatives, or spouses, staff provide minimal services. The social workers and facility assistants are informed of new arrivals through a landlord notification. A welcome letter is sent, and new residents are invited to an informal introductory meeting, where they receive flyers about home emergency services and information on local Community Centre programmes. However, this meeting is deliberately scheduled for after the first two weeks, allowing residents time to settle in before the formal engagement. Although new residents are invited to events at the Community Centre and the facility hosts social gatherings, such as summer and Christmas parties, these are not specifically designed to support the transition. The level of relocation support varies among senior housing facilities, but generally does not include extensive services or counselling regarding the relocation.

When examining the transition to senior housing, the learning processes of older adults appear to be embedded differently than in the transition to youth housing. Similarly to the pedagogues in youth housing, the staff members in senior housing also identify various conditions that can influence how easily residents settle into this form of accommodation. However, in senior housing, the age of potential residents plays a significant role in the relocation. The management of a senior housing facility describes the challenges associated with searching for new housing in older age as follows: "If you only start looking

when you're in your mid-80s, then it's simply too late. I then tell people quite clearly [...] they will no longer be fit enough for assisted living because it's a fully self-sufficient life."

The manager explains that some applicants for senior housing reach a stage where it is "simply too late" for them to transition into assisted living. At a certain age, they may no longer be "fit" enough for a "fully self-sufficient" lifestyle. This statement does not acknowledge any potential for learning how to adapt to assisted living. In contrast, in youth housing, varying levels of independent living skills are assessed, and the pedagogical staff actively address these differences by providing tailored support, regardless of age or initial circumstances. Unlike the pedagogical approach in youth housing, the management of senior housing does not specify which skills potential residents lack. Instead, they describe candidates in general terms as "no longer fit enough", without identifying the particular practices they are unable to perform or suggesting ways they could acquire these skills. Age serves as a guiding criterion to determine whether assisted living is a suitable form of housing for the applicants.

Unlike in youth housing, where the relocation is collectively organised to facilitate learning and adaptation to the new environment, the transition to senior housing is largely an individualised practice. Resident turnover is relatively low, with many tenants remaining in their apartments for several years. They typically leave only when their health deteriorates to the point where independent living is no longer feasible or upon passing away.

The interviews with the residents of senior housing indicate that relocation can also serve as a learning opportunity. Gerda, an 80-year-old woman who has lived in private senior housing for 15 years, reflects on her first night in assisted living and the process of adjusting to her new living environment:

> [...] you lie in your bed for the first time. And the first thing that goes through your mind is, what do you have to do first? And then to find your way around the house. Many people who come here are completely helpless, even when it comes to the house. If I can help them, then I do it, depending on whether they approach me. But you also have to deal with habits and customs. And above all, you have to fit in somewhere. And as I said, the younger you are, the better it is, but when you're older, you resist a lot of things. Then you don't want it all like that anymore. And then you have to deal with people as such, right? How do you approach them? How do you speak to them? There are so many things where you first have to reorient yourself.

Gerda describes the numerous challenges that new residents face following relocation. On the one hand, they must familiarise themselves with a new living environment both personally and socially, which requires adapting to the internal structures and routines of the facility. On the other hand, they must learn how to navigate the available support structures and determine how to access assistance effectively ("How do you approach them?").

A comparison between Gerda's experiences and Denis' relocation narrative reveals notable similarities. In both forms of assisted living, new residents must orient themselves in an unfamiliar environment, a process that many find challenging. Both interviews highlight feelings of "complete helplessness" and the need for "reorientation" after arrival, aligning with the sense of being overwhelmed that Denis has previously described. However, while adaptation and integration processes occur in both settings, in senior housing, these responsibilities largely fall to the residents themselves. Some newcomers receive support from longer-term residents, but they must actively seek out this assistance. Otherwise, the notion of helplessness and inability to adjust is often taken for granted, as Gerda herself suggests. Older adults are frequently characterised as being reluctant to adapt, with the assumption that at a certain age, one simply becomes too old to adjust to new organisational structures and surroundings.

In contrast, Denis clearly identifies who to turn to for support in adapting to youth housing. He even expresses concerns about receiving excessive guidance and appreciates that the pedagogical staff refrain from providing too much care.

The fundamental purpose of these two housing models differs significantly. While youth housing aims to support young residents in becoming independent and employable, senior housing focuses on enabling residents to maintain their independence for as long as possible, allowing them to continue living in private accommodation. Unlike in youth housing, however, the process of ageing, increasing dependence, and adjusting to a new living environment is not explicitly recognised and addressed as a learning process by the senior housing staff.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The article sets out to contribute to a better understanding of the constitution of learning in life course transitions, drawing on the example of relocations to age-specific assisted living arrangements. First, as is outlined in the findings section above, the article explores how learning is done in relocation transitions to these facilities. Second, it discusses how such learning processes are age-coded. The following paragraph summarises the constitution of learning in the transition to assisted living and explains the ways in which this relates to age.

When comparing housing transitions to youth and senior housing, it becomes evident that learning is done differently in each transition. In the relocation to youth housing, various actors shape the transition, including family members, peers, the new cohort of residents, pedagogues, and even AI assistants. Here, learning primarily revolves around becoming an independent adult and navigating a new living environment and life situation. It takes place through multiple practices, for instance, during the physical move through parental support, in social interactions facilitated by pedagogues through their counselling and everyday guidance as "life helpers", and in shared living arrangements with other residents.

In senior housing, the key actors involved in relocation transitions include moving companies, family members or spouses, social services, facility assistants, and fellow residents. The main objective is to support older adults in maintaining their independence for as long as possible, enabling them to continue living in a private home. At the same time, the residents must navigate their new environment, adapt to the available support structures, and adjust to their changed living conditions. These learning processes are constituted primarily by the residents themselves and their peers. The relevant practices include seeking assistance, initiating contact with long-term residents, and participating in meetings with social workers.

According to Hof and Bernhard's (2025) concept of irritations as catalysts for learning, relocations to assisted living can be understood as such for both age groups. As the data illustrates, the transition is often an overwhelming experience for new residents, requiring them to adapt to an organisational structure and navigate their new living environment. This aligns with Walther et al.'s (2022) perspectives on learning at transitions. Contrasting learning as a social practice in different housing transitions provides an additional analytical dimension for research on housing transitions. From an educational science perspective, these findings also highlight the potential for further research on housing transitions beyond middle age, particularly in later life, as already showcased by Krasemann (2017).

The different constitution of learning in the residential transitions in both cases will now be discussed as age-coded processes. Age constitutes how these changes and learning processes are framed during housing transitions. Interestingly, neither organisation explicitly refers to "learning" in most cases. In youth housing, even though it is described as "a place for living, learning, and education" (Paz Martinez et al., 2012, p. 148), learning is primarily framed through residents' "independence" – their progress toward self-sufficiency and the practices they still need to develop. For young adults, navigating the organisation is considered an integral part of growing up. In later life, by contrast, the dominant concept is "fitness", a seemingly naturalised category associated with ageing. Here, reorientation and the potential need for support when relocating are not framed as learning processes but rather as indicators that individuals are "no longer fit" due to being "too old". This perspective assumes that residents already possess the necessary "housing skills", effectively disregarding learning processes in later-life transitions. This distinction may stem from the fact that senior housing is generally not conceived as a space for education. It reflects broader institutionalised life course structures (Kohli, 2007), in which life and housing arrangements are organised around employment, reinforcing a division between young people – who are expected to engage in education – and older adults, whose participation in learning is not presumed once they exit the workforce.

The findings highlight significant variations in how learning is approached and how age, the images associated and the assumptions related to certain ages serve as differentiating features in (housing) transitions at different ages in life. Relocations are often viewed as experiences that residents either learn to navigate in later life or encounter multiple times,

reducing the perceived need for peer involvement or specific attention in senior housing. This reflects the ideal of an autonomous, independent adult, who, as a "complete" individual, is presumed to have no further learning needs related to housing, even into old age.

Moreover, different historical demands concerning life experience, organisational structures, and resources constitute these transitions. It is crucial to acknowledge the potential ambivalences and subtle distinctions between support and paternalism that can arise from interventions in assisted living. Additionally, it is essential not to overlook other categories of difference that affect the design and embedding of these offers in learning processes, such as social class.

The findings show that learning cannot only be understood as age-coded. The example rather speaks to the co-constitution of learning, housing, and age in its simultaneity: age-specific housing has to be learned (e.g., by finding one's way in the organisational set-up), and age(ing) is also learned through housing (e.g., by addressing peers and staff on age-appropriate order and the way in which support is practised in the facilities). These considerations could expand on the idea of "learning housing" (Meuth, 2018) by understanding the concept more as "learning age(ing) through housing" or "learning age-appropriate housing", analysed as a social practice across the life course.

Based on the considerations presented here, I suggest that we look at transitions not only as assemblages, but also as age-coded learning assemblages. This perspective helps to understand learning as co-constituted. Questions about which actors are involved and which practices take place in dynamic assemblages can contribute to an analytical understanding of the complexity of learning in transitions. On the one hand, the article expands existing research on learning during housing transitions by introducing a practice-theoretical perspective and by systematically examining how differentiation in learning processes is done by age. In this way, it can contribute to understanding the emergence of differences in learning assemblages in transitions. It also aims to strengthen the focus on housing transitions throughout adulthood as a relevant empirical field within adult education and transition research. Finally, it further develops Wanka et al.'s (2024) Linking Ages approach by applying it not only to the margins of the life course, but also to adulthood itself, and by combining it with educational science theory. Consequently, this contributes to a better understanding of learning during transitions against the background of social change. It is also relevant for shaping support practices (e.g., counselling) and for identifying and challenging potential practices of age-based demarcation and hierarchy.

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Anna Wanka

AFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN TRANSITION(S) – LEARNING AS BECOMING IN THE TRANSITION INTO RETIREMENT

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how affects shape life course transitions and processes of learning and becoming. Life transitions involve shifting self-world relations, changing social positions, and reconfiguring boundaries, which can be understood through transformative learning and theories of becoming. Drawing on a qualitative longitudinal study with 29 older adults experiencing work-related transitions (unemployment, retirement, encore careers), I analyse episodic interviews and photographic diaries spanning over a period of three years using constructivist grounded theory and situational analysis. The findings show that out-of-work transitions evoke a queer, erratic affective attunement, moving from exhaustion to restlessness, and eventually to calm and joy. Affects are inherent to transitions, emerging within transitional assemblages and as properties of practices like repetition, recognition, and novelty. They act as connective tissue between practices and practitioners, co-constituting the entities undergoing transition. Affects also materialise in bodily perceptions and specific transitional temporalities. The study highlights how examining affective practices enriches the understanding of transformative learning and becoming in work-related life transitions.

Keywords: *affects, work, transitions, becoming, transformative learning*

AFEKTIVNE PRAKSE V PREHODU(-IH) – UČENJE KOT POSTAJANJE V PREHODU V UPOKOJITEV – POVZETEK

Avtorica v članku raziskuje, kako afekti oblikujejo življenjske prehode ter procese učenja in postajanja. Življenjski prehodi vključujejo spreminjanje odnosa med jazom in svetom, spreminjanje družbenih položajev in preoblikovanje meja, kar je mogoče razumeti na podlagi koncepta transformativnega učenja in teorij postajanja. V članku, ki izhaja iz kvalitativne longitudinalne študije, v kateri je sodelovalo 29 starejših odraslih, ki so doživeli prehode, povezane z delom (brezposelnost, upokojitev, nova karierna pot), je predstavljena analiza intervjujev in fotografskih dnevnikov iz obdobja treh let, ki temelji na konstruktivistično utemeljenih teorijah in situacijski analizi. Ugotovitve kažejo, da prehodi iz dela vzbujajo nenavadno neenakomerno afektivno prilagajanje, ki prehaja od izčrpanosti do nemira, nato pa sčasoma do miru in veselja. Afekti so neločljivo povezani s prehodi, se pojavljajo kot del prehodov in kot značilnost praks, kot so ponavljanje, prepoznavanje in doživljanje novega. Delujejo kot vezivno tkivo med praksami in izvajalci ter soustvarjajo entitete, ki so v prehodu. Afekti se

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materializirajo tudi v telesnih zaznavah in specifičnih prehodnih časovnostih. Raziskava pokaže, kako preučevanje afektivnih praks bogati razumevanje transformativnega učenja in postajanja v življenjskih prehodih na področju dela.

Ključne besede: *afekti, delo, prehodi, postajanje, transformativno učenje*

INTRODUCTION

In the process of life course transitions, relations between the self and the world transform, social positions are changed and boundaries are reconfigured: couples become parents, children become adults, students become workers. Such processes of change can be understood through the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; see also Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022).

In this contribution, I argue that learning is neither a precondition for navigating life course transitions nor an effect of having experienced them (Stauber et al., 2022). Instead, learning is an integral part of the transitional processes of *becoming* (Braidotti, 2002). Such an understanding has significant implications for both the theoretical conceptualisations of the relations between life course transitions, learning, and social change, and practical interventions: if learning is neither precondition nor effect, educational offers to facilitate the "successful management" of such transitions become arbitrary. Instead, we need a better understanding of educational elements in transitional practices, and these, I will argue, can best be identified through following the affects in life course transitions.

To exemplify such an approach, I first discuss life course transitions as processes of becoming, learning as transformations of self-world relations, and the role affects play in them. Second, I draw on a qualitative longitudinal study to outline how affects can point us to learning within processes of work-related life course transitions, with a specific focus on the end of working life. Finally, I discuss how the study of affective practices and affective attunements can benefit the existing literature on learning and life course transitions and sketch out an agenda for future research in this field.

BECOMING, LEARNING, AND AFFECTS IN LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS

The life course has often been conceptualised as an ongoing process of becoming (e.g., Ingold, 2015; Pilcher & Martin, 2020). From a relational perspective of "un/doing differences" (Hirschauer, 2014, 2017) while "doing transitions" (Stauber, 2020; Stauber et al., 2022), a life can be viewed as a constant process of becoming (Meissner, 2019). As Boll (2022) puts it:

> In the course of their lives, individuals move in and out of categories, move through some, but never leave others. Some transitions are one-way, some go

> both ways. Some are considered progress, some a setback. With such passages between categories, and along with their categorial affiliations, individuals change who and what they are, in an ongoing process of becoming. (p. 170)

Approaching life course transitions from such a relational doing perspective implies understanding life stages and transitions between them as open-ended processes of becoming something and someone else – for example, transitioning from child to adult, boy to man, man to woman. As such, transitions emerge from and are enacted in social practices through which the social positions taken before, within, and after them (e.g., adult, man, woman) are also shaped and constituted. Hence, to apply a relational doing perspective of becoming to the study of life course transitions implies understanding them as open-ended processes of practices in which transformations constantly emerge, unfold, shift, and change (Wanka, 2020).

When we approach life course transitions from such a perspective, and with an interest in learning, theories of transformative learning are of value. Theories of transformative learning, as first formulated by Mezirow in 1978 and developed further (e.g., Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022), understand (adult) learning as changes in the relationship between the self and the world, materialised in the incorporation of new perspectives. Such learning processes are understood to be initiated by people's subjective experiences of change, which challenge their existing self-world relations and perspectives, and have, hence, been criticised for their individualist and person-centred approach to learning, as well as their insufficient consideration of learning processes that go beyond the cognitive, thereby neglecting the affective dimensions of learning (e.g., Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Building upon practice-theoretical concepts, scholars have therefore advocated for more relational approaches to transformative learning (Hof & Bernhard, 2025; Lave et al., 2026). From a doing perspective, transformative learning can then be understood as relational – that is, going beyond the individual and its reflexive abilities and instead taking place in relations – as well as a constellation of practices. Thus, there is no individual that learns in a transformative manner, but transformative learning emerges in the practices and relations between people, things, discourses, etc.

Life course transitions may pose a perfect example for initiating what Mezirow (1978) called "disorienting dilemmas", which are supposed to start the cycle of transformative learning, as they often bring along new and confusing situations, expectations, and experiences. For example, a child finds herself in a strange (class)room, with a strange adult (not her parents) telling her what to do, and other strange children (not her siblings or friends) in the same position. This transition from pre-school to school child can pose an utterly disorienting experience and entail the dilemma of not knowing whether to subject to the new expectations or rebel against them. From a relational doing perspective, transformative learning can then transpire in the practices that constitute relations between her and the room, the books, the expectations, the teacher, the other children, and so on.

Finally, the terminology used here already points us to the role of affects: there must be certain affects attached to an experience to be classified a *disorienting dilemma*, able to initiate a transformation of self-world relations.

Studies on learning thereby have a longstanding tradition of concern with emotions in processes of learning and education. Research in this field has understood emotions as, on the one hand, something that can shape educational processes or, on the other, something that is being shaped by educational processes. A first strand of research has been concerned with the role that affects and emotions play in facilitating and contributing to learning processes, particularly in the field of civic education. While studies find that such emotions can be positive (for example, fun or excitement) as well as negative (for example, guilt or shame), the theoretical foundations of the relationship between emotions and transformative learning remain scarce (see e.g., Grund et al., 2024.).[1] A second and more theoretically engaged strand of research is concerned with the shaping of relationships through educational processes, the ways we learn how to feel, or *Bildung der Gefühle*, a German phrase that can be translated both as education or formation of emotions. Research in this field questions the distinction between emotions and cognition and argues that emotions can, and should, be learned as well to make them communicable, manageable, controllable, and potential objects of reflection (see e.g., Maxwell & Reichenbach, 2005; Stenger, 2012). Often, and in contrast to the first strand, scholars in this field focus on what we might call "negative emotions", that is shame, guilt or disgust (e.g., Schäfer & Thompson, 2009). In a phenomenological manner, they study how emotions are socialised, how we learn to feel, for example, ashamed, and what these micro situations of being ashamed tell us about emotional regimes in societies (Brinkmann et al., 2021).

In this contribution, I argue for a practice-theoretical understanding of affects as neither explanans nor explanandum of transformative learning processes, but as an inherent part of transitional assemblages. My understanding of affects is thereby in line with the "affective turn" in the educational sciences (Boler, 1997; Dernikos et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2021). In their comprehensive volume *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education*, Dernikos et al. (2020) exemplify this difference by drawing on the effects – and affects – that scratching chalk on a blackboard entails: in many people, it triggers immediate, corporeal responses that are hard to control and hard to verbalise.

In that, the affective turn is, as Reckwitz (2017) argues, closely related to the practice turn with its focus on implicit knowledges, the material, corporeal, and thus affective elements of practices. Accordingly, affects have been conceptualised as material – that is, bodily (Pile, 2021), spatial (Reckwitz, 2012), or materialised in things (Jones & Harris, 2019).

1 The concept of pedagogical eros (e.g., Kenklies, 2019) – that is, better learning outcomes through an emotionally laden pedagogical relationship – is another example of research that looks at emotions as facilitators of education. However, it has been heavily criticised for covering, or even justifying, abusive and unhealthy educational relationships (e.g., Gaus, 2011).

For Reckwitz (2017), affects are processes[2] of physical arousal that are "built into the practices" (p. 116): just as light transpires from a lightbulb and is subjectively perceived through the body/the eyes, affects transpire from practices and are subjectively perceived through the body. This negates the notion that affects arise from, and take place in, the body, even though they are subjectively perceived through the body and the senses. "Affects are then properties of the specific affective 'attunement' or mood of the respective practice" (Reckwitz, 2017, p. 119). Lying in bed, for example, usually goes along with feeling tired, and riding a roller coaster produces excitement. The understanding that affects are built into and constituted through practices has important practical implications: if specific affective attunements or moods, as Reckwitz (2017) calls them, are not the precondition but the consequence of practices, then one does not need to be concentrated to listen, read, or solve mathematical equations, but concentration *transpires through* the practices of listening, reading, or solving mathematical equations.

Moreover, affects form part of the connective tissue through which practices hang together to form bundles, complexes, and constellations – such as life course transitions– and elements of practices are reconfigured depending on the affects they produce. If, for example, research finds that movement is more likely to stir engagement than sitting still, movement may be integrated in practices of school teaching, rooms might be designed to mellow students down instead of arousing them, and temporal schedules might be adapted to enhance concentration. When affects contribute to connecting different practices to form bundles, complexes, and constellations through their affective attunement, then each practice process – like a life course transition – has a specific "rhythm" that we can reconstruct. Let's take the transition from work to retirement as an example. Some people work full-time and then stop working from one day to the next; others become unemployed before claiming pension benefits; some people keep doing (part-time) paid work while claiming pension benefits; others stop working for pay completely and instead start doing unpaid work (volunteering), etc. These sequences differ in their affective attunement, and thereby connect more or less easily to subsequent bundles of practices, like an in/active retirement lifestyle, lifelong learning or withdrawal from social contacts.

And finally, affects, themselves constituted in practices, co-constitute other entities. Karen Barad (2003) calls this process "thingification" or "entification" to refer to the ways in which phenomena (including human subjects) become demarcated, intelligible, and often even naturalised as such. For example, it seems "natural" to most of us to differentiate between apples and pears, between humans and animals, between one person and another. However, demarcating these entities, making them intelligible and separatable from one another, requires hard, practical work. Even though such entities may seem stable to us, they are in fact constantly changing. Thompson (2005) has developed the concept of ontological choreography to grasp the fluidity of the ontological statuses of objects and subjects in the process of "producing parents, children, and everything that

2 In fact, Reckwitz (2017) claims that affects are "states of physical arousal" (p. 118); however, I find that this terminology contradicts his point that affects are not (static) properties, but activities.

is needed for their recognition as such" (p. 8). And affects play a crucial role in these choreographies. Building upon Thompson's (2005) concept, Adrian (2015) developed the term "emotional choreographies" to refer to the changing emotional (affective) statuses that co-constitute these changing ontological statuses. Such a perspective enables us to explore how changes in ontological status in life course transitions – for example, from child to adult or from employee to retiree – are co-constituted by changing affective attunements.

To summarise, I propose an understanding of life course transitions from a relational perspective of "doing transitions" (Stauber et al., 2022) and therefore as open-ended processes of becoming – that is, processes of practices in which transformations constantly emerge, unfold, shift, and change (Wanka, 2020). Affects are part of these processes of becoming; they emerge in transitional assemblages of transformation. Thus, affects are not the consequence or precondition of change, but an inherent part of it. And they play a crucial and active role in the processes of becoming by (i) connecting practices with other practices and their practitioners, therefore forming the affective tissue between practice chains, people, and things, and (ii) co-constituting the entities that are becoming. Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978; see also Koller, 2012; Nicolaides et al., 2022) is constantly accompanying such processes, as the constant transformation of the self (as in becoming) requires constant changes in self-world relations.

Let's take the process of becoming an academic as an example. With every page someone reads or writes, every lecture they listen to or give, every academic discussion they participate in, a student becomes an academic – even if it is only with the completion of their thesis that they are officially and ritually recognised as such. Such practices entail a range of affects: boredom in certain classes and inspiration in others; anxiety and fear in exam situations and when discussing one's work; joy and relief when data are collected, and chapters are finished, etc. And they are accompanied by practices and processes of learning: learning to write, to talk, to move, even to dress, learning the names of important people and methodological skills. And with these learning practices, the affects change: anxiety decreases as we get to feel more competent in what we are doing, and boredom decreases when we understand more of what is being talked about. In this process, the boundaries between "academic" and "non-academic" (as in, what is intelligible as academic, a seemingly clearly demarcated entity) are constantly shifting while a person becomes more and more of the former and less and less of the latter, without ever being able to reach any kind of final destination. Transformative learning is therefore not to be understood as an individual, reflexive, and cognitive process that is initiated through affects, but a distributed, more-than-human, material, and incorporated part of becoming (ANON).

Now, this all seems quite abstract. Hence, in the following section, this perspective is put into practice.

EMPIRICAL MATERIAL: AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENTS IN WORK TRANSITIONS

To explore the role of affects in out-of-work transitions, I draw on empirical material from a qualitative longitudinal study that was conducted between 2017 and 2022 at Goethe University Frankfurt. The study followed 29 people at the ends of their working lives for three years through various work-related transitions: unemployment, retirement, employment after retirement, etc. Sampling was conducted based on the principles of theoretical (contrastive) sampling. It was carried out through notices and the display of flyers in public places (e.g., supermarkets), through businesses as well as social and recreational organisations (e.g., University of the Third Age), and via personal contacts. This resulted in a diverse group of participants, ranging from (former) university professors to entrepreneurs, teachers and shift workers, people with very stable and coherent as well as altogether very precarious employment trajectories.

Table 1
Sample description by socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic variables	
Total number of individuals	29
Years of birth	1948–1965
Gender	Female (16) Male (13)
Family background	Not married (8) Married with children (15) Married without children (6)
Residential area	< 5,000 inhabitants (3) 5,000–100,000 inhabitants (13) > 100,000 inhabitants (13)
Occupational status	Working full-time (12) Working part-time/marginal employment (4) Passive stage of partial retirement (2) Not working, not yet retired (11)
Former occupations	researchers, teachers, heads of development, bank clerks, IT personnel, self-employed, administrative workers, social workers, shift foremen, mechanical engineers, journalists
Pathway to retirement	Partial retirement (7) Early retirement (5) Disability pension (4) From unemployment to retirement (4) From full-time work to retirement (2) Worked past retirement age (2) Unclear (5)

Each year, episodic interviews (Flick, 2014) were conducted, together with photo and activity diaries that were kept by the participants throughout the years as well as observation protocols. The interviews began with a narrative-generating introduction. In the first wave of data collection, this was a biographical opening question, asking participants to tell me about their professional career, starting with their training, and encouraging them to take their time and go into as much detail as they would like. This introductory narrative, which would last between 20 and 45 minutes, was followed by an inquiry section with more specific questions on their life courses. Subsequently, the participants were asked to think back specifically to their last year at work and tell me more about it. This narration was followed by questions more directly related to retiring, like "When did you first think about retiring? Can you remember a specific situation?" and "Has anything changed since you realised you were going to retire?" Finally, they were asked to draw and narrate a life line, from birth to the moment of the interview, and the tasks of the photo and activity diaries were explained in more depth (the latter are not part of the analysis in this paper). In the subsequent interviews, the opening question inquired into what had happened in the lives of the participants during the previous year, and the photo diaries were used for photo elicitation in this narration. This was followed by more detailed questions about their last month and last day at work, about the changes in different areas of life (e.g., relationships, leisure activities or care work), their subjective definition of work and non-work, narrations about an average week in their current lives, and their plans and advice for other people undergoing this transition. None of the questions directly asked about affects, which emerged from the analysis rather than being an initial aim of the research.

The interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours. They were fully transcribed and coded using MAXQDA analysis software. The coding procedure was based on the social constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2016). First, the transcripts were completely coded by initial coding; second, the central codes were identified by focused coding; and third, these codes were related to each other in axial coding, which was accompanied by situational analysis mapping. In this analysis process, affects were identified as a focused code, with different initial codes (e.g., exhaustion or envivo-codes such as "punch in the gut") subsumed under them. In situational mapping, these affects were related to various other elements, practices, and events, and those affects that could be linked to narrations regarding the transition to retirement were selected for analysis. In all three steps, a cross-case and contrastive approach was taken to highlight shared or divergent patterns of practices and affects, rather than individual trajectories.

As outlined above, affects may be experienced through the body and processed through language, but as properties of practices, they remain hard to verbalise. Instead, affects are immediate, volatile, and ambivalent, and we often lack the language to express them. Hence, alternative methodologies have been developed to better grasp and trace affects, from autoethnographies to sensual methodologies and different modes of writing (see Knudsen & Stage, 2015). As this research was not initially carried out to analyse affects in transitions, it cannot draw on data acquired in these new and exciting ways. However,

it does draw on "affect as method", that is, the Spinozist notion of affects as "aesthetically based research methodology" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 79), where affects can be drawn upon as a methodological guide to the site of transition.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END: FEELING TIRED, EXHAUSTED, AND BURNT OUT

One of the most intensely experienced feelings participants narrate in the period before they transitioned out of work was tiredness and exhaustion, up to a complete lack of energy or even burnout. Richard,[3] a former blue-collar worker who later became a representative for severely disabled people in the company, was laid off at the age of 59. He summarises what many of the participants experience at the end of their working lives as: "I didn't want to work anymore. I was also drained out."

Some of the participants attribute this exhaustion to their age and the time they have already spent in their profession. Ute, a former journalist who quit her job in her early sixties, wonders why she felt so much more exhausted at the (voluntary) end of her working life than previously: "Where I thought, yes, there's actually no reason to be so exhausted anymore. And I hear the same thing from many others who are my age. Perhaps this vigour is waning a little."

This and similar accounts suggest that the repetition of work practices and routines over many years causes a feeling of exhaustion. Whereas one could argue that this is directly related to energy levels decreasing with age, people continue to find energy to engage in care or leisure practices. Andrea, who retired from her professorship at the statutory retirement age, recounts: "And I've been writing applications since I was 25. And I also find that tiring". Similarly, Dana, a social worker who retired early, says: "I'd rather just put my feet up and read something. I do realise that, this physical moment. I feel exhausted more often than I did ten years ago."

Dana exemplifies how these affects form the connective tissue between work practices and out-of-work transitions: when people feel exhausted, and work practices fail to engage them affectively anymore, they are more likely to leave the labour market:

> And maybe that's also a point where I say 'Well, I'd rather go now' and I'm not as exhausted as I would be in two and a half years and I'm like, 'Oh [sigh] how awful and so many hours today,' yeah.

Richard also experienced this lack of being affectively engaged at work, and describes the affective attunement at the end of his working life as follows:

> The interest has simply become a little less. [takes a deep breath] If you know that you're leaving or want to leave, then your motivation also diminishes. If you

3 Participant data was pseudonymised, which included replacing identifying information such as names with pseudonyms to ensure participant anonymity while retaining data utility for research.

> go into inner emigration ... I still did my job well, I think, but, how can I put it, I didn't bang on like that anymore. I did what was necessary, what could be achieved, and I did it all in peace. I was no longer so preoccupied with the anger that had previously cost me a lot of nerves with the management. [...] The drive was missing at the end. It was no longer like, 'Yes, hooray, we'll fight, we'll do it, we'll do it,' but it was, 'Yes, I'll do it.' And I think that happens to everyone who is already saying goodbye to their job on the inside.

Hence, years of engagement in repetitive work practices produces, over time, exhaustion, a lack of motivation and drive, and leads to work practices losing participants, or people ending their working life – often before the statutory retirement age via early retirement routes or the transition to unemployment.

While this can be a slow and gradual process for some participants, others experience affects so strong and sudden that they feel forced to stop working immediately. Mia, for example, held a management position in a large international organisation before experiencing burnout at age 59. She tried re-entering her job, but without success, and has since been on unpaid leave. She did not see this coming and often asks herself how burnout could have happened to her despite the fact that she enjoyed her work. In her narration, she recalls three reasons for the burnout: first, feeling "thwarted" ("*ausgebremst*"); second, spending a lot of energy to keep up with her male colleagues; and third, experiencing a loss of autonomy when the management in her company changed, which she affectively experienced as "a hit in the stomach". Yet she remembers that for a long time, she didn't even realise how "drained out" she was, until she experienced a complete breakdown:

> The breakdown, in retrospect I often thought it was a good thing that it happened. Because I wouldn't have got out of it any other way. I'm glad I didn't get ill, well, I mean physically ill now, right. Others get, I don't know, a heart attack or something.

After admitting herself to a clinic, she thought she could re-enter work, but noticed how work again burnt her out: "I went back to work and realised after four weeks [whistles] that it sucks everything out of me again". Since then, she has been on unpaid leave. She is reluctant to apply for early retirement, to not be "locked down in this status".

Jan, 52 years old at the time of the first interview, also lost his job due to mental health issues, however, from a much more precarious position than Mia: with long phases of unemployment, he had last worked as a warden, before he was given notice and claimed a disability pension. He recalls:

> Functioning is never automatic, it can be over very quickly at some point and then you have to look at how you [takes a breath], how to get up in the morning not with the duvet over your head but with joy and have a task somewhere [takes a breath], a human group where you look forward to it [takes a breath],

> who are also happy, and that you [sniffs] don't cut it off, lose it, leave it or get there again quickly.

He experienced his involuntary transition from work to unemployment and disability retirement as challenging, describing his last working months as "very exhausting", "very difficult", "cruel" and, at one point, even as "torturous", especially when he had to experience colleagues being laid off.

LOST IN TRANSITION: FEELING RESTLESS, AMBIVALENT, AND LOST

After Jan was let off from his last employment, he claimed a disability pension due to mental health problems. While he had suffered at his workplace, he found his status as a disability pensioner similarly difficult.

> A disability pension, that's somehow very difficult [takes a breath ...]. No matter how I do it with the background, I can't find the common denominator that I somehow have the strength, the courage, the hope to manage [...] to organise and arrange my life differently [...] I haven't managed it [...] the phases are more or less always there, like depression, mood swings [takes a breath], so the phases are always there, can I manage it, can't I manage it?

The feelings of exhaustion, lack of energy and hope continued across Jan's out-of-work transitions, and were accompanied by what he phrases as "inner unrest", fears and a perceived lack of care that he did not experience as much when he was still working:

> [...] being with people, 'Good morning,' 'Have a nice weekend,' that's quite nice. It calms you down. It reduces the inner restlessness. [...] And I realised that I need a task, human warmth, and a competence that is called upon. [...] When the fears get bigger and nobody calls, when I have the feeling that somehow nobody knows or nobody cares, friends or employers. You always have a social obligation. When you're a pensioner, you get your pension regularly and then there's an error, there's nothing left. Who's supposed to look after you?

Richard, who was also laid off involuntarily, remembers similar feelings of unrest during his time of unemployment, before he became eligible for a disability pension, especially when he had to deal with the unemployment agency.

> Work takes its toll, it's noise, noise, hectic, stress – I'm glad I'm out of it. Only when I was unemployed did I sometimes have those anxious moments where I thought, when will I get another letter from the job centre or what do I have to do now?

While both Richard and Jan experienced different, yet still negative affects throughout their involuntary out-of-work transitions, Mia's experience was more ambivalent and

contingent to change. Sometimes she talks about feeling full of energy and enthusiasm, and at other times hopeless and lost:

> Sometimes I feel really good, I'm full of energy and try to look after myself. Sometimes I'm so full of energy that I think, no, I can still do something. [starts to cry; in a weak voice] So sometimes I think, I would just say, lost in transition. That's actually the term that comes to mind for this topic, no. [in a steady voice] That's kind of my state.

The participants' narrations do not only provide examples of how difficult it is to disengage from work practices, but also how difficult it is to (re-)engage in non-work-related practices, especially in the first year after people stop working. The abundance of time that suddenly needs to be filled plays a major role in this kind of failure – the rhythm slows down, becomes more serene and tranquil. Consequently, the participants emphasized the discipline they needed to "pull oneself together", "stay active" and "get going", "go out", and the "lack of intrinsic motivation" they felt to engage in new (non-work-related) practices.

While looking for new ways to establish meaningful engagement with the world – volunteering, meeting new people, and engaging in new activities – Mia also felt cautious of doing so, "because I thought, I'm not going to overload myself with other things again. Because I have to find my own strength again first". Again, it is ambivalence that characterises her affective relationship to alternative forms of staying active and productive, sometimes feeling "full of euphoria" about volunteering, sometimes thinking, "well, why are you doing all this to yourself, why do you actually want to do all this? And that's the way I feel. So lost in transition."

A NEW LIFE STAGE: FEELING STRENGTHENED, CALM, AND FULL OF JOY

Sometime after their transition out of work, many of the participants experienced a transition from restlessness and feeling lost to calm and the feeling of having arrived. Richard recalls the affective choreography of his out-of-work transition as follows:

> I've really come to terms with the real retirement. I've been retired since [date], before that I was unemployed for two years and I was always a bit restless because you never knew what was going to happen, whether something would come from the job centre or ... and I didn't feel like working back then either, I'll be honest, it's over now.

He describes his predominant mood in retirement as "calm", and this calmness as increasing the longer he has been retired. He links this affective change to two things: the free time and the economic stability that retirement entails:

I'm just getting more and more relaxed, I realise that, I was already pretty calm at the beginning of my retirement because I knew nothing could happen now, you have a more

or less regular income, even if it's not much, but you can live with it and you automatically become calm.

The calm of being out of work entails many other affects: feeling "strengthened", "firmer, somehow", "more structured", "more composed", and having the feeling to "live more in the midst of life". Moreover, it enables him to engage in new practices by freeing up his headspace, giving him inner strength, and therefore allowing him to meet new people, maintain a "warmer" relationship with his wife, engage in new activities, and learn new things:

> And that's what's enriching in old age – not just meeting new people but having the opportunity to experience new things. You didn't have that before at work, you were so stressful or stressed and didn't have time [...] instead you had to consciously enjoy this free time. So it's really about realising what kind of time you have at the moment – I can't say it often enough, how happy I am.

It took Mia two years after her involuntary transition out of work to start feeling the calm that Richard describes; she says she needed two years to "top up my energy reserves". Like Richard, she also links this to a newfound ability to learn new things and engage in new activities, which she feels increases her wellbeing:

> [...] what I now do during the day in peace, so to speak, I have arrived at a different rhythm, I do everything much more in peace. I've learnt new things. I've started singing, something I'd totally neglected. So I'm making music really intensively, I'm in a choir, taking singing lessons, that sort of thing. I thought it was all good for the soul.

Dana describes a similar calm and self-determination that enabled her to rediscover herself in retirement, broaden her horizons, and learn new things. Like other participants, she furthermore expresses strong feelings of joy and enthusiasm:

> [...] the joy, yes, I'm happy and grateful every day that I ... have self-determination, that I'm actually healthy for now and can enjoy it so much, yes? [...] I also think it's such a phenomenon, I think it's so great ... that I'm really doing so well, it's really great. [...] Sometimes I can breathe, sometimes I feel light as air or dance alone because I'm doing so well. There's something great coming on, I listen to the radio when I'm vacuuming, something like that, so I think I'll vacuum away and check whether I have my curtains drawn. […] I'm sure it's happened five to eight times now in my retirement that I've danced my arse off, I think it's great. And I also really like dancing. [takes deep breath] Oh yes, that's new.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I have discussed the affective choreographies of out-of-work transitions based on the experiences of older adults towards the end of their working lives. In doing so, I have outlined how affects like exhaustion, restlessness, calm, and joy form parts of the connective tissues between the practices of paid work and non-work (or non-paid work), repetition and doing new things, concluding and starting anew. These connections show that practices with a similar affective "tune" are not necessarily more likely to connect to each other – rather, opposite affects seem to attract, and thereby connect practices of contrary affective attunement: practices that carry restlessness with those that carry calm, practices that carry exhaustion with those that carry enthusiasm, etc. Hence, the affective attunement (Reckwitz, 2017) and the respective affective choreographies (Adrian, 2015) of out-of-work transitions are queer and erratic.

This is in line with the theoretical foundation of this paper that emphasizes relationality and processuality, thereby framing transitions as assemblages rather than as linear trajectories. At the same time, approaching phenomena both a) theoretically from a transition lens and b) methodologically in the form of narratives, produces a certain kind of temporal sequence of practices across time. This has often been used to impose linearity and normativity onto the messiness of social lives. Methodologically, the critique of the domestication of queerness has been summarised by Bradway (2021) as follows: "Narrative, it is said, straightens perversity through sequence […][;] narrative always works on behalf of the normative" (pp. 711–712). Thus, our common ways of theorising transitions, the ways of collecting (or rather, co-creating) data, and the ways of presenting findings in writing, do force a certain linearity onto research (Goetzke, 2022).

However, I want to argue that assuming temporal relationality as sequence does not necessarily equate transitions with linearity and normativity, as accounts of queer(ing) time and queering age (Sandberg & Marshall, 2017) show. With Bradway (2021), I refrain from defining temporal sequence with "a linear teleology that produces illusory coherence", and instead highlight the "multiple, braided, and often conflicting temporalities that compose narrative as well as potentially queer temporalities of plot, such as suspense, simultaneity, and surprise" (p. 712). Approaching life course transitions as transitional assemblages instead of linear progresses makes it possible to understand them as "open-ended gatherings" that "allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them" and "show us potential histories in the making" (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). Along with a qualitative, longitudinal methodology, this allows for capturing seemingly contradictory or incoherent findings that change from one year to the next, failures that turn into (interpreted) success stories and vice versa, as well as ambiguity and uncertainty – or, as Mia expresses it, for feeling "lost in transition". Hence, the affective attunement (Reckwitz, 2017) outlined in the findings above provides one illustrative, exemplary way of telling the story about the affective choreographies that unfold throughout life course transitions, a story that is told at several points in time, but could look completely different if the study was to be continued for the next 15 years (and here, research funding comes into play).

Individual trajectories may not reach a point of calm or happiness or may reach it more slowly than others. And yet, taking this choreography as a starting point allows us to revisit the theoretical propositions on the role of affects in life course transitions:

- Affects are inherently part of life course transitions as open-ended processes of becoming, and therefore learning.
- Affects emerge in transitional assemblages of transformation and are properties of specific practices within these assemblages.
- Affects are the connective tissue that links practices with each other, as well as practices with their practitioners.
- Affects co-constitute the entities that are becoming, that is (among others), the people that experience transitions.

In which practice assemblages of transformative learning as becoming do certain affects emerge and how do they link to (other) affects, practices, practitioners, and entities? Focusing on out-of-work transitions, we might find a choreography of feeling exhausted, restless, and calm. Feeling tired and exhausted emerges within practices that are characterised by repetition, lack of recognition and autonomy. As affective connective tissue, they link practices of work to practices of non-work, and they *unlink* work participants from work practices. Or put more simply: tiredness and exhaustion make people leave work, whether by retiring, going on leave, falling ill, or becoming unemployed. Scholars have coined the term "cooling out" (Clark, 1960; Goffman, 1952) – itself an inherently affective term – for the processes describing how (mostly young) people become more and more detached from education, up to the point of eventually dropping out of the school system. However, research has shown that this concept can also be applied to other transitions and life stages (Wanka & Walther, 2024). In facilitating the cooling out of work practices process, affects like exhaustion "make" subjects that were formerly part of the workforce into retirees, sick, or unemployed people.

Curiously, in the affective choreography of out-of-work transitions, feelings of tiredness and exhaustion link with the contrastive affects of restlessness and feeling lost. These affects emerge within practices of re-orientation and searching – in this stage, the participants tried out a lot of different things and were very active. Their (often unsuccessful) attempt to get rid of the feeling of restlessness was met by a "market" of resonance-promising oases (Bischoff et al., 2021).

Feeling restless, and the resulting desire to stop feeling restless, therefore links to all kinds of practices, and co-constitutes subjects as "lost in transition" (Mia), that is, transitional subjects – people that are "no longer (employees)" and "not yet (retirees)".

These affects may link to – again – contrastive affects of calm and happiness. These affects emerge within practices that are characterised by a different rhythm and speed – one that is decelerated (Rosa, 2013). It is these decelerated practices that participants describe as sites of learning and acquisition of strength, therefore constituting them as post-transitional subjects that have arrived in a new life stage.

This adds important insight to the study of affects in transitions: while affects have been primarily conceptualised as material – that is, predominantly in the body (Pile, 2021), space (Reckwitz, 2012) or things (Jones & Harris, 2019) – we can see that they are also in a very specific way temporal. Practice theorists have long drawn on different notions of time and temporalities to describe how social practices connect (cf. Blue, 2017; Southerton, 2006; Wanka, 2019).

Drawing on Lefebvre (1984/2004), such temporal connections can be differentiated into processes of eurhythmia, connections that are stabilised and strengthened through synchronous repetition, and arrhythmia, connections that are weakened or destroyed through asynchronicity. As I've argued elsewhere (Wanka, 2019), people can "sense" arrhythmia through what are often perceived as "negative" affects. When we understand transformations – may it be change in the form of life course transitions or in the form of societal change – as the latter, we can presume that they are characterised by arrhythmia and therefore sensed through affects. Hence, affects can represent an important signifier for change and can provide a roadmap for transformations and transformative learning across life courses. When it feels strange, it is probably a transition – this has also become clear in the way participants meander and use different expressions that cannot be easily pinned down to one demarcated and clearly articulatable feeling. Tracing affects, as I have done in this paper, can thus be an effective methodological strategy to "track down" change.

What does this mean for theories of transformative learning? Emotions, feelings, and affects have been discussed as significant to transformative learning (cf. Taylor & Cranton, 2013). However, they have often been discussed in functionalist terms – as either enhancing learning processes by focusing attention, providing guidance for learning, or motivating individuals to engage in educational activities – or from a phenomenological perspective, as meaningful objects (and objectives) of education shaped in and through social interactions. The understanding of affects put forward in this paper connects to the latter, but also differs from it by claiming that affects transpire in processes of transformative learning – that is, all processes of becoming – and in a contingent and uncontrolled manner. Transformative learning is, from this perspective, not limited to an individual, reflexive, and cognitive process that is initiated through affects, but encompasses much more – it is a distributed, more-than-human, material, and incorporated part of becoming (Höppner et al., 2024). As showcased in the empirical material, it is not only the individual that transforms, but the world transforms with them.

Certain affects, as I have shown, are connected to certain practices and phases of life course transitions or change in more general terms. They form an important glue between practices and practitioners – thereby linking to the first strand of educational research discussed here – and connect practices with others. They are important actors in life course transitions by facilitating how and in which direction life course transitions unfold – similar to the position of a switchman. And they co-constitute the subjectivities that result from such processes of transformative learning. All of this shows that affects are much more powerful than most educational research has acknowledged so far.

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BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS: CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

ABSTRACT

Sustainability education often aims to empower individuals to help lead society toward more environmentally and socially responsible ways of living. This paper offers an alternative approach to addressing the challenges of adult learning in sustainability transitions. Rather than learning for sustainability, the processes of learning from sustainability discourses are explored. The paper provides conceptual and methodological insights into using a biographical approach to advance research in adult education and social change. Two empirical examples are provided to illustrate how individuals reframe sustainability and turn it from a public concern to a personal one, thereby developing a sense of agency. The concept of biographical learning is central, as it suggests that narrating and reflecting on one's life trajectory in the broader context of sustainability discourses can facilitate learning to understand, address, and remain an actor of one's own life in these times of rapid social change.

Keywords: *biographical learning, sustainability education, life course narratives, sustainability transitions, adult learning*

BIOGRAFSKO UČENJE V KONTEKSTU TRAJNOSTNIH PREHODOV: POJMOVNE REFLEKSIJE IN METODOLOŠKA SPOZNANJA – POVZETEK

Cilj izobraževanja o trajnosti je pogosto opolnomočiti posameznike, da pomagajo usmerjati družbo k bolj okoljsko in družbeno odgovornemu načinu življenja. V članku je predstavljen alternativni pristop k reševanju izzivov, ki se pojavljajo pri učenju odraslih v trajnostnih prehodih. Namesto na učenje za trajnost se osredotočamo na raziskovanje procesov učenja iz diskurzov o trajnosti. Opisana so tudi pojmovna in metodološka spoznanja o rabi biografskega pristopa v raziskavah o izobraževanju odraslih in družbenih spremembah. Na dveh empiričnih primerih je v članku ponazorjeno, kako posamezniki trajnost iz nečesa, kar je v javnem interesu, preoblikujejo v nekaj, kar jim je v osebnem interesu, ter s tem razvijajo občutek lastne sposobnosti za delovanje. Pojem biografskega učenja je tu osrednjega pomena, saj lahko pripovedovanje in refleksija o lastni življenjski poti v širšem kontekstu diskurzov o trajnosti podpirata učenje, ki vodi do razumevanja, obravnavanja in ohranjanja aktivne drže v lastnem življenju v današnjem času hitrih družbenih sprememb.

Ključne besede: *biografsko učenje, izobraževanje o trajnosti, pripovedi o življenjskih potekih, trajnostni prehodi, učenje odraslih*

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INTRODUCTION

Social change, particularly in adult education, is often framed as a challenge requiring personal adaptation through the acquisition of new knowledge, behaviours, and competencies (Alheit, 1994). A central concept shaping current social change is *sustainability*, often used interchangeably with *sustainable development* and commonly associated with societal responses to environmental issues. However, as public awareness grows about the interconnectedness of global challenges – such as the link between climate change and migration – *sustainability* has evolved into a broad and often vague term (Lange, 2018). It now encompasses a wide range of well-intentioned efforts (e.g., United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's [UNESCO] 17 Sustainable Development Goals), sometimes functioning more as a comforting narrative, presented as the optimal solution to both global and local challenges. This normative framing has energised the development of social transformation initiatives, with learning and education situated at the core of such efforts and viewed as the key catalysts for change. For example, in 2002, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD 2005–2014), which aimed "to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage behavioural changes toward a more sustainable and just society for all" (UNESCO, 2005).

This "act of hope in the future" (Lange, 2018, p. 2) – to educate in response to sustainability challenges – nevertheless reflects an ongoing debate within the scientific community about how to cultivate a sustainability-literate society. Specifically, the debate concerns how education (Mikulec, 2021; Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019), and by extension learning, should evolve to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world, and what sustainability education should encompass. Wals (2010) underscores a paradox between the urgent need to address climate issues, which in some cases justifies an instrumental approach, and the ethical dilemma of imposing expert-determined ways of thinking and acting. Concerns include the risk of treating learners as "marionettes for the good intentions of […] educators" (Breiting, 2009, p. 200), reducing educators to "technicians rather than participatory contributors" (Lange, 2018, p. 411), and framing sustainability thinking and practices as merely individual learning problems (Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 542). Furthermore, the widely used concept of Education *for* Sustainable Development (ESD) – like education *for* anything – risks reducing education to a means "for promoting a specific kind of 'sustainable' behaviour" (Jickling, 1992; Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 541).

In response, scholars have called for a critical examination of the underlying assumptions guiding such approaches, urging us to ask "who or what should transform, to which objective, and how this transformative process is supposed to proceed" (Schreiber-Barsch & Mauch, 2019, p. 520; see also Mikulec, 2021, p. 15). To counter tendencies toward instrumentalization, Jickling and Sterling (2017, p. 159) argue that what should be foregrounded

are the values that inform pedagogical choices, rather than prescribing fixed outcomes or behaviours. According to Van Poeck and Vandenabeele (2012), a shift in focus from the acquisition of pre-determined knowledge and competencies to a more democratic approach towards educational spaces and practices – cultivating pluralism, for example – can support the realisation that enabling people to live with social change requires creating opportunities for learning *from* sustainability. This understanding of education is central to setting transformation processes in motion. Accordingly, there is a need for educational practices "where citizens engage with, respond to, and act in confrontation with the issues at stake" (Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012, p. 548). Learning *from* rather than *for* makes even more sense when considering that sustainability issues are *wicked problems*, "characterised by incomplete, uncertain or contested expert knowledge, conflicting values and objectives, a lack of unambiguous problem formulations and the impossibility to find uncontested definitive solutions" (Block et al., 2019, p. 30). The idea that sustainability holds different meanings for different people reinforces the importance of creating space for listening and exploring those meanings (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 501).

This article puts forward the argument that giving learners the opportunity to share their own experiences of contemporary social change – and thereby develop a personal understanding of how to live within this *wicked* context – is essential for strengthening their capacity to engage with such change. This process can foster the ability to form connections within a relational logic paradigm (Lange et al., 2021) or to pose challenging questions (Biesta, 2006a). Thus, rather than asking how people can learn *for* sustainability, the aim of this paper is to explore the potential of learning *from* the sustainability context, further decentred from a normative, teleological framing of sustainability. In practical terms, this implies a different approach to sustainability education, "one that aims to meet learners where they are at in terms of interests, concerns, and meanings" (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 501). The proposed conception of learning remains instrumental to some extent, but it moves away from a predetermined goal of what should be learned for the sake of sustainability issues (e.g., adopting so-called "green" practices). Instead, it suggests a non-teleological view of learning within the context of sustainability.

To this end, the paper proposes using biographical research (West et al., 2007), with a particular emphasis on the concept of biographical learning (Alheit, 1994), to examine the potential of learning *from* the sustainability context. Within scientific debates on sustainability education, biographical learning has yet to be recognised as a significant source of learning. A few notable exceptions include the work of Vandenabeele and Wildemeersch (2012), who explored how farmers learn about environmental issues through biographical narrative settings, and the work of Jaeger-Erben (2013), who proposes the biographical approach as a method for analysing changes in everyday consumption resulting from critical life events. Some academic communities, particularly in Francophone (e.g., Fabry & Luyckx, 2024; Pineau, 2023; Schmutz-Brun, 2021) as well as Lusophone and Hispanophone contexts (e.g., Serrano Castañeda et al., 2024), have conducted extensive research on the use of reflective methodologies, such as biographical narratives, to create dialogical

spaces for relearning how to live on Earth. However, concepts such as *ecoformation* have yet to gain significant recognition within international sustainability education debates, where greater engagement with these perspectives would be highly valuable.

This article explores how narrating one's life story in the context of *wicked* sustainability issues can foster biographical learning, enabling individuals to make sense of their experiences and supporting educational research in better understanding learning within these contexts. Grounding reflection in lived experience through a biographical approach offers valuable insights for both adult education and sustainability transitions research. In particular, biographical narratives of life course transitions provide a fruitful means of exploring the "latent potential of transformation," as transitions involve "movements into new social situations and positions […] and thus become socially momentous in having social consequences and affecting individuals' life trajectories" (Walther et al., 2022, p. 11). A biographical perspective, specifically, can illuminate how individuals make sense of and articulate personal experiences of change (Eberle et al., 2022), as well as how broader contexts of social change, such as sustainability-related issues, co-shape life trajectories and transitions across the life course (Thevenot & Hof, 2024).

Given the limited scientific discourse at the intersection of sustainability education and biographical research, this article represents an initial effort to connect these two fields. Drawing on a thorough empirical study, the goal is to propose conceptual frameworks and methodological insights – relevant to both researchers and practitioners – that highlight the value of biographical approaches in understanding learning within the sustainability context.

To do so, the article will first examine how sustainability has predominantly been conceptualised as a global issue requiring intentional top-down intervention, often overlooking its personal dimension and the fact that it is a socially constructed concept that is constantly evolving. In the second part of the article, an alternative perspective on what sustainability represents for our lives and how it is being learned is proposed, drawing on biographical research theories. The central argument to be made is that the construction of personal biographies represents a means of making sense of one's agency within the context of sustainability. In the third part, the conceptual and methodological proposal will be exemplified and discussed to garner empirical insights. The biographical narrative interview passages derive from the *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions*[1] project and will provide initial indications of the potential methodological avenues that could be pursued in future research.

1 The research project *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions* examines the career transitions of people who have developed a particular interest in sustainability issues. The project is part of the interdisciplinary research training group *Doing Transitions - The Shaping of Transitions in the Life Course*, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The research group investigates the shaping of transitions in the life course, focusing on the interrelationships between discourses, institutional regulation, and pedagogical action, as well as individual learning, educational, and coping processes.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSION OF SUSTAINABILITY: EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCE RATHER THAN PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

This section presents the argument that the majority of research in the field of sustainability transitions studies has focused on meso-level transformation processes, which has led to a neglect of the concept of sustainability as a personally experienced phenomenon.

Focusing on meso-level transformations offers an approach to sustainability that moves beyond assigning responsibility solely to individuals. This stands in contrast to models like the ABC framework (Attitude, Behaviour, and Choice), commonly used in economics and psychology, which have been criticised for placing disproportionate emphasis on individual responsibility in addressing climate change (Shove, 2010, p. 1274). With or without an explicit tendency to shift blame onto individuals, research over recent decades linking sustainability and individual action has primarily focused on changing or improving consumption patterns. Educational research has explored how individuals can learn to change their habits (e.g., flying less, sorting waste) and how specific spaces, such as urban community gardens or real-world laboratories (e.g., Singer-Brodowski et al., 2018), can serve as sites for sustainability education and learning. Other studies have examined how trigger events, for example, watching a documentary or taking hallucinogenic mushrooms (Hards, 2011), can lead to personal transformation. Life course transitions, such as becoming a parent (Jaeger-Erben & Offenberger, 2014), renovating a home (Winther & Wilhite, 2015) or retiring (Burningham & Venn, 2020) have also been studied as *windows of opportunity* for promoting sustainable consumption (Schäfer et al., 2012). Collectively, these studies shed light on how practices can be (instrumentally) modified to address sustainability issues, such as altering personal consumption habits by, for example, purchasing organic products, reducing plastic waste, and lowering one's carbon footprint. With their focus on the detailed description of practices, these studies have made a significant contribution by demonstrating how individually performed actions are deeply embedded in collective practices and socio-material contexts – while largely overlooking subjective perspectives. Burningham and Venn (2020), who examined potential "significant 'moments' at which individuals' everyday consumption might be redirected onto a more sustainable course" (p. 115), conclude that framing such events as "moments of change" risks implying "a discrete point at which change occurs" (p. 117). Hence, in the aforementioned investigations, the personal and subjective articulations of sustainability are lost out of sight, so that the less static (Greene & Rau, 2018; Jaeger-Erben, 2013; Rau & Matern, 2024), less obvious, less impressive, less visible, less everyday social changes are not made relevant.

By employing a biographical approach, this paper explores the subjective dimension of sustainability, emphasizing how individuals' experiences, accounts, and life conditions shape and co-construct the sustainability context over time. If we consider that what qualifies as a "sustainability-related practice" is far from fixed, since sustainability discourses evolve over time and are reinterpreted across the lifespan and within biographical narratives, then a biographical approach becomes especially valuable. It allows us to examine

how individuals continuously engage with, adapt to, (re)position themselves within, and learn from this ever-changing context. Thus, a biographical approach offers insight into how lives unfold and how experiences are shaped and given meaning in relation to the sustainability context. This paper does not, however, seek to assign responsibility for who should act, when, or how, nor to prescribe the most appropriate life path or define what qualifies an individual as a so-called change agent. Rather, it emphasizes that individuals are engaged again and again in the process of learning from and about sustainability issues throughout their lives, and in ways that are unique to them (Stimm & Dinkelaker, 2024). The aim is to thematise biographical learning as a relevant topic for sustainability education both as an object of study and as a pedagogical approach that draws on individual experiences within sustainability contexts.

The following section introduces the biographical learning approach and argues that it can facilitate access to additional sustainability knowledge and highlight previously understudied forms of sustainability agency.

SUSTAINABILITY AGENCY AND BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING

Biographical approaches to understand learning in sustainability transitions

Biographical research focuses on long-term processes of experience and meaning construction. Accordingly, we can ask to what extent sustainability, understood as a guiding principle of contemporary social change (Neckel et al., 2018), manifests as a construct of relevance in individual biographies.

The following section argues that *biographical learning* or *narrative learning*[2] can prove to be a valuable addition to research on sustainability transitions, as it offers new perspectives on evolving socio-cultural phenomena (Hallqvist, 2014, p. 498). It is not a new idea that life can be an object of learning. It is "itself a field of learning" (Alheit, 1995, p. 59). What is relatively new is to think about life as an object of sustainability-related learning. It is worth noting, however, that the concept of *ecoformation*, introduced by Gaston Pineau (2023) and developed with a community of researchers over the past 30 years, along with the related training program (GREF), has yet to gain full recognition as a subfield of sustainability education, specifically one focused on nature and the ecological environment, drawing on life narratives among other methods. Recent work from this research community asks: How do ecological relationships and identities emerge? How do our interactions with the world shape us, transform us, contribute to our life trajectories? What is the place of this informal learning in our lives and overall learning? How do our eco-formative experiences contribute to ecological awareness (Bischoff, 2023, p. 6)?

2 In this paper, the terms *biographical learning* and *narrative learning* are used interchangeably, as the objective is not to distinguish between different biographical research strands (see Hallqvist, 2014; Tedder & Biesta, 2009, pp.77–79). Therefore, the terms are employed based on whether the accounts are influenced by Alheit and the biographical research community (ESREA's Life History and Biography Network) or Biesta and colleagues' research for the *Learning Lives* project.

The use of biographical approaches in adult education has been a consistent and persistent practice since the 1990s (Bernard et al., 2024; Hallqvist, 2014). Those who advocate for this approach frequently highlight the valuable insights gained from the subjective experiences of learners themselves. In contrast, sustainability transitions studies have thus far tended to view learning primarily as a tool for implementing top-down strategies, with a focus on policymaking and meso-level adjustments (Köhler et al., 2019). Thus, sustainability transitions studies – and particularly those engaging with their educational dimension, namely the field of sustainability education – notably lack recognition of biographical approaches, such as autobiographical reflection and storytelling, as meaningful components of sustainability learning practices.

One possible explanation for this delay is the strong influence of international policy (e.g., UNESCO) on both lifelong learning and sustainable development, leading to the assumption that both are shaped solely by political and economic imperatives. However, scholars such as Biesta (2005, 2006b) argue that learning goes beyond the discourses of lifelong learning policymakers. Biographical learning, seen as the "individual aspect of lifelong learning" (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 5), offers an alternative approach to policy issues that is further removed from formal structures. The assertion that the issue of sustainability is shaped by and pertinent to international policy has also been challenged. For instance, Elizabeth Lange (2018) posits that sustainability "has no ideology, universal goals, slogans or key leaders. Its form grows from the context" (p. 415). Building on biographical narratives (conducted with individuals who are genuinely concerned with sustainability issues), it seems reasonable to posit that sustainability can be cultivated from personal anecdotes, experiences, and challenges. This cultivation of sustainability from below can contribute to further advances in sustainability knowledge, particularly on issues of concern to the everyday lives of adults and thus also for the fields of adult education and learning.

Articulating life stories to give meaning to and learn from sustainability

> [L]earning can take place as a result of articulating stories from one's life, through the process of talking about and reflecting on life experiences, in other words from the very narration of one's biography; […] by having stories with content and structure, by having a narrative that says something about what and how you have learned. Narrative and narration are not simply a vehicle for such learning processes but can be understood as a 'site' for learning. (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89)

Consequently, biographical narration invites individuals to create new meaning by connecting the pieces of their lives in creative ways (Alheit, 2018, p. 125; Hallqvist et al., 2012, pp. 73–76). In the research project *Working Out Sustainability in Transition*, the sample consisted of individuals who had experienced a professional transition to a sustainability-related job (e.g., from the banking sector to vegetable gardening) and who, in

the interview situation, made sense of their transition by linking their working life to the sustainability context. The professional transition experience can be conceptualised as a biographical disruption that can facilitate access to information about the processes of transitional learning (Alheit, 1994; Hallqvist, 2014, p. 499; Hof & Bernhard, 2024). As transitioners are forced to cope with change, within the scope of the biographical narration, they are compelled to (re-)interpret the relation between their lives and the world in which they live. The narrations are the result of the production of (subjective) meaning derived from past experiences and future aspirations. From there, the biographical narrators produce new "life constructions", and with those new life constructions, "social actors take a different stance towards themselves and the world in general" (Alheit, 1994, p. 293).

In a similar way, Eberle et al. (2022) refer to modes of biographical articulation. To show "how interviewees develop new ways of self-positioning, legitimize important decisions, and give direction to their further course of life" (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 140), three different biographical interview case studies were analysed. It was concluded that "biographical articulation" relies on discourses for being "powerful opportunities to gain a voice, to be able to speak and/or to transition into new subject positions" (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151). Articulation patterns thus "work as engines for transitions in the life course" (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151), since, for example, "[b]iographically relevant positioning processes [occur] against the background of a diverse universe of other possible subject positions and offerings" (Eberle et al., 2022, p. 151).

This (new) "self- and world referentiality" positioning can be seen as a learning process that can cause changes (Alheit, 1994, p. 289, 291; Hallqvist, 2014, pp. 499–500). Thereby, people that can learn from their life stories "are effective 'narrative learners'" (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89). Hallqvist et al. (2012) consider this narrative exercise to be an act of "reflexive identity" (p. 73). But that's not all. Those who advocate for biographical learning also argue that it "has a 'potential' to change structures", since "people not only reflect but also act to change their situation" (Hallqvist et al., 2012, p. 73). This is the argument of the next section, namely that biographical learning is a means to address sustainability issues.

Articulating life stories to make sense of the sustainability context

In biographical narratives, individuals tend to explore and make sense of how their life path relates to larger societal changes (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and in the specific sample of my research project, sustainability issues were made relevant to explain life trajectories – how they are touched, affected, implicated, and in some cases mobilised. Hence,

> [s]upporting narrative learning is […] neither only about improving people's 'capacity' for narration, nor only about providing opportunities for doing this together with others. What matters is also the extent to which such learning processes can be understood in a political way and can be lifted from the level of private troubles to the plane of public and political issues. (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, p. 89)

Indeed, when individuals connect their personal life trajectories to the context of sustainability – for example, by describing changes in their consumption habits – they enter a space that lies "between the personal and the political", and "almost every 'private' decision has 'public' consequences and, vice versa, because social conditions affect individuals' freedom of choice" (Vandenabeele & Van Poeck, 2012, p. 52; see also Sauvé, 2014, pp. 7–10). The very act of telling one's life story can be seen as a form of participation between the personal and the political, since constructing a biography, for example, involves a number of both intentional and non-intentional decisions, i.e. giving a selective account of social forces to explain one's actions, for example, to emphasize (or not) the impact of the sustainability context on one's life trajectory.

Vandenabeele and Van Poeck (2012) explored the potential of narratives in sustainability education not through biographical interviews but by organising focus groups where the participants, guided by a facilitator, discussed an environmental policy plan. Their focus was on deliberation as democratic education, "an educational process in its own right, in which citizens are entitled to explore the often paradoxical and ungraspable character of their experiences" (Vandenabeele and Van Poeck, 2012, p. 52). Their findings support this paper's claim that even in argumentation and debate, people consistently use storytelling patterns. Two key conclusions stand out: first, that "citizens' knowledge is best articulated by stories and can be best understood in this way," and second, that "narrating experiences can support citizens in responding to the complexity of concern-raising sustainability issues" (Vandenabeele and Van Poeck, 2012, p. 54). In short, storytelling helps people use concrete language and lived experience to navigate the complexity of sustainability.

According to Biesta and Tedder (2007), in telling and reflecting on their life stories, people can learn about their own "agentic orientations and how they play out in one's life", and this can have "an important role in the achievement of agency" (p. 132). In short, life stories facilitate learning processes that can enhance personal agency in the face of complex social change, providing individuals with the means to shape future actions through the act of narrating their experiences.

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAYS

The following section is intended to illustrate the conceptual work that has been conducted thus far and to inspire the pursuit of alternative methodological avenues, whether for the sake of research, teaching or both. A comprehensive analytical examination of the empirical material has been conducted for the *Working Out Sustainability in Transitions* research project, and the resulting empirical findings are presented in other articles (e.g., Thevenot, 2022; Thevenot & Hof, 2024). To obtain firsthand accounts of experiences pertaining to the sustainability context, the research design used biographical interviews as a data collection method. It is assumed that in contemporary Western societies, sustainability has become a mainstream topic through which individuals position themselves, legitimise certain practices, and distance themselves from others (Neckel et al., 2018).

Moreover, it has been postulated that life narrative exercises prompt interviewees to break with the routines of everyday lives and move on to new biographical spaces (Evans, 2013, p. 29). This enables them to reposition themselves, address their learning transitions, and thereby inform research about what new knowledge adults are acquiring.

Between 2020 and 2022, biographical narratives were collected from 15 individuals as part of a research project grounded in a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants in the process of a career transition related to sustainability were recruited through snowball sampling. Biographical interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes and focused on their professional trajectories, were conducted and repeated a year later to explore personal change and evolving perceptions. Most of the interviews were held via videoconference due to the pandemic and the participants' geographic spread across six countries (in European countries and the USA).

The interview setting is interesting in view of the purpose of the methodological contribution to be made in this paper. In the recruitment process (via first contact and informed consent), the participants were first made aware that the project was related to the topic of sustainability. Because the interview questions were open-ended – beginning with prompts such as *Please describe your professional path from the very start to where you are now,* with follow-up questions like *Can you elaborate on that?* or *Can you describe this situation in more detail?* – sustainability was not addressed explicitly. It was therefore up to each respondent to determine whether, and how, to incorporate it into their narrative: whether it was a recent concern or a long-held value, how it shaped subsequent events, and whether their understanding of it was stable or evolving. This openness gave participants the space to define the relevance, form, and influence of sustainability on their own terms, shaping how it intertwined with their personal journeys, career transitions, and aspirations.

Two case narratives (Heidi and Max) are presented below. They are indicative of the argumentation made above but not to be understood as representative of the research project sample. Heidi's example offers insight into the process of reframing the concept of sustainability from one of public interest to a matter of personal significance. Furthermore, it demonstrates how sustainability as a topic can be utilised as a means of reframing one's role and sense of agency at work. Max's example emphasizes the process through which prospective actions can be articulated, reflected upon, and evaluated as feasible and achievable (or not).

Making sustainability something personal exemplified with Heidi's narration

Heidi was in her early 50s when she was interviewed about her working life. In the 1980s, she studied business administration and then went to work for a large food company. She quit after two years:

> I just felt like, um, it's so unnecessary and so unimportant […] I just wanted to spend my working hours on something that I could be, yeah, proud of or at least think that, you know, it's worth doing it. (Heidi)

From the start, she frames her professional path as a search for meaningful work. After completing a PhD in international marketing on fundraising, hoping to "get a foot in the nonprofit sector", she instead, partly due to family plans, ended up in HR at a large for-profit travel company: "It wasn't uninteresting. But it was in the end, the main focus was: We have to expand our business. And what I wanted inside was to reduce this business." During a six-year parental leave spent accompanying her husband on international assignments, Heidi recounts a pivotal moment in her pursuit of meaningful work:

> When I went to school, we were talking about dirty rivers and about killing seals for the fur and things like this. And this already always, yeah, kind of grabbed me. I thought, this is not right, 'we have to do something' and things like that. Um, but it wasn't the big issue of how we really change our world right now. And, um, that came really when I went [abroad]. In Europe, we already have a certain common ground about things that are important. [...] [In foreign country H there was] a complete insensibility on this topic [...]. That really made me into, yeah, 'I have to think about it in more detail and more depth'. And as I was looking for something I could change in my job anyway, also this might be a moment to get into this topic. And once you start with environmental topics you [laughs] can't stop because it's so interesting. And, yeah, from then on, this was my main focus. (Heidi)

Heidi describes a tipping point in her involvement and attitude to sustainability issues. After living abroad, topics that once seemed self-evident – *a certain common ground* – became visible and prompted reflection, which she suggests ultimately altered her worldview. Environmental disasters shifted from distant and abstract concerns to immediate and personal ones: "in [country H] you looked into the sky, and you could see it. And that made it much more, yeah, much more urgent from a personal point of view". While the disasters discussed at school over 30 years ago felt like remote, sensational headlines disconnected from daily life, they have now become a "big issue" that she feels personally responsible to engage with. This shift in perspective marks a transition from passive collective acknowledgement to active personal interest. The framing of the realisation does not entail significant personal transformations; it does not result in the sudden modification of her everyday life or a shift in life priorities. For her, sustainability is not just a topic but a fulfilling pursuit: "you [laughs] can't stop because it's so interesting." It also aligned with a long-standing professional ambition. To deepen her expertise, she enrolled in an environmental studies master's program. The formal qualification gave her more confidence to promote change within the travel company, but she continued to feel isolated in her efforts. In 2013, she resigned. Over the past decade, she has worked as a self-employed sustainability consultant.

The narrative is built around the idea that she has been consistent all along in her pursuit of purpose-driven work that makes a meaningful contribution to society. What had changed between the time she left her job in the 1980s and in the 2010s was her understanding of

what counted as meaningful work. As the concept of sustainability has become a defining theme of contemporary social change, individuals seeking a sense of purpose increasingly pursue opportunities aligned with its values (Thevenot, 2022). Heidi exemplifies this trend: working to advance sustainability goals enables her to construct a meaningful life narrative that legitimises both the major and minor shifts in her life course.

Heidi was not used to telling her personal life story; nearing the end of the 70-minute interview, she mentions in a meta comment to the researcher: "you're asking so many questions I haven't asked myself, so it always takes a while to [laughs] to answer them". Heidi had begun engaging in sustainability work long before she participated in this research interview, where she had the opportunity to share and reflect on her work life experiences and transitions. Tracing why and how she had made significant work-life transitions – driven by a search for purpose and justified through the concerns she articulated – proved to be a fruitful exercise in clarifying her agentic orientation toward sustainability, its relevance in her everyday life, and the agentic possibilities she is beginning to prefigure for the future.

The explosive nature of unlived lives exemplified with Max's narration

Max was in his late 30s when he was interviewed about his working life. Like Heidi, Max's narration begins with his choice of studies and work experience. Prior to his dual study program in the automotive industry, he finds it relevant to mention his voluntary service in a children's hospice: "that was a really, really good year. Every day, I had the feeling I'm doing something good". He suggests he knows how it feels to do work with a purpose. Thus, when he began working in the car industry, he recalls having doubts about whether it was right for him. He had dreams of saving up money and travelling the world by bike. Instead, 15 years later, Max was still working in the same company. He explains that the incentives and the regular promotions kept him going even if the car industry was not completely fulfilling and his desire for something adventurous, entrepreneurial, ambitious or influential kept resurfacing. He recalls two significant events from 2016 that may explain why he was questioning his work trajectory: watching a Leonardo DiCaprio documentary on climate change and becoming a father. Afterwards, he felt the need to do something "that makes the world a little bit better". While on extended parental leave, he seriously considered changing jobs and applied to several companies that shared his environmental values. But in the meantime, his boss in the automotive industry offered him a project management position in the company's new "sustainability" department.

In an attempt to justify his situation, i.e. staying in the car industry but on the topic of sustainability, Max's narrative includes a series of reflexive practices:

> Hmm and maybe this is the biggest topic, why I haven't made a big cut so far. Because I don't want to miss like the security. I think I could live within that money, hmm, and I would like to even try different things, but there are two kids now and since I've had an unlimited well-paid contract in the industry

> since I was 21 or something, it is really hard to give this away. So, if there was a chance to have this security, trying something else with less money, I would say definitely, I will do it, I will try it. […] Aahm so, let's see what the future brings. (Max)

Max mentions a possible life that he is not living. A life he wishes for, but at this point remains an "unlived life" (Alheit, 2018) or a life *not yet lived*. In fact, he hypothetically describes how he could get by earning less, suggesting that the fact that he is not giving up his executive position in the car industry has nothing to do with financial benefits. In the above passage, the argument that trumps all other options is the need for stability for his two children. In other words, he longs for changes in his life that are more in line with his personal beliefs, but taking action is complicated. Instead of saying "I have two kids," his phrasing "there are two kids now" is consistent with his reflection on his lack of personal control over his situation and the options available to him.

In contrast, however, in the introductory part of his narrative, he sees his children and becoming a father as the driving force and a wake-up call to rethink his career:

> When my kids are bigger and they will ask me: 'Dad, what did you do with all your time? What did you do?' And I have to say, you know, I did this and this but nothing really big or important or something which makes the world a little bit better. (Max)

With this sentence, Max implies that what he has done professionally so far is not yet enough and will not necessarily be received favourably by his children. It is implied that one way to change the still unsatisfactory direction of his career would be to make a significant contribution to the environment.

It can be assumed from the narrative that Max is not acting according to his desires by not putting his life opportunities into practice. Indeed, Max is faced with several challenges (e.g., his responsibility for stability in the household, which is a strong gendered expectation in Western society (see Kammerlander, 2025) versus working in a more uncertain context but doing work that makes *the world a little bit better*) for which he has no immediate answer. But the articulation process and related pre-reflexive efforts can be seen as experiences of what Alheit and Dausien (2002, p. 15) call "moments of self-education". Furthermore, from a biographical learning perspective, the unlived life that Max narrates and reflects upon may have what Alheit (1994, 2018) calls a "socially explosive force". These narratives are powerful as they create the space to express the options for changing one's life – and to consider how such changes might make a difference in the world. For example, Max implies that he has options to choose from, that a somewhat traditional career path of staying in the same company for the rest of one's life is not an end in itself. Especially at a time when sustainability concerns have become personal concerns, expressing his desire to change his life for the sake of doing something purposeful changes what it means to have a career in modern society.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on sustainability education by demonstrating the value of biographical approaches to learning, which emphasize personal experience and reflection through biographical narratives. Sustainability education is not limited to the acquisition of knowledge or competencies aligned with the expectations of international organisations seeking to shape *eco-citizens* and *change agents* under a fixed normative vision. Rather, it calls for ongoing pedagogical reflection and transformation to better understand – and, in the case of educators, to support – learners as they navigate the *wicked* context of sustainability transitions.

While the majority of research on sustainability transitions tends to frame sustainability as an impersonal concept that necessitates intervention, this paper highlights the need to also consider individuals' subjective experiences and personal meaning-making. As Van Poeck and Vandenabeele (2012) note, it is essential to focus on how adults articulate and learn *from* their lived experiences with sustainability, rather than solely on how to learn *for* sustainability. This shift in perspective can facilitate the derivation of fruitful questions relevant to the field of adult education, such as the modalities of learning in light of sustainability issues. Furthermore, it supports an epistemological transition aligned with transformative sustainability education, as described by Lange et al. (2021), which sees sustainability education as an embodied relational process, emphasizing our "relational accountability" to the world (p. 44).

The sustainability context has significant implications for cultural forms of life, everyday practices, and relations to oneself (Neckel et al., 2018). It alters not only society but also its members – whether they want it or not. This is because social orders and their meaning are not fixed, but produced in communicative processes (Mezirow, 2000), with biographical rendering being one of these forms of communication. Further research using biographical approaches will enable a better understanding of how the sustainability context permeates and co-shapes our life courses, and thus what and how is being learned and for what reason. Hence, this paper advocates for the use of biographical approaches to examine sustainability as a social change phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by adult lives, with implications for both research and teaching.

The scope of this paper was to advocate for the integration of biographical approaches into sustainability education research and practice. By valuing personal narratives, we can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals experience and make sense of sustainability transitions, allowing us to learn from these experiences and act (or not) with greater reflection. It emphasizes the role of personal stories in addressing sustainability issues and suggests that telling one's life story can be a source of meaningful learning. It is not possible to quantify or prove the impact of this form of biographical storytelling on the processes of learning and action with regard to sustainability. However, in the light of the preceding conceptual and theoretical sections, Heidi's and Max's examples illustrate how making sense of and reflecting on one's work trajectory in the context of sustainability

through biographical narration can unfold. Such reflections offer a more nuanced understanding of contemporary and prefigurative life trajectories, as well as the types of life course transitions individuals navigate today. Furthermore, it contributes to sustainability education by illuminating how learning from the sustainability context can take place. The objective was also to inspire sustainability education and adult education researchers interested in social change to further empirically explore the potential of biographical narratives in sustainability education. Researchers and educators are encouraged to recognise the significance of personal experiences in shaping sustainable futures and to use such narratives as a tool for self-education and reflection on sustainability.

This approach offers an alternative understanding of sustainability education, emphasizing the need for continuous (re)learning and (re)negotiation of one's understanding, position, and the meaning of one's life course against the backdrop of rapid social change and pressing socio-ecological issues.

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PRACTICES OF BECOMING: WHAT AND HOW DO FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS LEARN WHEN TRANSITIONING TO UNIVERSITY?

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the learning experiences of first-generation students in higher education. While existing studies highlight the risks of social exclusion, they tend to overlook what and how first-generation students learn in their transitions to university. By utilising a theoretical framework that integrates biographical and practice-theoretical perspectives on learning, this study addresses a gap in research on how these students navigate their transition to university by learning. The study draws on 24 biographical case studies developed over three years (2019–2022) across universities in Austria and Germany. The findings demonstrate that biographical learning is embedded in concrete practices of becoming: practices of peer support, engagement, and pedagogical accompaniment. These practices of becoming a student simultaneously transform and reproduce social inequalities. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of understanding first-generation students' learning experiences in relation to social inequality, higher education, and societal change.

Keywords: *first-generation students, learning, higher education, biography, social inequality*

PRAKSE POSTAJANJA: KAJ IN KAKO SE ŠTUDENTI PRVE GENERACIJE UČIJO OB PREHODU NA UNIVERZO? – POVZETEK

V članku avtorica raziskuje učne izkušnje študentov prve generacije v visokošolskem izobraževanju. Obstoječe študije s tega področja poudarjajo predvsem tveganje socialne izključenosti, pogosto pa spregledajo, kaj in kako se študenti prve generacije učijo ob prehodu na univerzo. Raziskava na podlagi teoretičnega okvira, ki združuje biografske in praktično-teoretične poglede na učenje, obravnava učenje ob prehodu na univerzo. Temelji na 24 biografskih študijah primerov, ki pokrivajo obdobje treh let (2019–2022) na univerzah v Avstriji in Nemčiji. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je biografsko učenje vpeto v konkretne prakse postajanja: prakse vrstniške podpore, sodelovanja in pedagoškega spremljanja. Te prakse postajanja študent pa hkrati spreminjajo in reproducirajo družbene neenakosti. Avtorica v zaključku poudari pomen razumevanja učnih izkušenj študentov prve generacije v odnosu do družbene neenakosti, visokošolskega izobraževanja in družbenih sprememb.

Ključne besede: *študenti prve generacije, učenje, visokošolsko izobraževanje, biografija, družbena neenakost*

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INTRODUCTION: THE RELATIONALITY OF UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the expansion of educational opportunities and rising student numbers across Europe (Hauschildt et al., 2024), educational pathways remain permeated by considerable social inequalities (Boliver, 2017; Ingram & Tarabini, 2018). The acquisition of educational qualifications, societal positions, and opportunities for participation continues to be largely determined by social class. It has long been acknowledged, particularly since the studies of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), that educational institutions do not passively reflect social inequality but actively contribute to its reproduction. Research across Europe has unravelled how educational institutions, at every stage, perpetuate class-based disparities through their structures and practices, revealing transitions to be particularly critical junctures (Tarabini, 2022). Transitions within educational trajectories become gateways of inequalities, as educational choices are not purely rational or autonomous decisions, but complex processes embedded in the interplay of structures, institutions, discourses, and agency (Stauber & Parreira do Amaral, 2015).

How transitions in the life course *evolve* is closely linked to social change (Elder, 1985). One of the most notable examples is the so-called "educational expansion", a key phenomenon of social change in education since the 1950s (Geißler, 2014). In this context, higher education systems worldwide have expanded substantially over the past half-century, resulting in a much larger group of learners entering higher education (Deem et al., 2022; Marginson, 2016). However, while the educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s increased participation, it has not significantly reduced the relative inequality of educational opportunities (Wakeling & Boliver, 2017). Rather than eliminating social inequalities, educational expansion has merely shifted them to a higher level, introducing new forms of distinction and selection that persist to this day. This "upward shift" in participation has broadened access to education, but it has not led to a socially equitable distribution of educational attainment (Collins, 2019).

The enduring link between social class and education appears relatively unaffected by transformations in higher education, a pattern also visible in Germany and Austria. While the expansion of higher education has improved access for all social classes, it has not eliminated the inequalities rooted in class differences (Geißler, 2014). Despite the claims of meritocratic societies, it is still not "ambition" or "achievement" that determines learners' outcomes, but rather social background, as large-scale standardised studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Internationale Grundschul-Lese-Untersuchung (IGLU) regularly show. Ultimately, social class remains a key determinant of who *benefits* from participation in education.

The persistence of these conditions raises the question of how those who transgress the symbolic boundaries of social class manage to do so – and how they experience these transitions. Drawing on a cultural concept of social class in the tradition of Bourdieu (1989), this study explores the relationship between class and education by examining the learning processes of so-called "first-generation students" (Beattie, 2018). Recent research

in higher education has provided valuable insights into their transition to university, highlighting the risk of social exclusion faced by those who are the first in their families to attend university (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2020; Romito, 2021). Although first-generation students constitute a heterogeneous group (O'Shea, 2019), they are often united by a class-based distance from the university, rooted in their lack of academic socialisation. Many have grown up in working-class families, with parents in non-academic or precarious occupations. As such, being the first in a family to enter university is not only a formal status but frequently signals disrupted educational trajectories and limited access to dominant cultural capital.

Numerous studies reveal the subtle forms of disadvantage these students encounter in their daily lives. Experiencing themselves as "outsiders" (Lanford, 2019) and struggling to navigate the academic world, its culture, and its unwritten codes, which are rooted in middle-class educational traditions (Reay, 2017), many first-generation students find the transition to university particularly challenging. Increasingly, research is also focusing on the diverse ways these students overcome such challenges, exploring the resources they mobilise in their educational path (O'Shea, 2019) and the transformative processes they undergo (Montes, 2024). Nevertheless, the part played by *learning* in these dynamics between reproduction and transformation has rarely been explored.

In their systematic literature review, Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020) found that most studies on first-generation students have conceptualised them primarily as learners through the lens of academic performance (Vuong et al., 2010) and the cultural influences on their learning (Jehangir et al., 2012). However, a limited body of literature places the biographical experiences of first-generation students at the centre of their studies (Castillo-Montoya, 2018; Merrill & Monteagudo, 2010). Learning, understood here from a relational perspective, moves beyond a performance-based understanding and is conceived as a social process. In contrast to psychological or cognitivist theories of learning, relational theories foreground the learner's social conditions and lived experiences. Learning thus emerges as an experiential, social, cultural, and biographical process (Brinkmann, 2017). Following this "interconnected and multi-directional approach to learning" (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020), which situates learning relationally within the context of life history rather than evaluating learning based on success or failure, I pose the following questions: What and how do first-generation students learn when transitioning to university? How are these processes of learning shaped, produced, and experienced? In what ways do they relate to social reproduction or transformation?

BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN AND ACROSS PRACTICES

Adopting a relational perspective on educational transitions requires focusing on the *interplay* of structures, actors, and institutional regulations involved in life course transitions (Walther et al., 2022). This viewpoint emphasises how pedagogical actions, learning processes, and social conditions are intertwined and constitute transitions to higher

education in the first place. Consequently, transitions are not merely "social facts"; they are continually shaped by social practices that evolve throughout the life course (Walther et al., 2022). Analysing transitions to higher education through a relational lens requires moving beyond the notion of transitions as isolated, rational decisions or individual steps toward university enrolment. Instead, it highlights the relational nature of educational choices at the nexus of biographical experiences, institutional practices, and habitual horizons (Dausien, 2014).

Transitions become the central arena for biographical learning. Subjects must anticipate moving from one status passage to another, re-assure themselves accordingly, and are simultaneously confronted with the fact that "managing" transitions lies beyond their control. According to Alheit (2022) and Dausien (2008), biographical learning is characterised by temporality, contextuality, and reflexivity: "Unlike most psychological or didactic learning theories, learning from a biographical perspective does not refer to 'small-scale' changing processes, but to time structures in which the formation of meaning is possible" (Alheit, 2022, p. 11). Biographical learning is a complex process of meaning-making that unfolds over time. For instance, the decision to become a university student generates various possible meanings in the course of one's biography, which are not fixed but continually formed and reshaped as experiences evolve.

However, biographical learning is not solely an internal process of an individual, such as purely cognitive activities; rather, it is embedded within the "social space" (Bourdieu, 1989). Learning processes are contextualised interactive practices that arise from the relationship between the individual and society: "They are concrete situations, living environments and structured historical-social spaces" (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). These complex contexts present a significant challenge for students entering higher education, particularly first-generation students. Beyond acquiring discipline-specific skills, they must also develop an understanding of the university's unwritten rules, such as the expected modes of expression, classroom participation norms, and how to appropriately manage relationships with peers and professors. Nevertheless, the contexts of biographical learning (e.g. spaces of higher education) are not static but dynamic (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). The global Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, has demonstrated how unexpected crises can disrupt historical and social structures, impacting learning in profound ways (Sharaievska et al., 2022). Moreover, biographical learning is linked to "the ability of individuals to put themselves in a reflective relationship to their own experience process, to perceive their own learning processes, to (critically) 'observe' them on a higher level, to form and transform experiences" (Alheit, 2022, p. 12). Through biographical learning processes, individuals relate to themselves and their environment in new ways and (re)interpret their past experiences. This not only produces what is called a "biography" from a social-constructivist perspective but also creates the basis for future experiences (Dausien, 2008). Biographical learning is thus socially structured and at the same time structures new experiences.

While this perspective on lifelong learning is compelling, it remains focused primarily on individual agency. Although it acknowledges the socio-historical context of learning,

this dimension is not fully developed theoretically. To better capture the social aspects of biographical learning, incorporating practical theoretical perspectives offers a valuable expansion. Following the ideas of Alkemeyer and Buschmann (2017), learning can be understood as the acquisition of "play-ability" – the ability to participate in practices, for example, practices in higher education. Play-ability is not a given for everyone; it depends on specific prerequisites and must be cultivated. Acquiring play-ability is especially challenging for learners with a cultural distance from the university and its norms, such as first-generation students. The concept of being "enabled to participate in practice" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 22) underscores that learners are produced as legitimate subjects through their participation in specific social practices: "people (trans)form themselves via their engagement as recognisable subjects and cultivate their play-ability by learning to comply with the normative standards unfolding in praxis" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 9). In light of these considerations, biographical learning in higher education presents itself as a bundle of subjectivating processes of becoming a student.

RESEARCHING EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To explore what and how first-generation students learn during their transition to university, I draw on data produced for my PhD project: "Doing Class Transitions: First-Generation Students in Austria and Germany" (2019–2025). This qualitative research project aimed to analyse transitions to higher education from the subjective perspective of first-generation students.

Study Design, Sampling, and Case Selection

The sample was initially constructed through purposive sampling, targeting students whose parents had not attended university. This approach ensured that all participants were first-generation students. At the same time, the sample was developed step by step in accordance with the principles of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), allowing for increasing heterogeneity in age, gender, social backgrounds, and educational trajectories as data collection progressed. These dimensions were not predetermined but rather emerged as relevant through ongoing analysis and were integrated through theoretical sampling. The initial call for participation was disseminated via social media, through colleagues' university courses, and in my own teaching.

The final sample included 24 study participants, aged between 19 and 50. They were enrolled in Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral programs in the humanities or social sciences (e.g., Sociology, Education Studies, Musicology, English Studies). In view of this focus on specific disciplines, the study acknowledges that some fields are culturally more distant from working-class backgrounds than others (Becher & Trowler, 2001).

Data production took place at four different universities in Austria and Germany. The inclusion of institutions from two countries with distinct local contexts was not intended

to enable systematic cross-national comparison. Rather, it aimed to capture the diversity of first-generation students' experiences and to highlight how their learning trajectories – despite varying institutional and national settings – reveal commonalities that point to structurally similar patterns across borders. The four selected universities together represent a broad spectrum of academic traditions, student populations, and regional dynamics within the German-speaking higher education landscape.

Biographical Methods and Analytical Procedures

Guided by the premise that exploring life histories can provide valuable insights into social conditions (Bron & Thunborg, 2017), 17 biographical-narrative interviews were conducted, and 7 autobiographical written accounts were produced. While biographical interviews have been widely recognised as a sustainable method for understanding student experiences in higher education (West et al., 2014), written narratives offer another valuable means of gaining access to students' lived experiences. Both methods focus on the generation of narratives and are oriented towards the relevance of the study participants.

The interviews began with the prompt, "Please share your life story". As the interviewer, I intervened as little as possible; further themes (such as starting university, memories of peer or teacher interactions) were not prompted by a fixed questionnaire but followed what the participants had already shared. The duration of the interviews varied from one to three hours and they were transcribed verbatim.

The participants who chose to write about their educational experiences or contribute diary-like entries were given the flexibility to structure their writing according to their preferences. The autobiographical written accounts ranged from 5 to 20 pages.

In line with the sampling strategy and the logic of data collection, the analysis followed the principles of grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), drawing on empirically grounded coding procedures to identify emerging themes and develop conceptual categories.

To ensure compliance with ethical standards, all institutions and places are anonymised, and all participating students as well as mentioned third parties are assigned pseudonyms in the presentation of findings.

SITES OF EXPLORATION: EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN AUSTRIA AND GERMANY

In Germany and Austria, after completing primary school at around age 10, students are typically tracked into different secondary school types based on academic performance and teacher recommendations: the general secondary school (*Mittelschule*) and the academic track (*Gymnasium*). While attending a *Gymnasium* leads to a school-leaving certificate qualifying for university (*Abitur* in Germany or *Matura* in Austria), *Mittelschulen* offer a mix of vocational and academic orientations. As previous research has shown, this

early tracking contributes significantly to the reproduction of social inequality (Becker & Lauterbach, 2008).

Higher education in Austria and Germany is characterised by the absence of tuition fees at public universities. Despite the low-threshold financial access compared to other countries, first-generation students remain underrepresented at universities in both countries (Hauschildt et al., 2024), suggesting that factors beyond cost – such as social and cultural dynamics – continue to shape university participation and influence who pursues and stays in higher education (Lessky et al., 2021; Müller & Klein, 2023). These disparities indicate that financial accessibility alone does not guarantee educational equity and call for a more nuanced exploration of educational transitions in relation to social justice.

TWO CASE STUDIES: MARIE AND CHIARA'S UNLIKELY PATHS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The in-depth analysis presented in this article draws on two case studies; however, the findings were discussed and validated in dialogue with the broader sample. In line with the methodological approach, the selection of these two cases was guided by theoretical considerations (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They represent maximally contrasting cases within the overall sample, enabling a nuanced exploration of the range and variation within first-generation students' biographical learning. The comparison of their experiences reveals structural dimensions and points to generalisable patterns in the learning trajectories of first-generation students. Before turning to the analysis of their narratives, the educational pathways of both protagonists will be briefly outlined.

Marie Schmidt

Marie Schmidt grew up with her younger sister in a medium-sized town in southern Germany. At the time of the interview, she was 26 years old and nearing the completion of her bachelor's degree in education studies at an Austrian university. Her mother completed an apprenticeship and now works as a foreign language correspondent. During her childhood, Marie had limited contact with her late father, whose life was marked by frequent job changes, long periods of unemployment, and alcoholism.

As the first in her family to attend university, Marie's transition to higher education was challenging. Her educational journey was burdened not only with feelings of insecurity and being overwhelmed, but also with a lack of familial support. Rather than receiving encouragement, Marie found herself having to defend her career choices against her mother's expectations of what a "right" or "appropriate" life course should look like (such as focusing on finding a husband).

Marie attended a *Gymnasium* with a focus on social sciences, placing her on the academic track toward university. Despite this formal positioning, she experienced a mixture of feeling overwhelmed yet also of being in the right place. Her enthusiasm for the education and psychology courses grew, as both the subject matter and the teachers' recognition

conveyed a sense of belonging and academic fit. This ultimately led to her decision to pursue the *Abitur*, a qualification granted at the end of secondary education comparable to A-levels or a Baccalaureate Diploma, with the intention of studying something related to education. After a longer stay abroad doing voluntary work, she initially applied for social work programs in Germany but reconsidered her choice when she wasn't accepted. Instead, she moved to an Austrian city to live with a relative, partly as a way to distance herself from her hometown ("I just didn't want to go back home").

Upon arriving in Austria, Marie explored various degree programmes and universities that aligned with her interest in education. Studying at a teacher training college was not an option for her, both because she had no interest in becoming a teacher and because she was deterred by the entrance exams. Her choice of study is thus shaped by a mix of social, local, and institutional conditions as well as specific hopes tied to the idea of studying, for example, a longing for self-determination.

Chiara Russo

Chiara Russo is 22 years old and in the 7th semester of her bachelor's degree in educational studies at a university in a large German city. She was born in Germany to Italian parents, who had migrated as young adults for economic reasons (*Gastarbeiter*). Both parents completed their secondary education in Germany and later pursued apprenticeships. Chiara's mother, who initially worked as a waitress, is now a fitness trainer, while her father is a hotel manager. Her parents separated when she was young, leaving her relationship with her father tenuous – he is largely absent from her narrative. Chiara was primarily raised by her mother, alongside her brother, who is 11 years older.

Chiara's educational biography is marked by constant negotiation between her mother's expectations, institutional pressures, and her own aspirations. These competing forces become especially clear in a critical moment in the German education system: after primary school, Chiara was recommended for a non-academic track, but her mother insisted she follow an academic track and attend a *Gymnasium*. Once enrolled, Chiara was left with the burden of navigating the path chosen for her, a challenge she describes as "fighting her way through". The pressure to succeed weighs heavily on her. Chiara perceives herself as responsible for securing her family's social mobility, making her educational success more of a collective mission than a personal journey.

After graduating from high school, Chiara initially opted against university, despite her mother's objections. She completed a voluntary social year in a nursery to gain direction, followed by an internship in a daycare centre. After a few months, however, she decided to take a degree in education instead of the vocational training to become a nursery schoolteacher she had originally planned. She justifies her choice of study logically: since both an apprenticeship and a bachelor's degree take three years, it made more sense to invest that time in a degree, which would offer broader career options beyond becoming an early childhood educator.

In both Maria's and Chiara's cases, the transition to university is far from linear. Statistically, neither was likely to pursue higher education, and each faced distinct challenges. The two narratives reflect different trajectories of social mobility: Marie exemplifies a form of upward mobility that diverges from her family's generational path, as she must push back against her mother's expectation to enter the workforce and start a family immediately after school. In contrast, Chiara's educational journey builds on her family's prior social advancements, with university attendance being an anticipated step. Although both students navigate expectations imposed by others, the nature of these expectations differs fundamentally. Their different pathways to university reveal how becoming a student involves navigating classed norms and inherited expectations.

RESULTS: PRACTICES OF BECOMING

Marie's and Chiara's processes of becoming a student are not only embedded in a generational context[1] but can also be decoded as a specific social practice. The analysis points to biographical learning being situated in the following concrete practices of becoming a student: (1) practices of peer support, (2) practices of engagement, and (3) practices of pedagogical accompaniment.

Practices of Peer Support

The process of becoming a student is not an isolated journey but one deeply embedded in networks of relationships and carried out collectively. Biographical learning unfolds within these social practices of transitioning to university *together*. Particularly peers – fellow students – who are also navigating access to higher education play a key role in these practices. The transition to university also marks the entry into the collective subject of a first-year student. Through Chiara's biographical narrative, we can reconstruct how peer interactions contribute to her becoming a student, highlighting the collective nature of biographical learning during the transition to university. When I asked Chiara in the interview about her first day at university, she responded with a memory of the orientation week for first-year students:

> I met other people that evening, and then we went on to another place. We had never spoken before, but all of a sudden, we connected and formed friendships right away. I associate that with my first days, my first day, and my first week, yes. (Chiara)

Chiara extends the timeframe from her first day at university to encompass the entire first week, which symbolises the beginning of her academic journey. For her, what holds subjective significance is not merely the specific courses or initial content of her studies, but rather

1 While a detailed discussion of these findings lies beyond the scope of this article, they are explored further in Petrik (2025). The results highlight the contradictory negotiations of educational, career, and study choices within generational relations of class, migration, and gender.

the intense development of social relationships during this critical transition. This social web unfolds, at least peripherally, within the framework of the orientation week, an event designed to facilitate entry into the university community. By building social networks, she establishes connections that provide a sense of security and stability during her transition to university. These emerging relationships play a crucial role in her biographical learning, as participating in collective peer practices, such as going out for drinks, enables her to become a student. The specific constellations of these social arrangements can be explored through Chiara's response when asked about other memories of the start of her studies:

> The campus in the [district] is so huge, and at first, it was all about figuring out how everything worked. Where are the buildings? Getting to know the people. Also, the lectures! I still remember making plans with others for lectures, like, 'Where are you sitting?' 'I'm here.' And 'Oh, I'm running a bit late, could you save me a seat?' – things like that. (Chiara)

Building relationships with fellow students emerges as the primary mode of organisation during Chiara's transition into university life. This supportive environment not only helps her integrate into a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008) but also enables her to become a student. Chiara learns by adopting the perspectives of fellow students, as they collectively navigate the spheres of higher education, identifying room to manoeuvre, and both adapt and bend the rules of the field. Her biographical learning process is situated within the interplay of socialising acts; it is "located in interactions of praxis that bring novices to possess collectively shared knowledge that is created in these very same interactions" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 12). By participating in these practices of becoming a collective subject, students mutually exchange "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1966) about university and therefore teach each other how to be a student. As first-year students, they participate in one another's becoming, forming a shared social practice of biographical learning.

Marie's narrative shifts the focus from institutional settings to everyday contexts that shape the transition to university. Peer collectives beyond campus play a key role, as seen in her student flatshare, where one flatmate also studies education. "The flat" becomes a meaningful space in her process of becoming:

> On the one hand, it was a kind of safety net, like a real anchor for me. On the other hand, I also felt a bit insecure, like ... that they were somehow ahead of me. That they were just better at certain things than I was, especially academic things or university-related stuff. They were much quicker with things, things were much clearer to them – like how to approach assignments, how to handle coursework ... and they also helped me. (Marie)

Over time, Marie's roommates become a biographically meaningful "anchor", offering emotional support and a sense of belonging. Yet her narrative also reveals the ambivalence of peer

relations: while her flatmates help her navigate university life, she often feels academically inferior, relying on their guidance to manage assignments they seem to handle with ease.

For first-generation students, the sense of community developed in collective practices acts as a vital system of care. Their habitual distance from academia heightens their reliance on relationship-building practices. Consequently, those who have ascended the educational ladder must work together to cultivate and leverage social capital, compensating for any lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

Practices of Engagement

Practices of engagement – defined as taking action within the context of studying – emerge as a second meaningful social practice in which biographical learning takes place. The biographical phase of studying opens up new avenues for exploration, manifesting in specific study practices.

When asked about her early memories of studying during the interview, Marie provided a detailed and evaluative account of her various impressions of the academic world. She views the university as a space that offers her both security and structure while simultaneously fostering opportunities for self-efficacy and experimentation. In this context, she frequently talked about her "interpretation group", referring to a specific practice of research commonly employed in qualitative social research, which emphasises cooperative engagement with empirical material in an ideally egalitarian setting in order to analyse data. Under the banner of the "interpretation group", Marie meets regularly with her peers to discuss interviews or observation protocols they conducted for their student projects. The starting point for the group was a course in which students worked in small groups to collect and analyse data, but as time went by, the group became independent. For her, the interpretation group is the "coolest" and "most exciting" part of studying. Marie's narrative reveals that it is not a specific subject or method that fuels her enthusiasm for her studies, but rather a particular form of collective action:

> So, in terms of the activity, where I said: 'Okay, THIS is research work,' it was our data interpretation group. Like: 'Oh yeah, that's how it can be.' Research can also be like this. You're not always just ... sitting alone in front of the laptop feeling overwhelmed [laughs], but it can also be REALLY exciting, and it can also be really ... playful and light ... that feeling of ease. Discovering something new, exchanging ideas about things. It can be something social, not just lonely research. [...] That's what it's like to really work as a researcher. And that is something 'official,' so to speak. […] People latch onto what you say and develop it further, like 'Ah okay, what you're saying now triggers a thought for me' or 'Now I see it.' (Marie)

The "real research" conducted within the interpretation group contrasts sharply with the abstract and lonesome experiences of academic work Marie had encountered thus far,

which shaped a particular image of research. This preconception is now challenged and refined through the experience within the interpretation group. Her use of the term "official" highlights that the interpretation group is not just a casual circle of friends – it carries an institutional connection that is crucial to its significance as a "niche" at university. Their research practice is "real" because Marie actively participates; she does not simply observe others conducting research but engages in it herself, moving beyond mere "practicing" to "doing". The shift from *learning about* research to *actively engaging* in it marks a transition from passivity to activity, illustrating a process of biographical learning where new forms of meaning are reflexively created over time. Two key aspects are central to this learning process: its pleasurable nature and its collective dimension. Both elements enable Marie to derive personal meaning and experience empowerment through her engagement in these practices.

The interpretation group can be understood as a situated, affective practice, where Marie gains recognition and can experience herself as part of a collective. Her interpretations, analyses, and academic contributions are acknowledged and valued, fostering a sense of belonging to the university. For Marie, this group becomes a biographical space of possibilities, where she develops "play-ability" and progresses in her process of becoming a student. Through her "engagement as a recognizable subject", she not only learns the rules of the field "unfolding in praxis" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 9), but these experiences also shape her future learning within the university context:

> That was the moment when I thought: 'Okay, maybe it wouldn't be so far-fetched to go into research.' Before that, I was like: 'Yeah, no.' It just felt too lonely for me, and I didn't think I had enough interaction with people. I didn't see myself as someone who analyses a lot and … I just didn't think I was a researcher [laughter]. It sounds silly, but that's how I felt. So, that was a really cool experience for me. (Marie)

In the interpretation group, Marie can experiment and cautiously envision new possibilities for her future. Her learning process seems tied to a specific social context: her biographical self-construction shifts from someone who felt disconnected from research to someone who now sees it as not "so far-fetched to go into research". This shift is deeply rooted in the practice of engagement, which forms and transforms both Marie's past and future experiences. Through this process, she gains confidence in her abilities, reflects on her experiences, and redefines her relationship with academic work. The interpretation group provides a space where her self-perception evolves, emphasising that biographical learning is a socially embedded process shaped by collective practices of becoming active. Trying her hand at being a researcher takes on special significance in light of Marie's social background. As a first-generation student, she does not have a script to follow – no "blueprint" for an academic trajectory. She must carve out her own path, developing a biographical "template" as she navigates this unfamiliar terrain.

Chiara's narrative shows that practices of engagement can also unfold beyond academic skill acquisition. She reflects on the end of her first semester, offering a glimpse behind the scenes of everyday student life:

> Most of the time we were busier with each other than actually listening to the lecture – but that's also something I remember quite fondly. And I remember at the end of the semester, I planned a weekend trip with a fellow student I'd met on the very first day – we'd become instant friends. We actually booked it during a lecture – train, Airbnb, everything within 45 minutes. It felt a bit rebellious to do that – but also very cool. So, lectures in the first semester were definitely an exciting experience. (Chiara)

Chiara's narrative illustrates how becoming active as a student can also unfold through informal practices of engagement: learning how to play along with – and occasionally bend – the unspoken rules of the university setting. Her story of planning a spontaneous trip during a lecture with a peer she bonded with on the very first day underscores how learning to inhabit the social world of the university is not limited to academic skill acquisition. It also involves creating moments of belonging, which serve as subtle yet meaningful practices of becoming. However, the scene also opens the door to *dis*engagement and highlights the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory experiences of first-generation students.

Practices of Pedagogical Accompaniment

Practices of pedagogical accompaniment, such as support or mentoring, constitute another site for biographical learning. Students not only learn by incorporating the perspectives of established members of the field – such as professors, teachers, or instructors – but also learn by engaging in social practices of recognition. These interactions serve as an "act of self-assurance" (Alheit, 2022, p. 11), shaping their paths as legitimate members of the field. For instance, Marie's biographical learning is anchored in the mentoring provided by her lecturer "Daniel". By supervising her research report, he plays a crucial role in shaping her process of becoming a student. Unlike the stereotypical professor image she had before, he doesn't present himself with that traditional, formal "professor" attitude, as she describes it in the interview. Instead, he comes across as open and approachable. In the interview, Marie recounts:

> I found it really overwhelming, but I talked to Daniel, the seminar leader, about it a lot. He gave me a lot of feedback and took away many of my insecurities. Somehow, I got the feeling like … OK, he's an insider; he knows how these processes work. Talking to him gave me a bit of orientation. (Marie)

Similar to the collective practices with peers, the social interactions with Daniel ease Marie's feelings of insecurity. Not only does she receive explicit feedback and acquires propositional academic knowledge about research, but by "talking to him", she learns

practical knowledge as well, for example, how to navigate university in a more secure way. In the shared social practice of working on her research report, she gradually adopts the perspective of her lecturer and supervisor. In a process of biographical learning, she "corrects" her perspective on herself and her academic work through his eyes and starts "to abide by the shared conventions of the practice" (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017, p. 14), for example, by learning that uncertainty, challenge, and even failure are not uncommon when doing research. More than just formal teaching, such practices of pedagogical accompaniment[2] describe an ongoing, relational process in which senior members of the field (e.g., professors, but also experienced peers) lay the foundation for appropriating both academic content and the unwritten rules of the university, thus contributing to becoming a student. Marie's account of her experiences with Daniel also give insight into how her perception of research undergoes transformation in these interactions:

> From my conversations with him, when he shared his experiences with research, it changed my understanding. I realised, 'Oh, no, it doesn't have to be done this way or that way.' And somehow … it changed my image a bit of what it means to do research. (Marie)

Marie's preconceived notion of what research "should" look like is challenged through her interactions and guidance from a knowledgeable authority at the university. Similar to her experience in the interpretation group, this process exemplifies learning that extends beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge. In a reflexive way, Marie relates differently to the world around her, reshaping not only her understanding of research but also her role within it.

Daniel, who the student familiarly refers to by his first name, acts as a mentor who legitimises her belonging within the academic field, affirming Marie's status as a member of the university. His attitude seems relevant in this context, because he deviates from the typical professorial habitus, sharing his own vulnerabilities and insecurities, which disrupts the *illusio* of the academic field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By appearing to be an unconventional university teacher and allowing her to creatively combine methods and theories, Daniel may offer Marie alternative ways of relating to the university, outside the traditional norms of the institutional habitus. This is particularly crucial for Marie, whose habitus was not shaped in a formally educated, middle-class milieu.

Another dimension of pedagogical accompaniment emerges in Chiara Russo's account. Although she speaks appreciatively of inspiring lecturers, her narrative contains no concrete example of direct interaction with teaching staff. Even when explicitly prompted by the interviewer, she is unable to recall a single such encounter:

2 The term "accompaniment" (rather than "mentoring") has been chosen to emphasise that not all shared social practices with senior members of the field can be considered supportive. Nonetheless, these interactions still significantly shape learning processes (see, e.g., Petrik, in press).

Interviewer: Were there moments when you actually spoke with any of them?

Chiara: During the course or outside of it?

Interviewer: Either – outside as well.

Chiara: Mh, nothing specific comes to mind right now.

This absence is revealing. It highlights how many first-generation students may never find themselves in a position to establish pedagogical relationships with lecturers or other academic staff – not only due to their own habitual dispositions, but also as a result of the structural conditions of the mass university, which seldom fosters or permits such interactions.

CONCLUSIONS: LEARNING AS BECOMING

The analysis shows that learning in transitions is situated in a network of social practices, shaping relations of belonging and opening the space for habitual transformations. These include practices of peer support, engagement, and pedagogical accompaniment. But *what* exactly do first-generation students learn when transitioning to university?

First-generation students primarily learn the "feel for" and "rules of the game" (Lareau et al., 2016) within the academic context. They acquire what Alkemeyer & Buschmann (2017) call "play-ability" (p. 121), which they cannot inherit from their family but rather develop by creating new experiences within collective social practices shared with peers, pedagogues, or other actors within the university context. This learning extends beyond academic skills or research techniques to include norms, images, and conventions specific to university life. While the practices identified in this study are not exclusive to first-generation students, they take on particular significance in their biographical learning processes. The recognition they receive is more precarious, and the risks of failure more present, making socially mediated practices of authorisation and legitimation within the academic field crucial for navigating their transitions and sustaining their "becoming" within it.

As students embody the ability to "play along", they undergo biographical transformations that also release empowering forces. By recognising the interconnectedness of biographical learning and academic content (e.g., research practices or theoretical concepts), these findings align with Ives and Castillo-Montoya's (2020) conclusion that such integration can contribute to "self-growth" and "community development" (p. 168). The potential for these transformations within learning also relates to the higher education context: its "niches" (such as self-organised research groups or peer events) allow for reflexive spaces and new constructions of meanings to be developed.

Notably, it is less the influence of individual pedagogues than the space and time the university offers that enables new experiences, shifting roles, and the building of communities and relationships. The availability of "niches" both within and beyond the institution proves vital in this regard. Silva et al. (2024) reached similar conclusions on the relevance

of extra-class spaces and interactive peer-learning in their study of a youth and adult education course in Brazil, underscoring the broader relevance of these findings across different contexts.

But *how* do first-generation students learn in transitions to higher education? Through shared practices of recognition at university – whether with peers, pedagogues, or through engagement with theories and research practices – they come to experience themselves in relation to the academic field and gradually as legitimate participants in higher education (Lave & Wenger, 1991/2008). Therefore, first-generation students learn by becoming part of the university field in ways that involve being seen, acknowledged, and recognised (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017). When transitioning to university, all students are impelled to position themselves within the academic field. For first-generation students, however, this process involves overcoming additional barriers, as their place is neither assumed nor inherited but marked by struggle and uncertainty (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, 2017). Biographical learning carries the potential of transforming doubts, insecurities, and a sense of alienation rooted in one's social class background (Phillips et al., 2020; Romito, 2020).

Nevertheless, there are aspects that have not been fully addressed in this study. First, the paper focused on experiences within higher education contexts. It would be worthwhile, in future studies, to focus more on biographical learning in everyday life contexts, such as political organising, communities or places of upbringing. Secondly, the focus on transformation, as presented in the theoretical framework of this study, carries the risk of overlooking struggle and neglecting mechanisms of exclusion. Lastly, the article draws on the fine-grained analysis of only two selected cases, emphasising depth over representativeness.

Despite these limitations, the biographical perspective adopted in this study has proven fruitful for understanding the complexity of learning processes in educational transitions. Biographical approaches allow us to trace how students actively make sense of their trajectories – often in tension with inherited dispositions or structural constraints – and thus offer valuable insights into the lived realities of first-generation students. By attending to the relational and situated nature of learning, such methodological perspectives help move beyond simplified narratives of success, failure, or adaptation that still dominate much of the existing research. The latter often conceptualises learning through a cognitive or achievement-oriented lens (Jehangir et al., 2012; Vuong et al., 2010), focusing on individual performance or quantifiable notions of development.

This study, by contrast, suggests an alternative perspective: the empowerment described by first-generation students is not tied to conventional notions of study success, but rather emerges through biographical and reflexive learning processes that are relational, situated, and grounded in everyday practices.

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Nicola Ingram, Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Jessie Abrahams, Laura Bentley, Harriet Bradley, Tony Hoare, Vanda Papafilippou, and Richard Waller

THE DEGREE GENERATION: THE MAKING OF UNEQUAL GRADUATE LIVES

Bristol University Press, 2023

The Degree Generation: The Making of Unequal Graduate Lives is an exceptional book that aims to comprehend the complexities involved in the transition from university to the labour market in the UK. It offers an interesting case for analysis, as graduates' opportunities have declined in the context of an expanded higher education system. Many face underemployment, and financial returns from higher education are generally diminishing. The authors argue that this occurs in a context in which higher education has been promoted as a driver of social mobility. However, as elsewhere, graduates' expectations are not being met, creating broken dreams rather than the expected upward mobility. To carry out their purpose, the scholars examine how different forms of capital are at stake when it comes to the graduate labour market, showing how the resources individuals accumulate over time are converted (or not) into *symbolic capital*.

The study draws on strong research methodology involving over 800 hours of recorded interviews with working-class and middle-class young people. The qualitative approach was based on in-depth semi-structured biographical interviews with 56 participants, who took part in Phase 1 (2010–2013) and Phase 2 (2014–2017) of the Paired Peers project. The research spanned seven years, encompassing the time they spent at university and the first four years after graduation, during which time the respondents were interviewed ten times in total. This research strategy, based on follow-up interviews, made it possible to collect exceptionally rich and detailed data about their experiences, perceptions, appreciations, and emotions at different stages of both their student and graduate trajectories. The interviewees came from a variety of areas across the UK and were diverse in terms of class, "race"/ethnicity and gender. Furthermore, they were recruited from two different universities in the city of Bristol, the largest urban centre in the south-west of England. One institution is considered a traditional university and is a member of the prestigious and elite Russell Group, while the other is a modern "post-92" university and a former polytechnic. All these methodological decisions made it possible for the researchers to address the multiple experiences and categorical intersections – which in itself is a significant challenge – involved in the transition from university to work.

Theoretically, this study relies heavily on Pierre Bourdieu's framework. While the authors apply the conceptual backbone of Bourdieu's toolkit – namely, habitus, capital, and field – they are also able to develop some of the French scholar's ideas that are less frequently explored. These include notions such as *capital conversion*, *symbolic capital*, *symbolic recognition*, and *social magic*. In this sense, the book serves as a fantastic illustration of how to utilise a wide range of Bourdieu's conceptual tools to deepen our understanding of a highly fragmented and changing social reality. I consider the use of the notion of *symbolic recognition* particularly relevant. Often overlooked, *recognition*, as I understand it, is at the root of seminal concepts such as capital, habitus, and field. To put it briefly, individuals are recognised, and they recognise others according to the properties (i.e. capital) they hold, while these properties – differently valued – place them in a position within specific fields. Furthermore, the particular location that individuals take up contributes to shaping their dispositions, which they have internalised and embodied over time. Individuals, therefore, are recognised and recognise others in a blending of capital, habitus, and field.

The book draws on the idea of symbolic recognition to highlight the fact that, in the context of degree inflation, rather than the accumulation of capital, what becomes more important is the construction of value, i.e. how graduates are able to make their own capital valuable or recognised in the field of the graduate labour market. Here is where capital conversion and the "act of social magic" (Ingram & Allen, 2019, p. 729) or *social alchemy* appear fundamental.

Furthermore, to make sense of the complex reality it addresses, *The Degree Generation* not only draws on Bourdieu's ideas, but also includes other interesting and relevant concepts. This is the case, for example, with Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism", which allows us to grasp how the graduates' optimistic expectations and hopes can be frustrated. Another example is Tholen's (2017) idea of "symbolic closure", which is applied to explore how various forms of cultural legitimation and exclusion operate in a given field, creating hierarchies and boundaries between who belongs and who does not. These conceptual tools, I think, are incorporated exceptionally well by the authors within Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

After the book's first two sections, which present the main contextual, theoretical, and methodological aspects of the study, the volume is divided into six analytical chapters, plus a conclusion. Each chapter deals with particular issues that affect the experiences, decisions, and trajectories of graduates. Based on the accounts of the meticulously selected participants, the book takes into consideration a great range of interconnected topics: the kinds of habitus, capacities, and capital graduates need to "fit in" on the London graduate labour market (Chapter 3); the place of geographical mobility, and the meaning of "home" and spatial belonging in graduates' expectations and decisions (Chapter 4); the working of the classed, gendered, and male-dominated field of engineering (Chapter 5); the role of social class and "hegemonic masculinity" in the finance industry (Chapter 6); the influence of cruel optimism and broken dreams in graduates' lives (Chapter 7); and the role attributed to luck in graduates' pathways and its connection to privilege (Chapter 8). In

times when inequality is perhaps what best defines our societies (Savage, 2021), all the experiences that emerge in the accounts of Adele, Marcus, Zoe, Leo, to name but a few of the participants, bring to light the multifaceted way in which social inequalities are reproduced and how symbolic struggles occur in the transition from university to the graduate labour market.

This book has many strengths. It not only applies different concepts to the phenomenon under examination, but also delves into the experiences of young people, considering meaningful aspects that shape their identities and trajectories. Indeed, the scholars succeed in showing how to disentangle the intersections between class, gender, and "race"/ethnicity when graduates from distinct institutions make the transition from university to the labour market. They do so while exploring other interesting aspects of this process and proposing new angles of analysis to consider more specific issues. For instance, the study suggests the existence of a "London habitus", a system of dispositions attuned to the "elite metropolitan vortex of London". Graduates who embody the "London habitus" possess particular types of capital that are consistent with cosmopolitan and global acumen. On this basis, the authors examine how graduates of the same Russell Group university but from different social classes and of different genders have unequal experiences and outputs when seeking opportunities in the city of London. Another point I would like to highlight here is the analysis of how individuals perceive luck and its role in their trajectories. According to Sauder (2020), sociology has been almost silent about luck. *The Degree Generation* has an entire chapter dedicated to this issue. It thus provides a rare and interesting example of a sociological analysis of luck and its influence on individuals' narratives and outcomes. The authors' main argument in this respect is that luck, or serendipity, is just another manifestation of privilege linked to the possession of different forms of capital.

Since the book's main purpose is to show how inequalities – whether in terms of class, gender or "race"/ethnicity – are produced and reproduced among university graduates, it does not delve further into the stories of those who (at least appear to) break through the structural barriers and manage to overcome the effects of symbolic closure. For future research, this line of inquiry may bring new insights into the complex way in which inequalities are legitimised, as well as how graduates are constructed and construct themselves as valuable individuals.

Overall, I strongly recommend this book to those interested in understanding how new generations of graduates and young people construct their trajectories, experience transitions, and envision their future. For researchers, it illustrates how to apply an intersectional perspective to grasp a fragmented and changing social reality. Furthermore, I think that the narratives and accounts found in this volume represent not only the experiences of young people in the UK but are also the lived realities of many worldwide. For this reason, it raises new questions for researchers from around the world.

Carlos Palma-Amestoy

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Barbara Stauber, Andreas Walther, and Richard A. Settersten Jr. (Eds.)

DOING TRANSITIONS IN THE LIFE COURSE: PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

Springer, 2022

The volume *Doing Transitions in the Life Course: Processes and Practices*, edited by Barbara Stauber, Andreas Walther, and Richard A. Settersten Jr. (2022), offers a novel praxeological perspective on life course transitions, emphasizing the active constitution of transitions through social practices. This approach challenges traditional linear models of the life course, aligning with contemporary understandings of flexible and non-linear life trajectories. The anthology is particularly pertinent to adult education and learning research, as it underscores the interplay between formal and informal learning processes during life transitions. At a time when flexible life courses and transitions are becoming increasingly important, this volume makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of the challenges and opportunities associated with these changes.

CONTEXTUALISATION WITHIN ADULT EDUCATION AND LIFE COURSE RESEARCH

This anthology provides insight into a research project funded by the German Research Foundation and its international discourse from a reflexive and practice-theoretical perspective. In the context of German adult education, the concept of "transitions" has been pivotal in understanding how individuals navigate changes, such as returning to education or shifting careers. The "doing transitions" framework posited in this volume resonates with the German discourse on "biographical learning", which emphasizes the individual's active role in constructing their educational pathways through life events (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Internationally, this perspective aligns with life course theory's focus on the interdependence of trajectories and the significance of human agency in shaping life paths (Gecas, 2003). In adult education, it is increasingly recognised that transitions include not only formal but also informal learning processes. The edited volume ties in with the central discourses in life course and transition research that deal with the question of how individuals learn and adapt in different phases of life. The contributions reflect the findings that transitions are often associated with uncertainties and challenges but also offer opportunities for personal growth and development. This perspective also aligns with contemporary discussions in relation to life course sociology (Shanahan et al., 2016).

OVERVIEW

The book is organised into three main sections – Institutions and Organisations; Times and Normativities; and Materialities – each containing chapters that delve into various aspects of how transitions are enacted and experienced.

In the introductory chapter, the editors present the "doing transitions" framework and describe the heuristics of the associated research approach. They argue for a shift away from viewing transitions as linear stages and towards understanding them as dynamic processes shaped by interactions between individuals and societal structures. This is complemented by Ted Schatzki's contribution, which discusses the concept of life trajectories from a practice theory perspective, emphasizing how life paths are formed through bundles of social practices and the interrelations among them.

The section *Institutions and Organisations* examines how institutional frameworks influence life transitions. Andreas Walther's chapter reconstructs welfare states as transition regimes, highlighting the role of policy in shaping youth transitions to work. Similarly, Heidi Hirschfeld and Bianca Lenz investigate how young individuals engage with and shape institutional support mechanisms during their transition from school to the workforce, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between institutional structures and individual agency. Heinz Hermann Krüger's qualitative longitudinal study then delves into young adults' educational careers, revealing the complexities of transitioning to higher education or employment. Next, Eva Heinrich, Nils Klevermann and Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha critically examine how organisations act as collective agents in shaping life course transitions, analysing their role in structuring opportunities and constraints. The final chapter in this section is Kathleen Riach's examination of the embodied experiences of ageing in the workplace, discussing how ageing is negotiated and experienced as a transition within organisational contexts.

The section *Times and Normativities* explores the temporal dimensions and societal norms associated with transitions. Nuria Sanchez Mira and Laura Bernardi discuss "relative time" in life course research, examining how temporal perceptions influence individuals' experiences of transitions. Noreen Eberle, Jessica Lütgens, Andrea Pohling, Tina Spies, and Petra Bauer investigate how individuals articulate their biographies during transitions, focusing on the narratives constructed to make sense of life changes. Anna Wanka and Julia Prescher reflect on the ordinariness and extraordinariness of life course transitions, challenging normative assumptions about age-appropriate milestones and typical life paths. Building on the question of normative expectations in transitions, Tobias Boll discusses how the concepts of normality and deviance are constructed and negotiated during life course transitions, examining the implications for individuals' self-perceptions and societal inclusion.

Finally, *Materialities and Transitions* focuses on the tangible aspects of transitions. Deborah Nägler and Anna Wanka explore the role of materiality – including bodies, spaces, and objects – in shaping life course transitions, emphasizing the interconnectedness

of physical and social dimensions. This section also includes Janne Krumbügel's analysis of gendered and medicalized discourses in pregnancy advice literature, illustrating how material artefacts and bodies are implicated in the doing of transitions. Moreover, Tabea Freutel-Funke and Helena Müller discuss the importance of spatial sensitivity in understanding transitions during childhood and later life, highlighting how physical environments influence transitional experiences.

In the concluding chapter, the editors emphasize the importance of relationality in understanding transitions, arguing that transitions are co-constructed through interactions with others and embedded within broader social contexts.

DISCUSSION

This volume collectively provides a nuanced understanding of life course transitions, emphasizing their dynamic, socially constructed, and multifaceted nature. The editors are advocating for a comprehensive approach that considers the interplay of individual, institutional, and societal factors. The book underscores the increasing flexibility and de-standardisation of life courses in modern societies while illustrating how transitions remain shaped by structural inequalities and institutional frameworks. This dual perspective is crucial for both theoretical advancements and practical applications in adult education and lifelong learning. The doing transitions heuristics offer the potential to examine and reflect structural determinants that shape transitions (e.g. economic constraints or categories of inequality). It thus provides a critically reflective approach to research, the expansion of which would be a great asset.

From the perspective of adult education and learning research, the book's insights into the role of formal and informal learning processes during transitions are particularly valuable. By foregrounding the agency of learners while acknowledging systemic constraints, the volume bridges micro- and macro-level analyses. Adult and professional learning processes and developments are not (necessarily) linear. This raises the question of whether the heuristic of doing transitions is suitable for learning and professionalisation processes that extend over longer periods of time. Here, the perspective of transitional constellations (Wanka, 2019) could be helpful in linking complex, far-reaching bundles and related transition phenomena and viewing them in a larger context. At the same time, the question arises as to when it still makes sense to speak of a transition or if the concept of transition is overly diluted and thus loses its meaning.

Overall, this anthology enriches scientific discourse by advancing a practice theory based, relational understanding of transitions, bridging theoretical and empirical perspectives. It is recommended reading for anyone who is looking for innovative insights into how transitions are constituted and negotiated in contemporary societies.

Lena Mazurkiewicz

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