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The Life We Live and the Life We Experience: Introducing the Epistemological Difference between "Lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) and "Life Conditions" (Lebenslage)

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Introduction

The lifeworld term and the programmatic demand for lifeworld-orientation are well established within the entire field of modern day social work. The subject of this article is the introduction of a lifeworld-concept, that is based on an epistemological distinction between "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) and "life conditions" (Lebenslage). In this context, the term "lifeworld" and its usage will be critically reconsidered and then contrasted to the term "life conditions". By taking a closer look at the differentiation between the life we live (i.e. the live as it happens), the life we experience and the life which we communicate to others, it becomes possible to demonstrate the specific borders and requirements of perception and communication, which have to be handled responsibly in research, teaching and practical work in order to meet professional, legal and normative standards.

1 The lifeworld term: Its phenomenological roots and its social scientific reception.

The lifeworld term in the German field of social work is as widespread as the programmatic demand to align to it. This development has its origin in the increasing orientation towards the "everyday life"[1] of addressees, which began in the 1970s. In the 1980s[2] it was Thiersch who introduced the concept of a regular "everyday turning point" (*Alltagswende*) into social pedagogy. This "everyday turning point", which especially based on critical and phenomenological reflections on everyday life, led to an increase in the importance of the lifeworld[3] term (Thiersch, 1986; 1992). At least since the 8th German youth report (BMJFFG, 1990) the so called "lifeworld orientation" has become a central paradigm in German youth welfare.

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[1] E.g. with recourse to Schütz 1974, Schütz & Luckmann 1991, prominent Thiersch 1978.

[2] E.g. Lenzen 1980; Concerning the inflationary usage of the lifeworld term within the social sciences even back then see Bergmann 1981; Buchholz 1984.

[3] In the former social work discourse references are made mainly to two traditional lines of the lifeworld term usage. At first to the lifeworld term rooted in Husserl's phenomenology. Husserl uses the lifeworld term as early as 1917 to describe the world of pure experience, which emerges from the natural act of humans examining their environment (Husserl, 1962; 2008). Schütz refines the term within the framework of his social phenomenology and emphasizes, that a person's lifeworld always has been the result of its occupation with the social world (Schütz & Luckmann, 1991). Schütz starts with picking up the lifeworld term, but then changes to the term "common sense world" (*Alltagswelt*). This term then is relevant to Thiersch, he himself being a prominent representative of a lifeworld orientated social work. He uses the terms lifeworld and common sense world explicitly synonymously (Grundwald & Thiersch, 2011, p. 854). A different comprehension of lifeworld is unfolded by Habermas, who opposes the lifeworld term to the system term within his "theory of communicative action" (Habermas, 1981) and asks in terms of social theory, to which extent the system causes a "lifeworld colonization". This understanding of lifeworld is used e.g. by Böhnisch in his discussion about deviant behaviour (2010, p. 34 ff.; Böhnisch & Funk, 2013, p. 73 ff.).

The increased usage of the lifeworld term is however accompanied by a terminological randomness, which eventually leads to criticism about the imprecise use of the term in the discourses of social work at the end of the 1990s (Fuchs & Halfar, 2000). Thiersch himself states finally, that the term is used without proper contact to the concept. The cause for the more or less random usage of the term is not only seen in an insufficient accuracy in the practical implementation, but also in the terminological determination itself, which is not precise enough. Fuchs and Halfar attribute this lack of clarity and accuracy to the fact that the lifeworld term was picked up without considering its phenomenological and linguistic context (see Fuchs & Halfar, 2000, p. 56). Although this reproach cannot be generalized, the disregard of the term's phenomenological roots becomes obvious at latest, when it stands for nothing more than a person's external life conditions. In this case, a person's lifeworld seems to be ascertainable just by dealing with his or her life conditions. This is contradictory to the term's phenomenological roots (Husserl, 2008; Schütz & Luckmann, 1991, Vol. 1). Even though the lifeworld term is not precisely defined, neither by Husserl nor by Schütz (see Felten, 2000, p. 75; Bergmann, 1981, p. 50ff.; Welter, 1986, p. 77, 170), the relevance of the subjective perspective can be identified as a crucial characteristic. Coming from a phenomenological perspective, lifeworld is regarded as the result of a subjective appropriation of the world. This process is based on previous experiences as well as on the usage of individual mental and physical characteristics. Accordingly, the phenomenological alignment to the lifeworld implies much more than a simple orientation towards a person's life situation. Speaking phenomenologically, not only differences in the life conditions have to be considered, but also differences in the individual's perceptual conditions (Hitzler, 1999, S. 232)[4].

2   Lifeworld and life conditions – a helpful distinction

As long as there is an awareness of the phenomenological origin of the lifeworld category, its subjective character is in focus. Nevertheless, the lifeworld term is accompanied by a danger of confusion. On the one hand it emphasizes the subjective character of the lifeworld category; on the other hand it refers to the basic requirements of subjective perception itself. Concerning this double reference, the lifeworld term is – apart from differing main focuses – very similar to the "life conditions" term. The life conditions term, which was borrowed from Karl Marx, was introduced to the social scientific discourse mainly by Otto Neurath (1931) and Gerhard Weisser (1956).

Weisser defined a person's life conditions as the „play-space" in life, in which humans can fulfill their interests and give their life meaning. In German: "… Spielraum, den einem Menschen die äußeren Umstände nachhaltig für die Befriedigung der Interessen bieten, die den Sinn seines Lebens bestimmen" (Weisser 1956, p. 986).

In this respect, both lifeworld term and life conditions term refer not only to the individual external circumstances of life, but at the same time refer to the subjective perception of these circumstances. However, while the life conditions term focuses on the frame conditions, the lifeworld term, on the contrary, emphasizes the subjective conditions of perception. Accordingly, the life conditions describe a person's material and immaterial conditions, whereas the lifeworld describes the subjective perspective pertaining to these conditions. It becomes problematic as soon as this very different frame of focus is no longer kept in mind

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[4] At the same time Husserl and Schütz can and should not be labeled as constructivists; to their ways to transcendental intersubjectivity (Husserl) and intersubjective understanding (Schütz) cf. Kraus 2013, p. 145ff.

and, in extreme cases, both terms are then used synonymously. At the latest, when the lifeworld term is used for nothing more than to describe the external conditions, the level of terminological indefiniteness is high enough to prevent any sort of successful communication.

In order to deal with this dilemma, I found it necessary to reformulate the terms lifeworld and life conditions in a systemic-constructivist manner in the end of the 1990s (Kraus, 2006; 2013, p. 151 ff.). This reformulation was not intended to be a phenomenological or social scientific reconstruction, but was geared towards fitting these terms into a theoretical structure, which is based on epistemological constructivism (Kraus, 2010; 2013).

3 Epistemological fundamentals of a constructivist lifeworld and life conditions concept

The thoughts outlined here are based on an epistemological constructivism which picks up on the scepticism regarding the quality of human perception (see Glasersfeld, 1996, p. 56 ff.). This scepticism has been mentioned in occidental philosophy time and time again. The possibility of obtaining certainty about the actual condition of an "object" is questioned, because human cognition always only has access to the results of different perceptional processes, but not to their actual causes.

Immanuel Kant prominently unfolds this thought, when he states that we can't experience reality directly, but only within the scope of our abilities to perceive (Kant 1798, 1800/1968). That's why, in general, it can not be verified, if the objects, as they appear to us (see l.c. BA 26) (i.e. the results of our reception process), correspond with the objects as they actually are (see l.c. BA 26) (i.e. the source of our reception process).

In order to achieve this, we would have to be able to bypass our standards of reception by comparing perceptive processes' results with their underlying perceptional sources without using the affected instruments of perception again.

This prerequisite has already been questioned by Pre-Socratics (Glasersfeld, 1996, p. 158). Within the constructivist discourse cognition is described as an operationally closed process, which emphasizes that cognition does not have direct access to the world itself, but only to one's own state of consciousness.[5] Thus, the construction of reality may be a subjective accomplishment, but not a random one. This fact can be made clear by considering thoughts about viability and structural coupling.

Although it appears that a randomness of cognitive constructivist processes seems to be propagated, especially among the popular scientific type of constructivist discourses,[6] this can be considered as an overstatement of basic constructivist conceptions. The reason for this being that it can be disproved even with radical constructivist models. Ernst von Glasersfeld's 'viability' concept (Glasersfeld, 1978, p. 65ff.) points out that constructions of reality do not have to conform to reality in order to be successful. However they are also not allowed to conflict with it. With Maturana's model about structural coupling it is possible to explain the reciprocal influence between informationally closed systems and their potential to form "consensual areas" (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 196 f.; Maturana, 2000, p. 115 ff.).

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[5] For a discussion on perception and cognition see Kraus 2013, p. 32-52.

[6] This would imply ontological solipsism, which denies the existence of an actual reality. This can be controverted by the fact that even in the radical constructivist discourse it's not the existence of a reality, which is doubted, but its perceptibility (see l.c., p. 26 ff.)

From my own perspective, the conclusion is important that human structural development is subject to a categorical double bond: On the one hand, a person's lifeworld is his or her own subjective construction. On the other hand, this construction is not arbitrary. In spite of all subjectivity – because of the human's structural coupling to its environment, this construction is influenced and limited by the framework of this very environment (Kraus, 2013, p. 65ff.).

4   Lifeworld, life conditions and their constructivist reformulation

In the context of the constructivist reformulation the terms lifeworld and life conditions were contrasted with one another and concretised regarding their respective key aspects (Kraus, 2006; 2013, p. 153). The lifeworld term should now solely represent the subjective perspective, the life conditions term solely the external circumstances and conditions of life. In this way the difference between the terms lifeworld and life conditions correlates with the distinction between the German terms "Wirklichkeit" (subjective reality) and "Realität" (ontological reality) (Roth, 1997, p. 316; Stadler & Kruse, 1986, p. 75 ff., Kraus, 2000, S. 31f., 2013, S. 20). Accordingly, the term subjective reality is aligned with the term lifeworld, whereas the term ontological reality is aligned with the term life conditions. It is true for both terms, that one is the subjective construct and it is subject to the conditions of the other term. In other words: lifeworld is just as much a subjective construction of a person, as is also subjective reality. And these subjective constructions are created under the influence and the limitations of the circumstances of life conditions.

Life conditions and ontological reality set the limiting and promoting circumstances for lifeworld and subjective reality. Due to the fact that cognition is operationally closed, lifeworld remains an inaccessible subjective category – even though it has to be constructed under the influence of life conditions. For further concretion, we can say that a person's material and immaterial resources are encompassed with the term life conditions. Thus, they do not only include the external conditions of material resources such as living and financial resources, but also the immaterial resources such as available social contacts and networks. In addition, life conditions also include the organism's resources itself, such as the physical constitution. The perception of all these conditions however, makes up a person's lifeworld.

At this point, the relevance for social work praxis becomes clear: Dealing solely with a person's life conditions (the orientation towards his circumstances of life) does not enable access to his or her lifeworld. Even if we could completely capture a person's social and material resources, we still would not have grasped his or her lifeworld. From an epistemological, constructivist manner, lifeworld and life conditions are defined as follows (Kraus, 2010; 2013, p. 153):

> Life conditions mean a person's material and immaterial circumstances of life. Lifeworld means a person's subjective construction of reality, which he or she forms under the condition of his or her life circumstances.

> German:

> „Als Lebenslage gelten die materiellen und immateriellen Lebensbedingungen eines Menschen. Als Lebenswelt gilt das subjektive Wirklichkeitskonstrukt eines Menschen, welches dieser unter den Bedingungen seiner Lebenslage bildet." (Kraus 2013, S. 153)

With the double bond of human structural development in mind, it can be stated that a person's lifeworld results from subjective construction processes. However, it has to withstand within the context of the given social and material conditions and not in a vacuum.

The lifeworld resulting from a subjective construction process can neither be determined by life conditions nor can it be independent from them.[7]

5   The consequences: Introducing the life we live, the life we experience and the life which we communicate to others

In due consideration of the previous arguments, the required lifeworld orientation seems to be at least a paradoxical demand when discussing a strictly subjective, non-accessible category. From a constructivist point of view, life conditions appear to be more accessible through observation than lifeworld. Irrespective of the fact, that life conditions can also not be captured "objectively", the question arises whether dealing with life conditions can be a lifeworld oriented undertaking at all. From a constructivist perspective there are good reasons for doing this:

Life conditions as subject of comprehending processes

Humans do not construct their lifeworld in a vacuum, but within the context of the circumstances of their life conditions. For this reason it makes sense to take a look at life conditions and their promoting and limiting influences on the constructions of lifeworld.

Life conditions as subject of help and control

In addition, it is exactly these life conditions on which social work professionals can exert influence, e.g. through traditional networking and taking a closer look at social relationships or simply by providing access to material resources.

The idea of lifeworld orientation unfolded at this point, does not at all ask to ignore a person's social environment, his or her material and social bonds. On the contrary: Although it is important to consider life conditions, it is crucial to take into account that a person's life conditions are not identical with a person's lifeworld. That is why it is not sufficient to only observe under *which* circumstances a person is living, but it is of special interest to examine *how* this person *experiences* these circumstances. This necessary and possible approach to this subjective perspective cannot be successful by only taking life conditions into account. The apperception and appraisal of his or her life conditions further requires professional communication with the subject.

The distinction between the phenomenon areas body, psyche and narration (Retzer, 2008, p. 818) and accordingly between the life we live (i.e. the life as it happens), the life we experience and the life which we communicate to others, helps us to reflect practical consequences resulting from the introduced lifeworld-concept (Kraus, 2013, p. 153 f.).

The life we communicate to others
Everything being accessible through communication – verbal and non-verbal communication
(language, behaviour, facial expression)

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[7] And yet, life conditions aren't immutable either. Lifeworld-based prospects can provide impulses for the (re)arrangement of life conditions. For a constructivist model of power, help and control see Kraus 2014.

The life we experience
All mental and psychical states and processes (consciousness, cognition, psyche)

The life we live (i.e. the life as it happens)
All organic and physiological circumstances, states and processes ("biological life")

The most relevant lifeworld category is the life we experience. However, it is also the hardest to access. The life we live , in comparison, is easier to access. This is the case, when, for example, professionals participate at least partially in the life of their addressees within the context of youth welfare services. But even then they only have access to a) excerpts of the life conditions and not to the lifeworld of the addresses. Furthermore, professionals b) do not access objectively, but filter through their own abilities of perception and interpretation. Information about a person's life conditions does not provide any secured insight into this person's lifeworld. The way an addressee perceives his or her body, social interrelations, housing, in short his or her life conditions, cannot be known by a professional. For this reason, it is of importance to complement the perception of life conditions in a communicative way and to focus on the life we communicate. Nevertheless, there are the same restrictions when dealing with the life we communicate as when dealing with the life we live. First, only the parts made accessible by the addressees are really accessible and second, professionals can only comprehend within the framework of their abilities of interpretation. Communication does not provide conveyance of information from the cognitive area of person A to the cognitive area of person B. The messages produced by the communication parties permit nothing more than a reciprocal speculation about the underlying communication base. Semantic comprehension[8] eventually fails due to the inner-outer dichotomy of human cognition. The "inner states" of the communication partner are just as hard to check as the life experienced by the counterpart can be captured ultimately. The reference to communication draws the attention to a strategy, which does not guarantee access to the addressees' lifeworld, but makes it more likely. Especially a form of communication based on the understanding that comprehension might fail will raise the probability of approaching the counterpart's experience. In spite of cognition operating self referentially and ergo being informationally closed, communication is not at all unsuccessful as a matter of principle. In the same way as all constructing processes, the terms of viability and structural coupling are valid for communication as well. There are possibilities of reciprocal connections and alternating orientations accruing from these terms (Kraus, 2013, p. 67-118).

Conclusion

To put it in a nutshell: If professionals want to orient themselves towards their addressee's lifeworld, they can approach it through professional communication and by professionally dealing with the life conditions of the addressees. Understanding that a person's lifeworld is an individual construction of reality, a subjective perspective on its life conditions, will increase the probability of a successful convergence. The demand for an orientation towards the lifeworld cannot imply that it is actually possible to capture a person's lifeworld. In fact,

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[8] Semantic comprehension in this case means actually capturing the inner actions and experiences of the communication partner.

professionals should be aware of the category's subjective character. The orientation towards the lifeworld then aims at an orientation towards this subjectivity.

The fundamental borders of perception and communication, which come into effect when trying to access another lifeworld, can indeed not be bypassed. But it is exactly this awareness of borders, which increases the chance of an orientation towards the lifeworld. First of all, because the own parts of recognition and comprehension are reflected critically. Secondly, because the addressee's subjective view on the world is of major interest.

The inherent limitations of a perceptive and communicative approach to the lifeworld of an individual can indeed not be overcome, but it is precisely this awareness of these limitations, which increases the chance of a successful orientation towards the lifeworld of addressees. This can happen when two very important criteria are fulfilled: First of all, when social work professionals critically reflect their own part in recognition and comprehension processes. And secondly, when the addressee's subjective view of the world becomes the major focus of professional interest.

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