

# **Mentality and Intergenerationality as Framework Conditions of ‘Lifelong Learning’. Conceptional consequences of a multi-generational study in East Germany**

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**Abstract:** The contribution by Peter Alheit is based on a comprehensive qualitative multi-generational study carried out in East Germany. Its target is the reconstruction of the individual processing of dramatic historico-political breaks in 20<sup>th</sup> century German history and the identification of varying intra-familial patterns of tradition. The result appears to be provocative: across the social environments analysed, by far the larger part of the sample shows social orientations and attitudes to remain practically unchanged between the generation of grandparents and that of grandchildren. Alheit speaks of an ‘intergenerational resistance to modernisation’ which was characteristic of the East German society. The author uses this finding as the basis for an interesting broadening of the theoretical concept of ‘lifelong learning’: it seems that educational processes throughout a life-span can only be adequately understood if underlying mental structures and intergenerational practices of tradition are systematically taken into account.

**Keywords:** East Germany, mentality, intergenerationality, biographicity, resistance to modernisation, lifelong learning

## **Introduction**

The label of ‘lifelong learning’ refers primarily to a period of time; to a quantitative duration or scope, namely the time span of an individual human life. This may at first appear to be trivial, since temporality (‘learning takes time’) and the aspect of a temporal structure (‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’) always play a central role in learning and educational processes. This impression of triviality, however, disappears as soon as more detail is to be provided as to *how* this aspect of temporality is to be conceptualised.

By no means does the temporality of learning processes have to be thought of in terms of the time span of a life-story. Most (psychological) theories of learning, for example, discuss learning in terms of – more or less complex – changes in behaviour in the time span of the *situation* of learning

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or action. Another less common perspective to be found in pedagogical contexts considers learning processes in terms of social units (institutions, classes, nations, societies) in historical dimensions – i.e. the history of mentalities.

The perspective of a ‘life story’ therefore takes into consideration a specific temporal level of analysis which is relative to other dimensions of time but nonetheless evidences a relatively independent logic of construction (cf. Schuller, 1997). Here it is no longer solely a matter of the quantitative measure of the ‘life-span’<sup>2</sup>, but rather it considers the qualitative aspect of lifelong processes and their socio-cultural structure. This aspect is usually known as the theoretical concept of ‘*biography*’ (cf. Alheit & Dausien, 2000b, 2002; Dausien, 2001).

In particular, however, the biography’s tangible feature stretches beyond the time frame of the life-span: crucial co-actors of the biographical learning process (such as parents, grandparents, children or grandchildren) have a temporally displaced life-span that is delayed in the case of the former or advanced in the latter. Biographical learning is therefore woven into *intergenerational learning processes*. Furthermore, biographies show *background structures* of long duration, such as cultural mentalities, social patterns of behaviour or ethnic particularities. These kinds of analytical perspectives usually play no part in the conceptualisation of ‘lifelong learning’. In the current debate on Lifelong Learning (cf. also Alheit & Dausien, 2002), the two usual modes of analysis have the ‘classic’ profile of apparently independent external and internal perspectives: firstly, an *education-politically* motivated approach of modified conditions pertaining to the employment and education society that has consequences for the organisation of individual and collective learning (cf. representatively Brödel, 1998; Gerlach, 2000; Field, 2000); and secondly, a rather *pedagogically* orientated approach for the conditions and opportunities of individual-biographical learning that is especially interested in the informal dimensions of learning (cf. representatively Kade & Seitter, 1996; Alheit & Dausien, 1996, 2000b, 2002).

The following contribution takes a ‘transverse’ viewpoint to the aforementioned approaches. It constitutes the combination of the external and internal perspectives. The empirical data to which it refers are *life stories*.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, educational processes of the life-span remain entirely of

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<sup>2</sup> The life-span is in fact based on biology (due to the basic subordination to the ‘biological clock’), but not thereby determined in its concrete social form and individual experience. It is not an ‘unquestionable fact of nature’, but rather a social phenomenon that takes on the ‘form of the biography’ in specific historical and cultural contexts (Nassehi 1994), thereby possibly reaching beyond the linear timespan of a life.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically: 86 carefully collected biographical-narrative interviews (duration: 1.5-4 hours) that were evaluated according to the standards of reconstructive social research (cf.

interest. However, the methodological setting is chosen such that in each case the biographies of one member of the grand parents' generation and one of the grandchildren's generation of *a family* are analysed as a 'case-framework'. In this way the theoretical sampling takes into consideration all relevant social milieus of the investigated region.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it becomes evident that 'lifelong learning' may follow patterns based on familiar processes of tradition and be favoured by social framework conditions. 'Lifelong learning' is therefore able to be construed as the 'conflict situation' of existing resources and individual characteristics: as a fabric of 'mentality', 'intergenerationality' and 'biographicity'<sup>5</sup> (see Fig. 1). *Mentality* may be defined as a (collective) framework of long duration that establishes a specific connection with the existing historical and social realities while also 'rubbing off' on biographical learning processes. *Intergenerationality* describes the concrete transfer of frames of reference in the process of familiar interaction. And *biographicity* denotes the individual 'processing logic' of lifelong experiences and learning impulses that, as a matter of course, include attitudinal influences and intergenerational traditions.

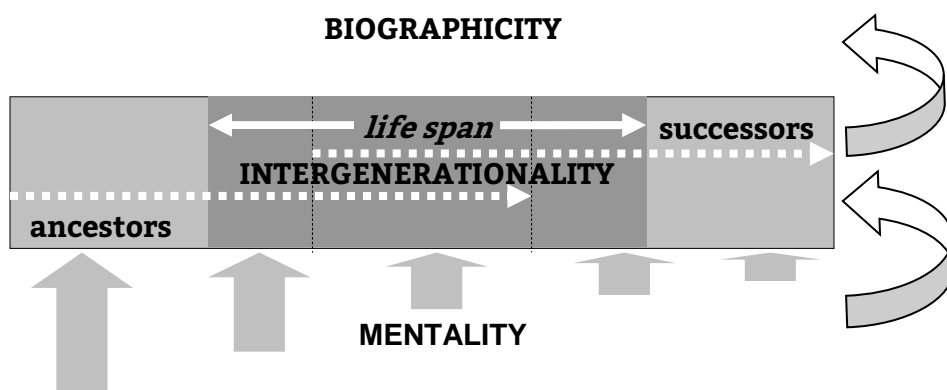


Fig. 1 Lifelong learning as a layer of learning influences

It is the intention of the following presentation of results to make this 'fabric' more transparent. Evidently only the 'broad' findings can be

details in Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke, 2004). The research project that is referred to here is an international comparative study undertaken between 1999 and 2002 of the development of mentalities in the German-Polish-Czech border region (Euro-region 'Neisse'). It is a study funded by the Volkswagen Foundation as part of the priority programme 'The Foreign and the Familiar'.

<sup>4</sup> The research region comprises a part of the aforementioned international comparative study. In East Germany this concerned Upper Lusatia and – as an industrial exclave – Eisenhüttenstadt (cf. Alheit, Szlachcicowa & Zich, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of 'biographicity' (cf. Alheit, 1993b, 1997; Alheit & Dausien, 2000a) describes the inner generative logic of a biographical processing of experiences (see in more detail the conclusion of this article).

presented within the given framework. Differentiated case analyses would exceed the limitations of a journal article. However, even this compact selection of observations is interesting in relation to the presented East German material as it points to extraordinarily important aspects for an 'expanded' *Lifelong-Learning-Study*. The following will firstly outline the historical and social framework conditions of the area of research – or its 'mentality aspect' (2). Secondly, a detailed presentation is made of the key findings relating to the 'intergenerational constellation' (3). Finally, in a brief summary (4), a first attempt is made to draw careful theoretical and methodological conclusions for the concept of 'lifelong learning'.

### **The consequences of a historical 'pattern of mentality'**

'Lifelong learning' has *contexts*. And these are not just the education policy prerequisites or the institutional or physical conditions that frame learning. As the following study will attempt to show, there are also underlying historical structures that are 'traditionalised' in a specific way – these are mentality patterns that warrant particular attention within 20th century German history. In his *Studies on Germans* (1989), Norbert Elias clearly demonstrated that we can only understand the peculiarities of the 'German mentality' if we search for its roots deep within Central European history. Since the Middle Ages, German history (in contrast to that of competing European superpowers such as Great Britain and France), is characterised by defeat. To be more precise: It is the trauma of the defeat of the *Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation* (long before the advent of European modernity), that resulted in the disintegration of Germany into unimportant, autocratic mini-states where, however, the ideal of former greatness is never forgotten. This peculiar discord between ideal and reality shaped the development of the 19th and 20th centuries. This discord even constitutes a defining factor in the development of Nazism and its barbaric excesses. It also contributes to the understanding of this socio-cultural configuration that epitomises Germany after its defeat in World War II and following the demise of fascism.<sup>6</sup>

The brief heyday of the unified German nation; that of the 'Second' German Empire between 1871 and 1918, has had no lasting effect as there was no contribution to the modernisation or civilisation of the national identity. In contrast to the examples set by modern European nations such as Britain, France and even the Netherlands, Germany continued in the autocratic traditions of the previous centuries. Only in Germany was the rise

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, Elias' analyses offers comprehensive and extraordinarily persuasive demonstration material in his *Studies on Germans* (*Studien über die Deutschen*, cf. Elias, 1989, especially. pp. 159 ff.; pp. 391 ff.).

of the middle classes or the development of the working class *not* involved in the unification of the nation. Unification came about because a militarist Prussian feudal class invoked long desired claims for European hegemony. At the same time, internally, it practiced the same 'enlightened absolutism' that had characterised not only the rise of the Prussian state in the 18th century, but also the suppression of the bourgeois revolution in the 19th century.

By no means does a 'republican consciousness' develop – at least in the mass of the German population – following the power-political downfall of this feudal class in 1918. Instead, a desire develops for a quasi-autocratic leadership. This is inflamed by the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. This collective longing is encouraged by the old elites and satisfied by the National Socialists in the form of Adolf Hitler. The desired '*Third Reich*' intentionally aspires to the unrealistic ideals of the greatness of a German nation that have already been the focus of previous generations. And it collapses unresolved at the end of the war in 1945 just as it did after the First World War.

Norbert Elias has suggested a kind of qualitative 'measuring device' for the altogether uneven European development. This also appears to be exceptionally informative in the analysis of Germany after 1945, i.e. in the observation of the '*formality-informality-span*' of a society (Elias, 1989, p. 41). "It deals with the [...] simultaneity of formal and informal behaviour managements of a society, or, in other words, with the '*synchronic*' slope from formality to informality" (ibid.).

Elias illustrates the parallels of formality and informality in a delightful historical example. In 1778 Mozart's father wrote a request for promotion to his sovereign that is not only structured extremely formally, but that also evidences a level of subservience without equal ('*to my most gracious sovereign and Lord of Lords, your most humblest and most obedient servant, Leopold Mozart*'). Conversely it is commonly known that in particular the Mozart family – and especially Wolfgang Amadeus – took advantage of informal freedoms within private contexts that are difficult to grasp in the present day. "The society of Mozart's era was characterised by the parallel of a certain formality in the dealings between superior and subordinated individuals (where a ceremonial harshness by far exceeded any of today's corresponding formalities), and an informality within one's own group (that also went far beyond the norms of what is socially acceptable within such a group today)" (ibid.).

This pattern of a broad formality-informality-span is characteristic of pre-modern societies. In the process of modernity, this span has been reduced drastically and, in particular in North American and European societies, the 20th century has been epitomised by a remarkable *process of*

*informalisation*. This is characterised by increased prosperity and income growth in all levels of society, a change in the balance of power between the 'established' individuals and the 'outsiders', the decline in specific 'power-differentials' (between men and women, between parents and children, between colonial powers and their (former) colonies, between the rulers and the ruled), but also by the insecurity that the levelling of conventional hierarchies entails (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 33-38).

It is symptomatic that German society undergoes this development with significant delay and repeated setbacks when compared to Britain. As late as 1918 does the impending defeat in a devastating war lead to the abdication of the autocratic elite that had over centuries codified massive social injustices, all the while having stretched the formality-informality-span anachronistically wide in comparison to its neighbour states. However, the alteration in the balance of power and the sudden influence of the labour movement after 1918 by no means lead to democratisation or civilisation. Rather, they lead to a collective insecurity that manifests itself in extreme party-political and ideological polarisation. Pragmatic bargaining processes between the opposing factions have no tradition. Therefore, the split of the labour movement into social democratic and communist factions is as evidently logical and 'German' as is the fatal liaison of the Prussian military aristocracy and sections of industry interested in war with the National Socialists.

The staged 'transfer of power' to the fascists 1933 indeed now appears as a 'regression' in the process of civilisation of German society. The gap between formality and informality is not reduced, rather it is again increased, even if the popular strategies of the National Socialists utilise modernisation-effects. Indeed, the 'German Nation' is *formed* anew in this way. Columns of soldiers and military formations are characteristic of public life. The 'Gleichschaltung' (the forced political conformity) of organisations and associations suppresses conflicts of interest, while racial ideology and renewed militarism create rigid mechanisms for exclusion and inclusion. That which is permitted by the National Socialists and how informally it is dealt with (whether through suppressed indifference or subtle sympathy of the masses; whether through distinctive separation along with concealed conformity of the elites; whether through 'inner exile'; or through conservative or leftist resistance of a courageous few), it all ends up significantly widening the formality-informality-span (cf. Elias, 1989, p. 42). The Germans are incapable of freeing themselves from a fatal power elite. In the end it is only the Allied victory that creates conditions for a new beginning.

In spite of the ongoing occupation, the western occupation zones become subject to *informalisation and civilisation processes* through economic normalisation due to reconstruction and through gradual democratisation of public life. This noticeably changes the political culture especially from

the 1960s (cf. in detail Alheit, 1994, p. 200 ff). Conversely, in the Soviet Zone we observe a rather contrary development. While society is *reformed*, it is under other ideological premises. The economic development is initially regressive due to the process of dismantling of industry by the occupier, and a democratisation of public life is permanently inhibited (cf. in detail Alheit, 1993a, 1994, Alheit et al., 1999, Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke, 2004). Rather than narrowing, the formality-informality-span appears to widen. A kind of 'neo-socialist feudal-state' emerges where the inner dynamic is more reminiscent of pre-modern societies than of the modern western democracies. An overregulated public façade and a social 'subspace' based on Marxist-Leninist ideology continue to exist in which established norms prevail and development hardly appears possible (cf. Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke, 2004). The Soviet Occupation Zone and the subsequent GDR is, from its outset, a 'niche society' that has to deal with the contradiction of a repressively organised public sector and a generally deregulated range of informality. In this historically developed and very 'German' constellation, a conservative mindset persists that tends to be resistant to change and modernisation.

These apparently 'non-pedagogical' observations are of interest in such an analysis of lifelong learning processes because they indicate that learning processes relating to a life-span can only then be adequately understood when they are viewed from a broader timescale. Moreover, these learning processes can only be reconstructed when they try to explain the potential effects of inertia as well as structurally dependent intergenerational learning-'traditions'.

### **'Intergenerational resistance to modernisation' as a learning effect across generations**

A methodical setting seems especially apt for an analysis that seeks to compare the life stories of two generations where each experienced their formative life experiences in historically significant periods of change, be it the '*war generation*' with the experience of the new beginning after 1945 (i.e. the cohort born between 1925 and 1935); or the '*reunification generation*' with the formative events after 1989 (i.e. the cohort born between 1970 and 1980). Three types of intergenerational constellations could be identified surprisingly without problems in an interpretative comparison of the structure and of the central themes of biographical recollections of grandparents and grandchildren<sup>7</sup>:

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<sup>7</sup> This is also true with slight variations for all three national samples. The relationship between the typologies do differ significantly in the Polish and Czech examples from the Ger-

- a constellation to be denoted as '*persistence type*'
- a constellation that may be labelled as '*modernisation type*', and
- a constellation that may plausibly be characterised with the moniker '*break type*'

*'Persistence type'*. This type reveals a surprising constellation wherein it becomes apparent that the characteristic way in which the social world is dealt with is 'inherited' by the grandchildren's generation just as it was by the grandparents. This is not limited to the basic '*habitus*'. Persistence in this case constitutes the repetition of practical behaviour patterns in everyday and biographical perspectives on an *equal* level. It manifests itself in professional traditions; in certain familiar rituals; in the specific understanding of one's role; in a political orientation; in a preference for religious beliefs; or in the concept of a distinctive culture. The grandparent-grandchild constellation points to a remarkable stability in intergenerational traditions. For example, it is taken for granted that the grandson feels as closely bound to the principle of religious brotherhood as does the grandfather. Furthermore, they share a concept of family, political preferences and unpretentious vocational aspirations. The granddaughter willingly assumes her grandfather's ideas of small business enterprise and accepts that she will take over the bakery her grandfather established. A Sorbian grandson actively take onboard his grandmother's 'family message' to maintain the Sorbian language and tradition.<sup>8</sup>

*'Modernisation type'*. This type shows considerable variation between the generation of the grandparents and that of the grandchildren. The grandfather was a carpenter, the grandson is an engineer; the grandmother trained as a nurse, the granddaughter is doing a degree in sociology; the grandmother was an active communist teacher, the granddaughter is an artist who, while still politically interested, reflects with some distance upon her grandparents' engagement in the SED.<sup>9</sup> As a rule, a social rise has taken place in this constellation of modernisation. This does not mean that basic '*habitus*' has significantly changed from grandparent to grandchild, since both generation may be socially engaged, interested in career advancement or artistically committed. However, their position in the 'social space' (cf. Bourdieu, 1987) has noticeably altered. The manner in which the social world is dealt with has been 'modernised'.

*'Break' type*. This intergenerational constellation generally points towards a social decline and to an insinuated or actual break in '*habitus*'.

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man findings. This is a phenomenon that can only be briefly mentioned here (in footnote 15) in this article (cf. Alheit, Szlachcicowa & Zich, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> These and further examples of cases are documented in detail in Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke (2004).

<sup>9</sup> These cases are also examined in depth in Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke (2004).



Here, for example, the grandparents' generation had a certain social prestige that is not at all of interest to the grandchildren's generation, who instead prefer a contemporary 'bohemian' existence. The grandmother exhibits a strong work ethic, the granddaughter rejects any dedication to work and 'just hangs around'; the grandfather was an SED functionary, the grandson has fallen into the extreme right-wing scene (a not uncommon constellation in the examined sample<sup>10</sup>). It appears typical in this manifestation for familiar bonds to gradually fall away and for emotional relationships between generations to wane.

The crucial aspect is, therefore, how the three constellations are distributed within the examined sample. The following aims to demonstrate the consequences of this distribution.

### *On the Dominance of the 'Persistence type'*

If a similar survey of generations were to be undertaken in the 'old' Federal Republic (of West Germany), as was the case in Upper Lusatia, then the majority of the tandem interviews would probably fall into the 'modernisation type' as the social structure of the western Federal Republic has dramatically changed since World War II. Furthermore, the interesting observation to be made is not that the qualitative relationships of the major classes (upper, middle and lower) shift noticeably. Instead, surprising processes of differentiation are able to be similarly observed in each of the classes resulting in the creation of new social environments (cf. representatively Vester et al., 1993, 1995; Alheit, 1994). What these environments have in common is that they do not alter the pre-existing relationships of equality. Rather, they set in motion a horizontal movement within Bourdieu's concept of 'social space' that could be described as an 'opening' in the direction of the cultural pole of the social space (cf. Alheit, 1994, p. 237ff.). This opening has mainly to do with educational progress that now extends even to conventionally uneducated social groups. The overall development leads to a modernisation of the social space that is preceded by individual modernisation processes.

In examining the material gathered in East Germany, a virtually contradictory set of findings is evidenced. Without wanting to give the impression of suggesting quantitative results, significantly more than half of the tandem interviews must be quite clearly placed in the 'persistence type'. Approximately one tenth fall in the in the 'modernisation type' and another tenth in the 'break type', or another tenth are not able to be clearly assigned to a type (see fig. 2).

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<sup>10</sup> These and further cases are also documented in Alheit, Bast-Haider & Drauschke (2004).

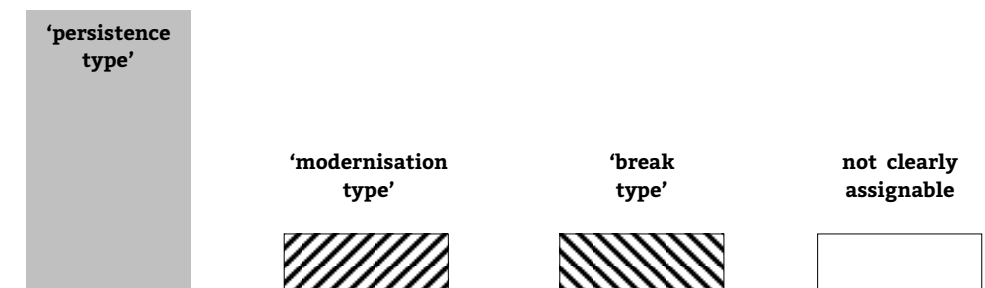


Fig. 2 Rough distribution profile within the qualitative sample

What does this phenomenon mean? In the first instance it is important to consider that the 'persistence type' has no social profile. It is distributed over all researched settings. The observation that a surprising persistence of 'habitus' exists between the grandparents' and the grandchildren's generation in East Germany is true for all levels of society, as far as the sample is concerned. If, as the evidence suggests, the phenomenon is not only common but moreover a mass phenomenon, then this implies that the social space has not been 'modernised' as in the West Germany, but rather that it has had (and still has) its inner dynamic blocked. This can be termed as intergenerational resistance to modernisation and it is the 'core aspect' of these discoveries.

This sociological labelling must without doubt be explored further in order to make clear which practical dimensions it touches. 'Resistance' is undoubtedly a certain activity that binds social energies. There must be reasons why large population groups of modern societies equally resist in changing their social situation and pass that 'message' on to the following generation. The resistance constellation is plausible in social elites. In order to stabilise their position, they naturally pass on to subsequent generations the routines and strategies of how to gain and retain prestige. It is also still understandable in marginalised groups where a certain level of indolence in their own ambitions as well as the modesty relating to their own expectations build up a certain resistance to frequent disappointments as well as to the experiences of outclassing. This position, too, has socially justifiable persistence effects. While the broad mass of the population, the 'middle class', as it were, chooses similar intergenerational reproductive strategies, special cases require explanation.

Exactly such a special case is presented by the society of the former GDR. And the incredible fact remains that the pattern of persistence evidently does not come to an end with the collapse of East Germany, instead, it

can still be observed more than ten years after re-unification. When considered from a purely analytical viewpoint, a type of 'feudal society' without classes has been created: Social groups remain static in their social space. Development between generations is noticeably retarded. 'Maintaining one's status quo' appears more sensible than 'progress'. The primary focus appears to be one of a symbolic status quo, rather than a material one. Apart from a few artificially created functional social groups, East German society informally maintained the separations of status associated with a pre-socialised society. Hence, the safeguarding of one's social status (even until today and at times at great cost) appears strategically more sensible than the search for new horizons.

However, modern 'estates' evidently come into being where the formality-informality-span has been artificially stretched. Small social units, whose existence is threatened, are forced to focus their reproductive strategies; to strengthen their inner coherence and not waste energies on change and modernisation. Coherence and persistence in one's social surroundings is the result. Problematic mental undercurrents are, nonetheless, thus called into existence. These include scepticism towards new or risky social arrangements; the desire for protection provided by (state)frameworks; and the poorly developed ability to be able to cope with precarious social conditions. Therefore, the intergenerational dynamic of modernisation is characterised by reluctance in the examined region more than ten years after reunification.<sup>11</sup>

The structurally conservative state of mentality contributes to the persistence of the social 'subspace' that was characteristic of GDR society. The orientation towards one's social surroundings and the stabilisation of the established routines and traditions is much more pronounced in eastern Germany than in western Germany. Marc Szydlik (1997) compared West and East German generational relationships shortly after reunification. He ascertained similar results to researchers in the youth field from Leipzig: East Germans place greater value on their familiar relationships than is the case in the West Germany. The ninth Federal Youth Report (1994) provides a similar assessment of the relationship of the younger generation to that of the parents: The family, and in particular the parents, were seen to be the central point of support when it was question of dealing with problems. The predicted conflicts between parents and children in the new (East German) states evidently did not eventuate. Instead, the family was increasingly valued and needed as a social network by East German youth. In fact, one may say that there is a stronger orientation towards family by East German youth in the new states.

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<sup>11</sup> The diagnosed 'lag in modernisation' also has demographic causes. A not insignificant component of the grandchildren's generation has made use of training and employment opportunities provided in West Germany. Of course, these would have to be included in the 'modernisation type', however, they are no longer part of the region.

Our findings confirm and explain these results. These findings, however, can also identify the risky aspects of the 'generational symbiosis'. The incredible post-unification observations are undoubtedly related to the fact that the 'established' GDR society forced individuals to develop and maintain a level or sphere of informality. This allowed not only confidential communication but also, in particular, the development of personal interests. Apart from a quite remarkable culture of interaction and of co-operation in the workers' collectives and in religious sub-societies, this sphere was the family unit. The established norms guaranteed continuity and dependability and were therefore enduring.

What is risky about this constellation (which by the way is affirmed by the dominance of the 'persistence type' that was investigated), is its relevance for the intergenerational resistance to modernisation which, as a mentality pattern is much more persistent than that was presumed in the transformation diagnoses (e.g. also Szydlik, 1997). It also promotes a disposition of social closure in social space and even constitutes a certain lethargy in social space. It provides key evidence that the social 'subspace' described above stays stable even in a transformation society.

### *Unresolved 'histories'*

This mental disposition is reaffirmed by the presence of xenophobic, even subtly racist attitudes in the *grandparents'* biographical recollections. These are not obvious and evidently have nothing to do with the experiences of reunification. In the biographical recollections of the '*war generation*' and independent of the social setting or the investigated intergenerational constellation, there is evidence of a surprisingly unbroken repetition of experiences and mentalities associated with Nazism. This discovery is a *highly controversial 'by-product'* of the undertaken research and was wholly unexpected. The decisive factor is not even the content (experiences gained during time in the Hitler Youth or its girls' equivalent, the BDM; or from time in the 'Waffen-SS' or 'Wehrmacht'), much more surprising is the nature of the narrative presentation of the content: In only a few instances are personal experiences with Nazism critically reflected upon. The lack of distance, in a certain sense even the 'brazenness' and positive connotations, with which the majority of interviewees reflect critically on experiences from the Nazi and war eras need to be explained.

The East German war generation evidently use a different 'format' in the narrative reconstruction of their biography when compared to those from West Germany when reflecting on the time prior to 1945. On the one hand interviewees from the old West Germany 'separated' themselves from this era through reflexive or distancing terminology, especially when they

were personally involved in or familiar with the Nazi state (cf. Rosenthal, 1995). On the other hand, East German narratives refer both to experiences from the Nazi era, as well as cherished childhood memories '*without distance*'. Apparently there are no social conventions that make it rational or even somehow morally necessary to come to terms with this history.

This finding seems surprising alone for the fact that the GDR explicitly associated its own creation with a profession to anti-Nazism. Article 6 of the East German constitution<sup>12</sup> stated "*In the interest of its people and in view of its international obligations, the German Democratic Republic has faithfully eradicated German militarism and Nazism on its territory.*" This wording was undoubtedly used during the entire history of the GDR and an integral component of the political propaganda. However, it never became a topic for public discussion, presumably because it was so 'official'. Quite to the contrary, the *anti-fascist foundation myth* presented an opportunity for the majority of the population (who, biographically at the very least, must be considered to have been Nazi collaborators), to repress their personal responsibility for tolerating a fascist regime of terror; for harbouring racist sentiments; and for having feelings of national superiority. Personal attitudes and prejudices can in this process be left *untouched*.

In the former West Germany, the issue of war guilt of the war generation was addressed by the student movement and led to some radical public debate. This forced the generation of grandparents (even if not acting out of conviction but to protect themselves), to '*rewrite*' their biographies. In the East, conversely, this process of civilisation was inhibited by propaganda and led to the vast majority of the population personally not having to come to terms with their past. In fact, the process of de-Nazification after 1945 was more thorough under the auspices of the Soviet occupation than was the case in the western occupation zones. However, the Soviet Military Administration of Germany (SMAD) issued its Order No. 33 as early as 1948 in which the de-Nazification commissions were required to cease their activities and dissolve themselves. As to why the great majority of the German people, including of course those from the Soviet zone of occupation, mostly willingly accepted the politics of the German fascists was never discussed: A debate did not take place during the time of the de-Nazification commissions, nor after their dissolution. Therefore, there was also no debate at all about the "deeply ingrained structural conservatism or the distinct aversion to anything foreign evident in small towns and villages" (Madloch, 2000, pp. 98f.). There existed a core belief which was held by a significant proportion of the war generation of belonging to a master race; of being able to denote other humans as being less worthy; and of being able to exclude the foreign (such as Jews) from the 'pure German community' ('*Volksgemeinschaft*'). It

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<sup>12</sup> In the version of 7.10.1974, Berlin 1974, p. 11.

was this belief that was able to persist unchallenged under a cover of a '*dictated anti-fascism*'.

Undoubtedly the creation of this anti-militarist and anti-fascist state was well intended. However, because hidden xenophobia, anti-Semitism and possibly also right wing violence did not fit the picture of this state, they were off limit topics and unable to be discussed. Nonetheless, as is evidenced by files collected by the national security services (Stasi), right-wing extremism existed from 1945 and throughout the entire history of the GDR (cf. Kinner & Richter, 2000).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, as they were never openly discussed, these activities existed in a '*protected space*'.<sup>14</sup>

This means there are reasons to believe that East German society possesses a body of knowledge of non-discussed and not at all discredited right-wing and racist prejudices that have left their mark in familiar traditions. This in no small part due to the conscious act of founding an anti-fascist state in East Germany. The biographical histories of the generation of the grandparents are a starting discovery. If this is considered in conjunction with the discovery of a widespread '*persistence constellation*', it is to be predicted that a proportion of the grandchildren generation possess this mentality also. At the very least, it explains why that society predictably trivialises and even accepts the right-wing violence that this research frequently encounters. This is by no means the central aspect of the presented research. However, this somewhat overlooked hypothesis in the discussions on right-wing extremism in East Germany certainly seems credible, as the distribution and the level of intensity of right-wing activities in the research area appear to explain the survival of certain related beliefs as well as the lack of deviation in the traditions.

### *The 'delayed society'*

The presented findings add to the impression of an ongoing existence of a social '*subspace*' that exhibits a significant historical resistance to change. It is useful to reconstruct the types of mentalities in point form as the significant changes in the social and economic environment since unification developed contrary to that which would have been expected. Historical changes are evidently not the same as mental dispositions (to these changes) within the population. These can lead to interesting asyn-

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<sup>13</sup> It appears symptomatic that during the GDR era that centres like Löbau, Görlitz and Dresden already were seats of right-wing activity. These are all centres of the right-wing scene today.

<sup>14</sup> Young people arrested for these types of activities were charged for hooliganism or assault or because of politically criminal acts such as civil disorder or vilification. In this way right-wing attitudes were veiled and effectively trivialised (cf. Madloch, 2000).

chronicities that this research undoubtedly revealed in the investigated region:

- *The drastic economic processes of modernisation that brought with it the 'gutting' of traditional industries, does not lead to an immediate modernisation of the social space. Instead, it results in a collective defence mechanism that is at its core similar to the defensive reproduction strategies of the GDR era. If the willingness of the younger generation to move away from the region is discounted, then the intergenerational processes of modernisation can only be seen as an exception to a rule. There is considerably more evidence for the behavioural persistence spanning the generations. However, this means that 'mainstream society' reacts very slowly to the demands required by the transformation. The changes are not actively overcome. Instead, they are more or less passively tolerated. The political institutions are not seen as a malleable social environment: They are seen, as they were during the GDR era, as unloved guarantors of social survival. This is a symptom of a 'delayed society'<sup>15</sup>.*
- *However, the preference for a persistent mentality is also a resource. It constitutes social cohesion. This is especially true across generations, which is much less evident in West Germany. Risks associated with individualisation are cushioned by intra-familial actions. Neighbourly solidarity and co-operation can still be relied on, as was evident during the flood of August 2002. Admittedly, the apparent self-help capabilities that the summer of 2002 evidenced should not be overstated. In a certain sense it is 'typically GDR': The communal strategies for dealing with (usually small) everyday catastrophes are well practiced. Furthermore, another common belief is that the state is purported to be a 'total-provider'. Even the incredible West German solidarity and willingness to donate is a well-rehearsed arrangement: The old social order has been restored where the misery of the East Germans is contrasted by the generosity of those in the west. A certain scepticism is called for in regards to the all too optimistic prognoses about the qualities of a public spirit in a united*

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<sup>15</sup> The label 'delayed society' is used for a delay in the process of civilisation caused by the system's structure. This is to be explained on the one hand figuration-sociologically both by a 'longue durée' in the development of a German mentality; and on the other by the specific configuration of GDR society.

Germany. When the state cannot repay on the promise that 'no one will be worse off' (something which, by the way, elicits feelings of *déjà vu* of the post-unification era), the usual clichés will regain ground: The public perceptions that arose in the 1990s of the whinging and ungrateful East Germans and also that of the ignorant and arrogant West Germans.

- The interpretation of the data justifies the proposition that we are dealing with a specifically German mentality profile: The historic configuration of the East German post war society follows on from the dramatic process of de-civilisation initiated by the National Socialists. A developed civil tradition obviously did not exist before the fascist era either. The processes of informalisation and civilisation the western Federal Republic undertook in the 1950s and especially in the 60s are impossible to ignore (cf. in detail Alheit, 1994, p. 200ff.). Conversely, the new (socialist) formation of society in no way reduces the formality-informality-span (Elias). Moreover, it leads to the formation of a kind of modern 'feudal society' that is able to survive in the 'social subspace'. This too is a symptom of the 'delayed society'.
- This constellation (which perpetuates many elements of a two century old specifically 'German' figuration), is in a certain sense merely modified post reunification. In every instance a similar 'social subspace' is created. In view of objective declassification processes as well as collective resentments, this slows the long overdue social momentum for modernisation and leads to further external divisions (separation from West Germany but also from the strangers within). A part of the willingness of the general population to accept right-wing violence has to be ascribed to this mentality pattern. However, this pattern, too, bears the hallmarks of a 'delayed society'.
- A further explanation for the frighteningly fertile ground for right-wing movements (and especially for the ineffable 'nationally liberated zones' inside the investigated region), may be the intriguing observation that prejudices, opinions and mental dispositions may have been transferred wholesale from National Socialism and may persist in the inter-generational process of forming traditions. The idiosyncratic 'lag in reflexivity' that many members of the war generation reveal in their biographical histories (in regards to their personal involvement as well as its



*organisation, goals and ideologies), is undoubtedly evidence of the missing culture of debate where recent German history is concerned. This again is a symptom of the 'delayed society'.*

The mentality profile of a part of the country is herewith identified. It is one distinguished by retarded modernisation, mental self-isolation and structural conservatism in its micro-social strategies for reproduction. This profile is, quite possibly, even more pronounced in the research area of East-Saxony when compared to the metropolitan regions of Berlin or Leipzig. The suspicion is, however, that the basic dynamics are not merely to be found in Upper Lusatia. Moreover, they can be observed, if with some modification, in all areas of society pertaining to the former GDR.

This provocative result should give cause for serious thought. Civilisation processes require time. They are not trivial effects of 're-education programs' of the kind enforced from 1945 by the western occupation forces that bore questionable results. Nor are they 'intellectual-move-to-the-country/national revival-movements' as Adorno (1969) had in mind in his ideas regarding *'Education After Auschwitz'*. Civilisation requires time and space for self-reflection as well as places for the discursive exchange of experiences which would enable the East German society to overcome its hermetic niche-mentality of GDR origins. However, having West Germany lecture the East on how to achieve this will be the least productive. The organisation for cross-border '*discourse-arenas*' with Poland or the Czech Republic may have more success.<sup>16</sup> Both national cultures, in contrast to the GDR, have allowed for a public discourse and had also begun to deal with their past while still under the auspices of state socialism (cf. Alheit, Szlachcicowa & Zich, 2006). This was achieved, perhaps not without contradictions, but nonetheless with the effect of activating feelings of public responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

Surely the result is also a challenge to the concept of 'lifelong learning'. A technical reduction of learning to that of a life-span would be theoretically and empirically short sighted. The presented findings show that analytical dimensions such as 'mentality' and 'intergenerationality' have a direct impact on biographical learning processes and have a lasting effect. Moreover, the chosen example is by no means exotic. Findings of recent social science studies on processes of Trauma spanning generations (such as those experienced by the next generation of Holocaust survivors

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, the Polish and Czech results vary drastically from those in the East German areas: Variants of the 'modernisation type' dominate in both regions, while the 'persistence type' only plays a marginal role. (cf. Alheit, Szlachcicowa & Zich, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Together with the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, this project has begun to organise German-Polish-Czech discourse forums and confronted the numerous participants with the findings of this research. Further forums are planned. The debates were (and are) controversial and not always uncomplicated. However, they can contribute in making the obvious risks to civilisation a topic of a political education project. This is especially the case with regard to German society after reunification.

(representatively Rosenthal, 1997) or Kosovo refugees (representatively Hartmann-Kunkel, 1996), convincingly evidence the intergenerational presence of psycho-physical catastrophes in the lives of parents and grandparents. Even less well known examples found in migration research (representatively Apitzsch, 2001) document how certain long term 'family goals' or 'ethnic identity constructions' influence the lives of the next generation. The framework conditions of 'lifelong learning' must also be reflected upon systematically. Evidently still missing is a consistent theory of 'lifelong learning' incorporating the dimensions of 'mentality' and 'intergenerationality'. Without this the theory is unsatisfactory. Then the question remains how concrete biographical learning processes are related to 'their framework conditions'. This again brings into play the previously introduced third dimension: The concept of 'biographicity'.

### **'Biographicity' as a building block of a theory of 'lifelong learning'**

"Men make their own [biography], but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." With only one word replaced, this quote of Marx's, taken from 18. *Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* (Marx-Engels-Works, 1972, Vol. 8, p. 117) creates an incredible awareness of the phenomenon that characterises the structure of 'lifelong learning'. We possess a potential for creating our own life story<sup>18</sup> that ceaselessly enables and also forces us to 'make' our own Biography (*biographicity*: from the Latin 'facere' – to make<sup>19</sup>). The substance of this shaping force is that which happens to us; that which we experience and – in a general sense – that which we learn. In a process of "outwardly open self-referentiality" (Alheit, 1997, p. 945) (where external influences are utilised based on an unmistakable inner logic), we process social experiences that life offers.

'Biographicity' is initially, therefore, the ability to connect new impressions and learning impulses that possess an inner logic to the pre-existing biographical experiences (cf. Alheit, 1993b, pp. 348ff.). A number of

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<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, this is also a product of the 'existing circumstances' as Marx would say. In fact, a comparison of biographies from 'around 1800' and 'around 1900' shows that the 'format' of biographic self-reflexivity dramatically changed in this period and that it is only the ongoing process of modernity that enables the 'making of biographies' (cf. Alheit et al., 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, this 'Graeco-Latinism' is not particularly attractive. However, it is apparently so intractable that it is even beginning to establish itself in the specialist terminology of the English and French speaking world (*biographicity*, *biographicité*, also *biograficidad*, *biograficitat*, even in the Greek, Chinese and Korean language the concept has been established).

more complex theoretical issues are obscured behind this relatively simple idea. For instance, what is meant by 'implicit inner logic' and how does it come into being, since there are no arbitrary experiences gained in our biographies? The times in which we live, the environment in which we grow up, our attitudinal backgrounds, our gender and even our ethnicity limit and dictate our 'wealth of experiences' that we are able to assimilate. A basic competency for understanding each new situation is developed as is the case when learning a new language. A kind of 'experiential code' is intuitively created with which new experiences are deciphered. However, we are *not* subject to *all* experiences of our time, of our social class, our gender, or our ethnicity. Instead we are subject to 'our' experiences. In other words, the '*generative grammar of experiences*' that we develop is specific and has to do with the individual.<sup>20</sup> The 'inner picture' of society that surrounds us is an 'individual construct', and undoubtedly this society was the prerequisite for such a picture to form in the first place (cf. Alheit & Dausien, 2000a). This intuitive concept of life that 'drifts' depending on new experiences is the basis for navigating through the accessible social world. In a sense it is the 'organisational centre' of lifelong learning.

Additionally there is another theoretically relevant aspect: The 'experiential code' is complex and grows more complex during a lifetime. New and irritating experiences may not be able to be sorted out 'unambiguously'. The 'experiential grammar' contains a sensory overload of a variety of imaginable processing options. This surplus of senses is always a contingent potential of 'modalisation' of personal and worldly references. This means that, exactly because of our experiences, we are capable of changing ourselves and the world around us. In effect, we are in a very fundamental sense able to 'learn'. 'Biographicity' is, exactly because of this, the basis of our ability to learn and to develop.

Considerations such as these are prerequisites for a plausible empirical approach to the phenomenon of 'lifelong learning'. The presented research shows that experiences and their respective 'sequencing' can be reconstructed especially promisingly in *recounted life-stories*. The focus of the analysis is thereby not only on the narrative (re-)construction mode of concrete narrators (cf. Schütze, 1984), but also on the 'narrative' patterns which (in terms of being social constructions) prefigure our own narratives; as well as on the 'histories' that give expression to our life-stories. This approach creates the opportunity to read the stories as performative expression of their own background stories. These stories that we, as concrete individuals, can or must tell, are indicators of cultural mentalities and intergenerational traditions. 'Biographicity' as a generative principle of the narrative reconstruction of life always possesses (from a methodological

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<sup>20</sup> This idea follows on from Chomsky's model of a '*transformational-generative grammar*' (cf. Chomsky 1969, 1977).

perspective) a figuration-theoretical aspect. Especially in its particularity it includes a reference to that which is socially common. This consideration makes a differentiation of the levels of reconstruction meaningful. By using a modified version of Chomsky's Grammar model (cf. Chomsky, 1969, 1977), these levels are shown to relate to each other in the way that 'competency' and 'performance' do and also reciprocally refer to each other. These levels are firstly, a reconstruction-level that refers to the *performance* of the told life-stories; secondly, a reconstruction-level that identifies the inner logic of a narrative recapitulation as a '*performative competency*'; and thirdly, a reconstruction-level that reveals mental and habitual background structures ('*background competency*').



Fig. 3 Levels of narratives stratification of experience

This methodical model of a reconstruction of life experiences opens a promising approach to the complex phenomenon of 'lifelong learning'. However, it also shows that reducing it strictly to a life-span would be problematic. The 'background competency' to live our life and to be lifelong learners refers to structures that may have become part of our experiences that, however, do not merge with them; it touches dimensions like 'mentality' and 'intergenerationality'.

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