

The Analysis of Global Social Structure

Notes for the colloquium on July 4, 2008

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No method should be used independently of theoretical assumptions. In doing research on global social structure, the theoretical framework proposed here consists in tracing relations between the distribution of resources and the division of activities. Resources include any preconditions to participate in activities. The division of activities comprises any social activity, including consumption, leisure, housework and labour. In a first attempt, resources may be analyzed into incorporated capabilities (*habitus*) and external resources, while the division of activities could be analyzed into different fields.

In order to get an idea of the global division of activities, rather localized empirical research has to be combined with the analysis of global flows, economic arrangements and international institutions. The look at global configurations serves to establish a hierarchy of fields. Even though pop music is a very important field in the lives of many people on a global scale, it is not of immediate relevance for an analysis of global inequality. On the other hand, seemingly trivial areas of social activity like housing and food are symbolically and physically essential.

For the analysis of social structure, research has to focus on possibilities of social groups to participate in important fields – and to do so in core activities. These possibilities are determined by the *habitus* and external resources, which the groups dispose of. Therefore, the method for the analysis of global social structure should illuminate the composition of *habitus* and resources – and then establish their relation to the global division of fields or their value.

The method proposed here combines the “*habitus hermeneutics*” developed by Helmut Bremer, Michael Vester and Andrea Vester-Lange with the analysis of practice, statistical data and correspondence analysis. The colloquium will focus on the first two elements. The underlying assumption is that individuals cannot invent their behaviour spontaneously but have to rely on learning, which takes place as an incorporation of forms of behaviours and their transformation into patterns; furthermore, individuals cannot apply their patterns of behaviour at random but are confined to certain realms of society depending on their incorporated and external means. The

method of “habitus hermeneutics” seeks to analyse the patterns of behaviour and the acquisition of external resources during the life-course, while the method of “analysis of practice” seeks to establish the participation in fields.

Habitus Hermeneutics

The material for habitus hermeneutics is basically provided by a brief life history that should be recorded and transcribed. Often, 15 minutes suffice, if the material is sufficiently focused. The life history should comprise: family of origin, childhood, education, current family, occupation, and outlook on life and future. While doing the interview, circumstances could be noted (e.g. clothes, behaviour, housing, relation between interviewer and interviewee). It is important to get information on the following items:

Family of origin: Relevant persons, their characteristics and their relation; relation of interviewee to them; siblings and relation to them; income, wealth, profession; organization of everyday life and important activities; style of education; values.

Childhood: Peer group and position of interviewee in it; activities in everyday life.

Education: School(s); grades; preferences (e.g. favourite subjects); relation to other students; educational goals and achievements.

Family: Search and finding a partner; expectations; everyday life; division of activities and income.

Occupation: Labour; circumstances; relation to expectations.

Outlook: How does the current situation relative to hopes and wishes? What could the future look like?

Analysis of Practice

The material for the analysis of practice can be provided by a brief description of a “typical day” in life of 10-15 minutes. The interview should be recorded and transcribed. In addition, questions on extraordinary activities can be asked. Some observation is possible as well. It is important to find out how the interviewee secures his/her material survival and what “rewarding” activities he/she

pursues. Therefore, the interview comprises labour/occupation and work/consumption. It should contain the following information:

Labour: Occupation (or informal labour); remuneration; position; working climate; origin of company and managers, if applicable.

Work: Important activities in leisure, household, family and society; functions in organizations; goals and values associated with these activities.

Additional activities: What are special activities pursued?

Interpretation

Both interviews have to be interpreted as a group. This is essential for two reasons. First, the interpreter is no objective machine but a human being with certain preferences, opinions, presuppositions etc. In a group discussion, these can be reflected and criticized. Second, four eyes see more than two etc. In order to make the best of group analysis, a sequential procedure has been proven to work best. This means that participants in the interpretation proceed by discussing one line of the interview at a time, comparing their understanding, their interpretation and their presuppositions on each point. Ideally, the discussion could be recorded and transcribed as well. However, a summary of the outcome may be sufficient. During the sequential analysis, contextual and theoretical knowledge should be subdued. It should (only) enter the final discussion toward the conclusion.

The interpretation process concludes by establishing a general assessment of habitus, external resources and practice. All single interpretations are weighed against each other and transformed into statements on life chances, relative social position, group adherence, options in the division of activities etc. A characterization of the habitus and the group may be attempted as well.

Some Rules on Interpretation

- All utterances have a meaning (including pauses, mistakes, interjections).
- Any interpretation deserves attention.
- All interpreters are equal.
- Earlier interpretations can be cancelled or modified.

- The perspective of the interpreter has to be reflected and discussed.
- The discussion aims at a consensual interpretation.

Along with any interview, several important data have to be collected:

- Year and place of birth
- Sex
- Date of marriage and birth of children (if applicable)
- Occupation (including place, company, boss)
- Income and wealth

For the analysis, several types of information might be useful:

- Knowledge of English and national language
- Preferences in consumption (e.g. clothing)
- Theory and practice of religion
- Political opinion