

Habitus and Symbolic Codification of Inequality in a Globalizing World

Conference at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

5 June 2011

11:00 General Outline of the Project
Boike Rehbein

Part I: Fieldwork Experience

11:30 Lower Castes in India
Tamer Söyler

11:45 Social Movements in India
Simin Fadaee

12:00 Legitimate Citizenship in India
Andrea Silva

12:15 Milieus in Northeastern India
Andreas Küchle

12:30 Milieus in Laos
Boike Rehbein

12:45 'Khmerness' in Thailand
Benjamin Baumann

13:00 Lunch

Part II: Critique of Fieldwork

14:00 Roundtable: What went wrong in fieldwork?

Part III: Consequences

15:30 Roundtable: How to improve fieldwork and methodology?

16:30 Coffee break

Part IV: Integration

17:00 Precise Definition and Written Outline of Joint Research

Introduction

General Outline of the Project

Boike Rehbein

The general outline will also be circulated among all participants of the conference as well as the absent project partners by Boike. The paper will contain references in order to develop a material collection.

Boike Rehbein welcomes all participants of the conference, especially the two guests Prof. Dr. Houben and Olivia Killias. As there is evidence of fake conferences using fraud papers in China, this conference will hopefully be of real benefit for all attendants.

The aim of the conference is to exchange experiences made during the first stage of fieldwork of the said research project, name problems that were faced by the researchers and from this point draw consequences for further fieldwork.

Boike started by recapitulating the **theoretical background** of the project. As the project enquires into contemporary social inequality against a global horizon, objects of research are societies all over the world and the particular unequal distribution of chances to carry out activities within these communities.

These “capabilities” (Amartya Sen, 2006) or „capital“ (meaning the entity of resources of a person; see Pierre Bourdieu 1992) include production and consumption as well as artistic expression, political and social engagement, discussion, leisure etc.

Bourdieu used the term „habitus“ for the modes of behaviour which arise from the specific environment and social group people grow up and live in and which are natively learned and adapted to accordingly by a person. A social group („milieu“, Michael Vester 2003) can be defined as crowd of people with similar types and amount of resources, who therefore pursue similar activities and can be observed having a similar habitus. By the tendency of social groups to reproduce their social resources they have a certain continuity over time, even if the surrounding society changes in the meantime (Bourdieu 1989).

The reproductive character of this phenomenon can also be observed in another dimension: As each resource and habitus attribute is symbolically codified and socially classified, it always connotes an assessment and judgements, which lead to a reconfirmation of social differences, while each social difference is interpreted on the basis of the available appraisals and reconfirms them (Souza 2011).

This social classification implies “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1998) if it implies social inequality. The universe of symbolic codifications is a “discourse” (Michael Foucault) in the sense that it is taken for granted and prescribes what can be thought and what can be said in a given society. State authorities are in position to control use of language and also its interpretation. Nevertheless milieus follow their own rules and reframe meaning and use of language. This does also apply to nationalistic symbols and the symbolic universe.

Symbolic universes have largely been national universes during the past century, underscored by national languages, national media and national elites. But this is beginning to change with the

current tendencies of globalization. In the long term, this development will affect inequality – in terms of resources, activities and symbolic codification.

The overall project focuses on the relation between the unequal distribution of resources and symbolic violence. In order to construct a proper theoretical framework and an empirical insight into contemporary inequality, it also needs to analyze the social division of activities, existing milieus, processes of social classification, the general ethos of societies and milieus, the impact of global capitalism and the relation between global, national, transnational and local variants of society. The final step could consist in an analysis of the subjective experience of social inequality: the social differentiation of “being-in-the world” in a specific society and in global comparison.

Boike then carried on talking about the concrete **methodology**: The milieu is the entry point into the analysis of social structure and into the project. To establish existing milieus, narrative life-course interviews and the method of habitus hermeneutics should be the first step.

This method (established by Vester et al.) consists of brief life-course interviews with persons considered typical for particular milieus. The interview covers family of origin, childhood, schooling, peer group, contemporary situation and outlook. It is assessed through sequential analysis, preferably carried out by a multicultural group. The habitus interview could be replaced by a more extensive, narrative life-course interview for this project.

The second step seeks to link milieus to the symbolic universe, especially symbolic violence. To assess the relation between milieus, symbolic codification and social classification, marriage and partnership are investigated: interview questions, participant observation and pile sorting. This should render insight into strategies of milieu reproduction and the evaluation of other social beings.

In order to analyze social classification, group discussions could be carried out during the group analysis of the available habitus hermeneutics interviews (see in the methodology of habitus hermeneutics). It means that the process of analyzing the interviews in a group of people from different backgrounds could be conducted as a group discussion and then be analyzed as well. The hypothesis is that this discussion will indicate us more about the social classifications and habitus of a determined culture.

The third step of the project is more ambitious and involves all kinds of data that are accessible, primary as well as secondary. A hypothetical construction of the global division of activities needs to be done in order to link milieus and symbolic universes to the activities that are valued. At the same time, the milieus need to be linked to the global division of resources. Finally, the forces establishing and influencing the division of resources and the symbolic universe (evaluation of resources, social classification, evaluation of activities and symbolic violence) need to be identified and analyzed. This analysis is most likely closely linked to global capitalism.

Now it is time to learn about the participant’s experiences during their first stage of fieldwork.

Part I: Fieldwork Experience

The fieldworks of Tamer, Simin and Boike were funded by DAAD.

Lower Castes in India

Tamer Söyler

At the beginning Tamer explains the background of his research interest, explains the Habitus Hermeneutics concept and then criticises this research method.

Tamers working hypothesis is: Castes in India are a symbol of violence and social exclusion. Focusing on Dalits the aim of the project is to analyse if their situation is a culturally specific form of social distinction that is substantially different from other types of exclusion in other parts of the world.

In a further stage of research mechanisms of social exclusions in India and Germany will be compared.

In 2008 Tamer spent 5 months in India and while his first week, he found himself in vibrant discussion with Indian scholars about the social structure of his host land and the castes system in particular. His discussion partners tried to explain castes with indigenous habitus, while Tamer asked if it was actually a different classifications system.

Tamer is not sure if Habitus Hermeneutics (HH) is the suitable methodology for his research. He recaps the characteristics of this method at this point of research as it is not an established approach yet and a procedural flexibility in the face of contingencies of actual research should be allowed: HH is a qualitative research methodology; but Tamer rises the questions what distinguishes this method from classical qualitative research methodologies? It helps collecting data about social structure from a life-course perspective.

A typical life history should comprise six parts

1. Family and Origin
2. Childhood
3. Education
4. Current Family
5. Occupation
6. Outlook (on life and future)

The initial draft emerged into 14 interview questions:

1. What were the most important events/stages in your life?
2. How were they celebrated?
3. Who had to be invited?
4. Please describe your family background.

5. Please describe your childhood.
6. Please describe your schooling
7. Who are your friends/important social relations? respectively Who is important in your life?
8. Please describe your present situation.
9. What do you expect for the future?
10. How and why did you chose your partner? respectively How and according to what criteria did you choose your partner?
11. What is important in your life?
12. Who would you entrust these important things?
13. Please try to find ten terms that would describe your life.
14. Please discribe your present situation. respectively Please find ten terms to describe your life.

For a complete and successful data collection in addition to these questions, one activity interview, one questionnaire and one observation should be done.

A activities interview question would be „Please describe a typical day in your life“.

A simple questionnaire notes basic social data such as age, sex, education, income/wealth.

On a separate sheet of paper observations on the interview setting (e.g. house, friends, dress) should be registered.

In Tamers point of view HH differs from other qualitative interviews through the combination of

- a good life-history framework
- oral history interview
- qualitative interviewing frameworks

On the other hand he sees some points of critique. HH seems to limit the interaction between researcher and narrator, because of the strictly phrased questions. HH proposes a strictly theory-guided perception/ (structural fieldwork). In this case data collection and analysis must go simultaneously with a well planned systematic analysis.

It is a disadvantage hat you can use the set of 14 questions only once. Making use of pre-interviews and follow-up interviews can be very helpful. Furthermore there should be no time limit („15-minute interview framework“). It is more humanistic to listen to the narrator as long as he wants.

According to the integration of experiences into the project Tamer recalls that the projects should go parallel. This means the individual projects go in parallel to the main project.

More applicable seems the aim for clusters. This will require a common unerstanding of the broader research framework. As the research group is a cluster itself, it should be easy to work wi a common interview framework.

Social Movements in India

Simin Fadaee

Simin's thesis is that global expansion of capitalism has impact on social movements and that social movements reproduce inequality. Postcolonial and industrial societies both created „new societies“ and also distinct social movements.

As her focus is on India, she could observe that following the economic liberalisation in 1991, there was a shift in industry, which also caused „new social movements“ (environment, gender, women, etc).

Her thesis that social movements reproduce inequality, is based on the observation that structures of the movements itself are being reproduced by their members.

Therefore there are two units of Simin's research:

1. the organisation of the movement
2. the activists behind the movement

Simin wants to find out if there is a change in the movement, and if not why. If yes, she will analyse what is altering.

To use the HH approach she had to find individuals to talk to. Her aim was to have interviews with leaders and founders of a movement as well as other high-ranking representatives.

She would then analyse if there are changes:

- if no, why not?
- if yes, are they going to alter in inequality or other structures?

Simin can refer to four sets of interviews in her fieldwork experience:

I. Semi-structure interview in two parts

First sequence about

- when the movement started
- actions/ strategies/ framework
- problem/ challenges/ media and stalls (?)
- reaction of society

Second sequence about the personal background.

That lead to a uncomfortable feeling on both sides. The narrator just did not see the relevance and felt the questions being absurd.

Furthermore their mindset was focused on the first part; so the answers were still relating to the context of the first sequence (i.e. „What was the most important event in your life?“ „Joining the movement“)

II. Flipping over the two sequences

- personal information

- social movements

This order even made it worse: a shift was not possible, people did not see the relevance. People pretended to have no time (to talk about their personal life) and so on.

III. Own semi-structure

First an explanation why the family background was important and then questions about

- childhood
- schooling
- perspectives for future
- one term that describes you life, ...

This order brought some quite good good answers and no bad feeling.

IV. Interviews with non-activists

Simin had some interviews with non-activists, which were not putting the person in a certain background (not framed), therefore a narrative/descriptive answer was expected, but the problem was

- questions tended to be answered with „normal“ („How was you childhood?“)
- questions were just not understood („Explain your life!“ „What do you mean?“); researcher did not want to interfere too much (lead the interviewed person in a certain direction)
- Questions like „What is important in your life?“ generated rather abstract/immaterial answers (India, love, health), so the second question
- „whom would you entrust this?“ did not make sense

To conclude at this point of research set no. III works best for Simin.

Legitimate Citizenship in India

Andrea Silva

The fieldwork trip was Andrea's first visit to India.

Her main research questions addressed to experts and academics are:

How does „citizenship“ work in Chile, India, Germany?

For India: has the focus changed? How was it formed?

It was soon quite clear that academics in India had other perceptions of citizenship than elsewhere: While in Chile reference was given to democratisation and social movements, Indian narrators answered with social justice, domination and casts.

The similarity between the compared countries are so far:

- globalisation (nation states)
- inequality codes/symbols
- languages complexity

Andrea illustrated the background of her research by explaining the concept of citizenship:

social and political scientists → Thomas H. Marshall: social classes in the 20th century (England)

capitalism: inequality

citizenship: equality

→ lead to the creation of social classes

For India this concept is not enough, because of the casts (other domination, education). This implicates that the main inequality in India is not applicable to this concept, because religion/region/gender/language are stronger interrelated in India.

Andrea then referred to the Dalits. The identification takes place through the cast's ideology. But even the Dalits are fighting groups since the identity.

Andrea attended the Dalits conference on national state building, identity and „being Indian“.

She could set some interviews with rather open questions. Especially „Talk about your life“ lead to good answers.

But when Andrea suggested to talk about another topic, the narrators showed perplexity and it became clear that more interaction by the researcher was needed.

For example the question „What is important in your life?“ was too abstract, and consequently „Whom would you entrust you this?“ did not make sense. Sometimes no answer was given at all.

Andrea would like to exchange experiences about the introduction part of the interviews as she was thinking a lot about how to start the interview. Besides she apprehended the limitation because of the language barrier and is quite self-critical about this point. Andrea is open to different answers and thoughts about this concerns.

Milieus in Northeastern India

Andreas Küchle

Andreas is on the stage of finding a suitable approach and also about to find a concrete topic as well as how to analyse it.

Andreas gives an elaborated introduction to society in his research area in Northeastern India:

- Rural area: 20% of inhabitants live in an urban centre (which had been established 100-150 years ago)
- agriculture: 59% own land themselves
- no industry (state industry closed down)
- 90% funds from outside

This implies that the region is fully depending on the Indian national state.

You can find cultural diversity in the region. Andreas wants to find out how the society is structured. He has some informations already:

- 16 tribes are officially recognised
- a lot of illegal immigrants come from Nepal, Bangladesh,

The analysis of a „hill“ socioculture would involve valleys, villages, tribes and clans of the region.

The historical approach would focus on the colonial background. This are the main historical shifts in society:

- pre-colonialism: Hunter-gatherer
- redistribution
- labour between villages
- division of labour: not relevant for social structure
- military power
- no village controlled another village/s

The main social capital/resources is slavery in the hills. The slaves have the lowest rank. The children are illegitimate and have thus no access to land, nor a right to a life on their own. Only men can fill an official position in politics and own land. Political offices are imparted to the next generation only.

Dynamics in society occur through success in headhunting. In this sense the clan-system is not hierarchical. Clan members can improve their merit making by headhunting

While colonisation the region was under British rule. In this time different social fields were formed: political/ educational/ economic...

In the villages councils were installed and a new ownership law established. Furthermore new professional groups such as shop keepers, farmers and teachers were developed. Now there was a

shift between educated and uneducated villagers, which led to unemployment among the uneducated.

In the urban centres the elites become richer and send their children to schools outside. Underground groups just as in Bangkok/London or Amsterdam derive.

The middle class is a mainly bureaucratic milieu.

One question of research will be: Do these milieus really exist as milieus?

Problems that occurred:

- Not able to talk about daily life/regular oblivious about life conduction
- a lot of suggestions had to be made
- hard to access poor people /allowance needed
- village counsel: no free speech in villages (fines); refused to answer;
- ownership: income is a taboo

Another method you be the

Picture methods, where you let interviewee pick picture. This approach is also suitable for people who can express themselves verbally.

In the end Andreas raises an ethical question:

He found expectation towards his person as a researcher, which he could not fulfil. Some people were complaining that he would already be the 3rd person who asked personal questions life in Northern India, but nothing had changed so far.

The only thing Andreas could promise was to send his work to the interviewee in English language.

Milieus in Laos

Boike Rehbein

HH worked well in Laos. Boike took 4 to 6 questions about the life-course and also other components of evaluation.

The answers given should be interpreted as group where disagreements is welcome for the discussion.

For HH it is not needed to have previous knowledge, it may even be better to have no idea about the topic and the person.

Boikes advantage in Laos is that after 20 years of research he knows a lot about the region and also knows a lot of people. It is a benefit being able to make use of one's local knowledge.

In this condition the researcher must turn his knowledge into methodology, not common sense.

Finally Boike raised some more questions that should be discussed:

How to make HH flexible?

Are are imperial contradictions strong? (see Hegel: resistance of the object)

What about symbolic violence?

Khmerness in Thailand

Benjamin Baumann

The whole project is funded by DFG.

Benjamin's working title is „ritual reproduction of Khmerness in Thailand“. As there is no inequality in the title, he initially intended to concentrate on religion. But inequality raised from ethnicity is also an issue in his region of research.

As introduction Benjamin gives a detailed overview about his region the province Buriram in Northeastern Thailand (Isaan) and the research project in general:

The three Northeastern provinces Surin, Sisaket and Buriram are least developed. The local dialect in Buriram is khmer. The ethnic category „khmer“ in Thailand's North East has to deal with stigmatisation and called „baan noog“ (backwards). This ethnicity is seen as lower and inferior by ethnic Thais. Benjamin wants to find out how and this is the case and if/how this stereotype is reproduced and will therefore have to raise the question of social identity, ethnicity, assimilation to national identity, local power centres in a homogenous national state as well as the social geographic periphery.

Theoretical background is provided by several scientists:

- Bourdieu and his works about habitus and ritual practice.
- Platte (?): ritual society
- Weber: society of religion and social status as well as religious status
- Assmann: cultural memory: rituals and symbols
- Bentley: Habitus and ethnicity

...

In his recent fieldwork Benjamin spent 12 weeks in Thailand. While he was in Bangkok for 3 weeks, he spent 8 weeks in a Northeastern village called Sawayjeek (สวายจีก). This village is 12 minutes from the Cambodian border. The inhabitants speak four languages: standard Thai, Thai Klim; Thai Korat, and Khmer.

The main tasks for Benjamin were to meet scholars; find accommodation in the village and start the data collection by testing questions if they make sense and were being answered. Benjamin was also collecting census data and improving his own language skills.

He has a research assistant who helped him to transform the questions into Thai. By talking about the question with the mother of his host family he could detect untranslatable parts or if a translation has lost its meaning.

The main goals were achieved. Benjamin could furthermore even take part in some ritual ceremonies such as 4 marriages and 2 funerals. He conducted 12 interviews using the HH method.

The interviews were mainly led by the research assistant. The 10 words questions (life description) were too abstract. The most common answer about what is important in life was family instead of property. The interviewees were wondering about this question as the answer was clear for them.

On the other hand the most important thing in life was ownership of land.

A problem faced was to get into the sphere of men, as women were more open to talk to Benjamin. He wonders if he should join the men in by drinking alcohol with them, which was offered but refused by Benjamin so far.

Critique of Fieldwork

Vincent Houben

Vincent believes that the socio-culture from pre-colonial times stills exists. But i.e. the literature about Indonesia in socio-culture gives just an Indonesioness frame.

The nature of area studies itself is that there is always an interpretative moment in it as it is an approach from within:

1. stress moment already
2. adopt theory to different concepts
3. no escape: language framed in terms

The normal practice is to not be secure anymore. How to frame is a general problem and challenge we all have to be conscious about. Translational moments are most productive and we should not give up our ambitions. We have to de-centre our vision of the world to be the forefront of new social science. As our capacities are limited, we should be relaxed about it.

The old style would include pure description, unique places, and compilation of unique areas. Nowadays we don't get results, but results that are open to comparison and generalisation. Therefore group work is a really good method.

In the SFB 640, in which Vincent is working on he topic of identity, not a single theory has emerged, but an area of discourse. The understanding and interexchange of each other influences one's own work. Of course there will be more moderate results in a multidisciplinary group.

Consequences and Intergration

Summary of occurred problems at fieldwork

<i>Boike Rehbein</i>	partnership and marriage
<i>Tamer Söyler</i>	to find an authentic/casual way of asking
<i>Simin Fadaee</i>	creation of a context
<i>Andrea Silva</i>	HH in general: open questions might get better results
<i>Andreas Küchle</i>	staying together without repr. /official rituals; only with 1st child
<i>Benjamin Baumann</i>	cluster of questions: age/ get to know/which village/

Boike concluded that we got a serious impression of the precepts that have to be reconfirmed now. One problem were the reflexive questions. He suggests to rather observe than ask. Always keep in mind that what people say they do and what they actually do may differ. Of course observance not always possible and also not sufficient.

His overall impression is that HH worked surprisingly well and brought up insight of the values (social significance) of the interviewees.

How to get people to talk

Tamer suggest not to interview them, but just have a conversation. Meaning not to follow the questions strictly. He would like to call it „casual interrogative situation“ and sees it just as part of being in the field: being there is the fieldwork.

Simin's strategy is to be selective about the questions. One has to focus because of the limitation of time. She makes an argument for semi-structured interviews and free speech with guiding questions.

Andrea is sure that she get better answers in a more relaxed interview situation when she made friends among the narrators. The answer might be more exclusive and the way of asking is more comfortable. Nevertheless she is not sure about this method.

Tamer adds that the construction of reality implies always a simplification. The researcher must keep the field in mind as well as the preliminary work and questionnaire.

Benjamin feels his bounders and guidance in the methods. He proposes to find a starting point and start to do what ever you want to do. Soon can be decided if it works. As Benjamin did not have any social relations in his field before, he just made some daily life talks (free speech) and constrained them in other ways. For better comparability he recorded the conversations and could listen to them again later. Benjamin noticed that he got response to some of his question already. Otherwise it would not have been referable.

Tamer interjects that this method does not fit in every context and is relating to the people you are dealing with.

Andreas remarks that the mix up of personal/amicable relations is nearly inevitable and drinking beer together might be relevant for the studies as well. The effect is that you feel closer to each other and have sympathetic feelings towards the group also. Arranging new meetings and interviews is easier, even if this informal way is not suitable for every narrator.

Michael Klein reminds that ethnic morals should be superior. Researchers should never exploit their informants and keep in mind the ethnical side of things.

Olivia Killias wants the researcher to consider the expectations of the interviewed persons.

Boike also votes for a guideline of questions in mind and not on paper, so that interaction can be as natural as possible.

Language Skills

Tamer comes up with a question about language barriers. How serious is the fact that you cannot speak every language and mother tongue of the narrator? He suggests that you mainly should „understand“ each other, maybe by the help of symbolic tools.

Boike admits that there is no answer to this question. Of course one cannot learn every language, but stick to certain groups.

Benjamin reminds all about the monopoly of national language. A researcher often uses terms which are used by state.

Boike suggests to limit the group and define it according to your thesis.

HH group discussion

Boike emphasises the importance of the different background of the group as only the diversity will lead to different interpretations. One person would take something for granted and there would be no discussion, but keep in mind that the conductor already interprets while the talk.

The methodological rule about the HH group discussion is that you have to find one result in the end as a consensus is more truthful.

Tamer wants to know more about the type of consensual agreement.

Boike suggests to have a group discussion within a group of locals and record that. This kind of group discussion is also worth a try.

Benjamin reflects if fake interviews may be useful for paradigmatic results. It should also be considered that to hear the discussions takes a lot of time.

Tamer suggests to issue an internet blog where all participants of the conference would put their transcriptions of the interviews online. The impressions and interpretations could also be shared among all readers.

Boike doubts if the participation will be good enough.

Michael would like to know how the consensus may look like. Is it must be a large group, how to find participants?

Boike would like to transform Tamer's idea of a blog:
How to make a full hermeneutical circle?
Why do we need to do that?
Try to contrast what you assume to critique the pre-limitations.

Benjamin wants to know if the participants of a discussion should have knowledge about the topic before the interpretation and *Boike* affirms.

Social classification

Andreas asks how to distinguish classes and how to interpret symbolic violence, when every narrator says „i am poor!“

Andrea remarks that only people who suffer would see India's caste as an issue while others don't see the point. This may be a hint.

Elektra's view is that awareness and reflection are more important as what is not reflected is actually hard to find. If something is normalised you just are not aware.

Benjamin found out that schools are suitable as places of research. You can clearly see that hegemonic classes are reproduced here.

Elektra agrees and finds discourse analysis (advertisements, media) another good method.

Benjamin reminds that social classes are everywhere.

Michael agrees, but wants to know how to find out what is it in my studies? Another hint may be ethnicity and identity, which gives information about social classification.

With these remarks and discussion this conference is being closed.