Reflexivity and Alienation in Transition: The Moral Regulation of Life Conduct in 'Competence agencies'

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The research focus will mainly be on processes of reflexivity of young people who are in the transition from school to work. Unlike the definition of 'reflexivity' which refers to a higher form of consciousness that critical sociologists apply, this research utilises the definition of the politics of the self, which arguably every person employs, that is the relation of the self to itself. The central assumption underlying this research is that these processes mediate between individual concerns and structural contexts. Thus, reflexivity is conceptualised as the most important part of subjectivity, and is itself mediated through institutions such as Social Work, which sometimes directly aim at the specific self-relations of clients. This, I will argue, amounts to something that can be defined as "moral regulation".

In this paper I will outline the methodological part of the research, connecting 'Competence agencies' to concepts of reflexivity, moral regulation and alienation. However, I will not elaborate on the empirical part of the research.

2 'Competence Agencies' (Kompetenzagenturen) in the Transition from School to Work

The German transitional system is a web of interventions that supposedly supports young people who are not participants in the regular 'dual system'[1] or have other difficulties in making the transition from school to work. The transition system is very complex and entails many different interventions, but almost all of them are oriented towards "normal", straight trajectories into the labour market as an ideal biographical path.

'Competence agencies' target young people under the age of 25. Established in 2002 as a pilot project, there are now 209 of such agencies in Germany. They are financed by the European Social Fund through the Federal Government, but they are supposedly neutral actors within the transitional system. This is important because they are meant to be a 'guide' through the transitional system for young people.

According to the Federal Ministry, the mission statement of 'Competence agencies' is to:

"…support particularly disadvantaged young people in finding their way into an occupation and into society. They offer help for those who cannot - or cannot anymore - be reached through the existing system of interventions for the transition from school to work. Contact persons locate youth and jointly agree on an individual support and qualification plan. The social worker then guides the realisation of these plans. They accompany the young people on

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[1] The German ‚dual system' combines on the job training with state-led vocational schools.

a long-term basis and involve their families and personal context. (…) The goal is to enable them to lead an independent life" (Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth: 2010, transl.).

'Competence agencies' combine street social work to gain access to young people with providing long-term support and counselling on the youths' work orientation and transition into work. They act as guides through competence testing, case management, organising and counselling. Many concepts of these agencies point out that this provides an opportunity to tailor interventions towards individuals, instead of trying to fit young people into pre-existing interventions. This is facilitated through contracts that are supposedly voluntary, with the 'Competence agencies' "offering help" and young people themselves taking the lead. Furthermore, their "families and personal context" are involved, so it seems not just to be about labour market related skills, but life conduct in general. As a Federal guideline puts it, it should be about "individual career and life planning leading to labour market integration through comprehensible steps." This also implies that, although the measures should be tailor-made, the goal is the 'primary' labour market.

Therefore, young people aged 15 to 25 who are ascribed with multiple problems have to align their life plans, aspirations and desires to their transition into the labour market. This is unless they are lucky enough to have the opportunity of going to university, but these young people are not in the transitional system. 'Competence agencies' seek to regulate and support this transition, mainly through case management and counselling.

3   Reflexivity

Hence, planning aspect seems to be central to the pedagogical concept of 'Competence agencies'. People make plans before they act. These plans mirror what they care about and how they think they can achieve it. Thus, these plans draw on their aspirations and desires, on what's actually available to them and indeed, what they are forced to do under threat of sanctions. People deliberate, and in the words of Margaret Archer, they evaluate "their situations in the light of their concerns and […] their projects in the light of their circumstances" (Archer 2007, p. 4). This is what I mean by referring to "reflexivity" or self-relation: subjects have the power to transform themselves through self-monitoring, self-criticism and self-control, and they do so in respect of their concerns.

Thus, a central assumption for my research is that *all* people are reflexive actors, but that different forms of reflexivity exist dependent on different biographies which include experiences with institutions. People's plans reflect what they value as well as their circumstances. In 'Competence agencies', as in many social work organisations, they are denied of being capable of the 'right' form of reflexivity. Nevertheless, they are deemed to be responsible for their actions and their development. Thus, their agency is denied and – at least in principle – presupposed at the same time: Motivation, work orientation and the willingness to be helped are presupposed *and* are the goal of the intervention. In pedagogical institutions, this paradox is often to be solved through sequencing: We have to help them now, so that in the end they are able to help themselves. Thus, the goal is to enable them to conduct their lives in an "independent" or "autonomous" way. Conversely, autonomy can only be attained in a predefined way: through wage labour. The assumption is that 'Competence agencies' among others, seek to work on these problematic forms of life conduct through classical pedagogical means, which transforms processes of self-monitoring, self-criticism and self-control. Through working on the projects of young people, social workers also implicitly or explicitly work on their concerns. Furthermore, the projects young people pursue often take a

preliminary form: life plans are open for revision and in fact are revised quite often, which makes them a primary target for moral regulation.

4 Moral Regulation

In drawing on the notion of 'moral regulation', 'moral' does not refer to a codified, abstract system of norms. Rather, what is meant here are questions of *moralisation*, that is the process through which subjects are moralised; and questions of ethics, that is self-formation in the practices of everyday life. For example, how are subjects constructed and acted upon? How do subjects know and decipher themselves and consequently act? This way of posing the problem goes back to Foucault's famous notion of government as the 'conduct of conduct', in this case through 'Competence agencies', to influence the structure of the field of possible actions of others through, for example, competence testing, support and assistance plans etc. Moral regulation in this sense has a dual character as being both externally regulative and internally constitutive (cf. Corrigan & Sayer 1985: 194).

Young people's strengths, abilities and plans are subject to intense scrutiny. Yet, the notion of regulation also implies that young people are not coerced into conducting their life in a specific manner. Governing "free individuals" in liberal societies rests on a process of individualisation, self-government becomes important thereby putting the abilities and capacities of citizens at the center of attention. Counselling, with its principles of being voluntary and respecting the autonomy of life praxis, works on the knowledge that the self has about itself. Similarly, competence testing is not merely about producing knowledge about facts, but also about how the self should see itself and consequently act. Not applying the knowledge that was produced through an open and voluntary exchange (such as in the 'ideal' situation of a counselling session) to one's actions might not be reasonable. This is because the subject itself is involved in the formation and formulation of their own goals. At the same time, there are measures which are directly aimed at conduct, such as sanctions in case of non-compliance.

Projects of moral regulation are to be found in specific governmental and administrative practices that aim at directing the life conduct of actors, especially through defining what can be called life choices, because it is up to the individual to decide what course of action to take. These decisions are especially pertinent in the transition from school to work.

These practices are constructed, reinforced or interpreted by social workers who mediate the reflexivity of the young people, leading to the allocation of specific interventions. These interventions also act as a medium for placing the young people within social hierarchies.

5 Alienation

The framework outlined above poses the problem that will be empirically verified by the research. Social work is seen as a profession that is normative in nature, as it is about the concerns and life conduct of people in circumstances that are detrimental to their flourishing. If it is true that we cannot define objectively what is the right way of conducting one's life and which are "good" concerns, and thus cannot impose certain ways of life conduct, we need to know how to separate self-relations that are emancipatory from those that lead to suffering. This is where I would like to briefly introduce the concept of alienation as Rahel Jaeggi (2005) defines it.

Alienation according to Jaeggi is not a purely Marxist category. Rather, it is conceptualised as a state in which the subject cannot act on its concerns and cannot appropriate the world as a

result of its own doing. This leads to a situation where people are not "available" to themselves, where they feel they cannot influence what they want or even what they can do. This disrupts practices of appropriation which lose their openness and inclusiveness. This is only one of the problems attached to young people's transitions from school to work in capitalist societies; and one could argue that there are more pressing matters such as creating real opportunities that are also acceptable. For example, the choice of either taking any job or being poor is not acceptable. The problem here being that what is acceptable cannot be determined purely subjectively, because of the problem of adaptive aspirations. The term 'adaptive aspirations' refers to the fact that people consciously or unconsciously adapt their aspirations to their circumstances (cf. Bourdieu 1987). The internalisation of what is attainable forms individual dispositions such that social structures are reproduced. For example, we can observe this in respect to the cooling out effect: occupational aspirations of young people are adjusted downwards the longer they stay in the transitional system. But these can neither be determined solely objectively, from the outside, because this would destroy the autonomy of life praxis. So the question whether the desires and life plans of young people are worked on and transformed, under conditions that allow them to grasp these aspirations and consciously work on the self, is vital for social work practice.

In referring to alienation, there is no assumption of undistorted pre-social needs, aspirations and desires. It is impossible to separate the influence of socialisation from wishes 'themselves'. Nevertheless, the concept of a subject acting upon itself presupposes some kind of analytical distinction between the self and the social. In the words of Mitchell Dean: the task is not to assert something like the causal primacy of the social but to show how this primacy occurs in particular cases (cf. Dean 1994: 146).

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