

People and social uncertainty: Critical Psychology's orientation theory meets Bourdieu

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Abstract

This paper will concentrate on intersections and connections between the sociological approach of Bourdieu and the critical-psychological approach of the Tübinger Forschungsgruppe (TFG). Both are focused on the “standpoint of the subject”. Neoliberalism, migration, and refugee movements will serve as points of reference in understanding the connections between these two practice-oriented scientific approaches.

Keywords

changing societies, cultural capital, depth sociology, economic crisis, neoliberal economic structures, orientation pressure of modernization, receiving societies, refugee movements, refugee crisis, research as cooperation, social self-understanding, social uncertainty, social upheaval, solidarity, standpoint of the subject, types of capital

When looking at the opportunities for and limitations to individual action within changing societies, it is useful to refer to the practice-oriented approaches of Bourdieu and the Tübingen Research Group (Tübinger Forschungsgruppe, short: TFG) as analytical tools. These approaches do not give generalized statements or recommended courses of action for very current topics. The use of such theoretical approaches in practice always involves individual agents.

Switching perspective from the “standpoint of the subject” to the structural societal level and back again entails certain uncertainties and vagueness in presentation. These two perspectival levels cannot be portrayed in one single clear picture – the people being described, or who ideally “self-describe,” as research subjects, are also in uncertainty themselves.

Pierre Bourdieu's scientific intention is to work out a "depth sociology" that strengthens the standpoint of the subject (e. g., Bourdieu, 2001/2012). The "orientation theory"- approach of the TFG is based on a critical-psychological perspective, one which inherently incorporates society and the social context while, in practice, aiding the social self-understanding of the individuals involved in the research. The TFG refers to Bourdieu in various studies (see, e.g., the projects "U35" and "EVA60 – Vielfalt gefällt!", Josef Held in this ARCP issue).

This paper will concentrate on intersections and connections between the sociological approach of Bourdieu and the critical-psychological approach of the TFG. Neoliberalism, migration, and refugee movements will serve as points of reference in understanding the connections between these two practice-oriented scientific approaches.

The first passage will focus on the perception and description of uncertainty in human orientation, the second on changing societies, and the third on the self-understanding of science "for the people." The fourth chapter will look more closely at both approaches, while the fifth chapter will illustrate the practical application of these categories.

1. Social uncertainty and orientation – An approach

Fueled by neoliberal economic policy, the world economy and the socio-economic infrastructures of many countries have undergone fundamental changes since the beginning of the 1980s.

The enormous impact of economic crises, wars and civil wars in different regions around the world have led to massive migration and refugee movements. Many societies, organized around the nation-state, that serve as frame of reference for human action and orientation began moving on a mass scale. In addition to these movements, the chances of social exchange, networking and orientation began changing and diversifying due to modern communication technology. New opportunities and risks have arisen, as current discussions about fake news and the way of dealing with information from the World Wide Web have shown.

People move through time and physical spaces on earth; they move in and between societies. In doing so, they absorb different cultural elements (Farb, 1988: pp. 26-27) and develop their own special personal repertoire of competencies, orientations, and possible courses of action.

A good many of the certainties acquired during socialization (regardless of whether they are rated negatively or positively) are not fully applicable in situations of upheaval. This applies as much to immigrants as it does to long-

established residents and domestic migrants. This may lead to great uncertainty and confusion on all sides. Events like terrorist attacks or the “misbehavior” of individuals and groups have, in combination with modern media, an immense impact on orientation and action, which could in turn result in an unforeseeable feedback loop between individuals and groups, self-image (the way one sees oneself) and perception by others.

Rainer Bauböck (1998) uses an analogy to describe certainty and uncertainty associated with migration (or local, rapidly changing political environments): Imagine you are sitting in a stationary train and you see another stationary train beside you. If you look out the window, you only see the other train in the background, nothing else. If the train beside yours begins moving in one direction, you will have the feeling that your train is moving in the other direction. Our “normal” experience is, that backgrounds don’t move if the foreground doesn’t either. For individuals, national borders and nationalities “normally” represent an ever-present background (cf. Bauböck, p. 21). These backgrounds may change if, e. g., national borders are modified, in times of war, or for refugees. Such kinds of sudden “background changes” (with immense impact on life) have been experienced by, for example, Iraqi people in regions occupied by the so-called IS.

If you change the perspective (in Bauböck’s train-analogy) by turning your head to look out the opposite window, you will be confused to see that your train hasn’t been moving at all. The same confused feeling will occur once the train beside yours leaves the station and the station building appears again. An immediate sense of uncertainty has become palpable and you notice that your own perception and orientation are relative. Presumably solid points of orientation can begin moving and shifting, resulting in a new image. After such confusion, regaining and stabilizing orientation takes time.

Stabilizing the orientation seems easy in the case of optical uncertainty, but in a case of a societal background change, where personal resources consists primarily in internalized cultural capital of individuals (Bourdieu, 1983; Kröll, 2012), this process will take more time. With the help of these resources, individuals have to act and orient themselves in a new social context that represents new rules and assumptions. This is especially the case when the social field is not homogenous and consists of various sub-levels containing their own respective (unconscious) rules regarding, for example, different gender roles and gender-hierarchies. Furthermore, most situations of migration or flight involve new language(es) that may use another alphabet, languages which are based on a different internal structural logic, and which provide different modes of expression.

Rapidly-changing political circumstances can, for example, in a country in the midst of political upheaval, may lead to mass oppression of individuals and groups that are “traditionally oriented” to the society before.

An obvious choice for stabilizing orientation would be to fall back on broad categories, but this would run the risk of stereotyping and, in the case of conflicts, of mutual escalation.

2. Societies in upheaval – Subject and theory

Pierre Bourdieu developed his theoretical tools in the 1960s in Algeria, analyzing Algerian (specifically Kabyle) society under in the influence of French colonialization. The pre-capitalistic Kabyle society operated with a behavioral logic different than the capitalistic-influenced French society. Native Algerian people encountered the capitalistic logic of the French colonial empire and many individuals, especially in the cities, adjusted themselves under the prevalent circumstances to this new logic. As a result, there arose a break with or contradiction to the individuals acting from the old logic. Depending on the standpoint of acting individuals, either the background had changed, the individuals, or both (see also, Frisinghelli/Schultheis, 2003; Kröll, 2012). In order to be successful in a capitalistic economy, other resources (the Bourdieusian “types of capital”) and behavior patterns are necessary than those in a pre-capitalistic economy.

Bourdieu photographed during these changing times in Algeria. These photographs have the ability to serve as a mirror for better understanding dimensions and consequences of current economic and social upheavals (Schultheis 2003, pp.16 ff.). Most of the present societies have been “confronted with a brutal neoliberal radicalization of capitalism and its logic” (Schultheis 2003, pp. 16f., translation by TK ¹). More and more segments of the population are affected and “they are confronted with a new economic logic that demands a completely flexible and mobile labor force without history or social commitment. This logic is incompatible with the patterns of thinking and behavior of many people.” (Schultheis 2003, p. 16, translation by TK ²)

There is an apparent analogy between the “deruralized” farmers of Kabylia and “the dismantled and deregulated employees of present capitalistic societies”

¹ „mit einer brutalen neoliberalen Radikalisierung des Kapitalismus und seiner Logik konfrontiert“ (Schultheis 2003: 16)

² „Auch sie sind mit einer neuen ökonomischen Logik konfrontiert, die vollkommen flexible und mobile, geschichts- und bindungslose Arbeitskräfte fordert, eine Logik, die mit ihren grundlegenden Denk- und Handlungsschemata schlicht nicht zu vereinbaren ist.“ (Schultheis 2003: 16)

(Schultheis, 2003, p. 18, translation by TK³). One could compare the testimonies from the Algerian Kabyle with the results of the research conducted under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu and gathered in the collected works on the French society, “The Weight of the World” (Bourdieu et al. 1997 “Das Elend der Welt”). More current changes are taking place in European societies due to the so-called “refugee crisis.”

The TFG conducted a study with young employees from the service sector (in Germany) with an approach analogue to Bourdieu’s premise that (young) employees are affected by the strong pressures of economic modernization, which can be described as the “neoliberal pressure of modernization” (Kröll 2013, p. 79). Individuals orient themselves under this pressure and it influences them with regards to their solidary actions as well as their subjective agency. In an interview with the German magazine *SPIEGEL*, Bourdieu compared the effect of neoliberalism on the stability of societies with the effect of AIDS on the human body:

Neoliberalism is a siege weapon that declares an economic fatalism against which any resistance seems futile. It is like AIDS: it attacks the immune system of its victims.” (Bourdieu 2001, p. 120, translation by TK⁴)

In their study, the TFG looked at solidarity among young employees working in the service sector and their subjective agency. The Bourdieusian analogy of the immune system was proven to be true: Solidary action in the working environment seemed to be permanently affected by the impact of neoliberal economic policy. The study began shortly before the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers and the European financial and economic crisis. The main part of the research was conducted in the period at the beginning of the crisis (2007-2010).

One main result of the study was that individuals interested in the sustainable and solidary modernization of the work environment (and society) face the challenge of supporting the resistance “against the neoliberal invasion” (Bourdieu 1998, translation by TK⁵) and of “(re)creating stable spaces where communal solidary actions and learning experiences are encouraged and made possible again.” (Kröll 2013, p. 94, translation by TK⁶).

³ „dem demontierten und deregularisierten Arbeitnehmer heutiger kapitalistischer Gesellschaften“ (Schultheis 2003: 18)

⁴ „Der Neoliberalismus ist eine Eroberungswaffe, er verkündet einen ökonomischen Fatalismus, gegen den jeder Widerstand zwecklos erscheint. Er ist wie Aids: Er greift das Abwehrsystem seiner Opfer an.“ (Bourdieu 2001: 120)

⁵ „gegen die neoliberale Invasion“ (Bourdieu 1998)

⁶ „an der (Wieder-)Erschaffung von stabilen Räumen mitzuwirken, die gemeinschaftliches solidarische Handeln und Lernerfahrungen begünstigen oder

This does not take place without contradiction. Intense discussions and debates occur between groups with (seemingly) similar goals, but ideas regarding the means with which to reach them differ considerably (cf. Kaul, 2017 on the supposedly “meaningless violence” at the protests against G20 summit in Hamburg in July 2017). At the same time, universities are subject to increasing economic pressure and a certain “commercialization” and commodification that makes market-independent research more difficult.

The migration movements within Europe as a result of the financial crisis, and refugee movements to (central) Europe mainly as a result of the Syrian civil war, brought new players, topics, challenges, and uncertainties to public awareness. Politically-religious terror attacks contribute to uncertainties and influence the orientation of the various people involved.

3. Research for the people: Subject standpoint and understanding

Essentially, Bourdieu’s personal goal is an emancipatory research for the people. “Sociology isn’t worth a penny if it only provides knowledge from experts to experts” (Bourdieu 1993, p. 7, translation by TK ⁷). This was the main driving force behind Bourdieu’s political involvement and what led him to publish the anthology “Acts of Resistance”⁸ (1998). Bourdieu wants to connect economic and social policy and demands a return to the roots of social misery:

The sociologist, who is usually just summoned to glue the crockery shattered by the economists, could remember on this occasion that sociology could infer on the political decision-making level, which is frequently left to economists. Human suffering, caused by neoliberal politics (as we described it in “The Weight of the World”) must be described and related to the social policy of companies (redundancies, types of employment contracts, wages), their economic outcome (profit and productivity) and their typical social indicators like work accidents, occupational illnesses, alcoholism, drug use, suicide, delinquencies, felonies, rape, and similar. The foundation for an economy of happiness could only be reached on that basis. It would be an economy that would take into account things, economic leaders and economists don’t –

überhaupt erst wieder möglich machen.“ (Kröll 2013: 94)

⁷ „Die Soziologie wäre keine Stunde der Mühe wert, sollte sie bloß ein Wissen von Experten für Experten sein.“ (Bourdieu 1993: 7)

⁸ Original French: „Contre-Feux“; in German: Gegenfeuer.

strategies that are the guidelines on behalf of which the politicians wish to govern us. (Bourdieu 1997, pp. 54-55, translation by TK ⁹)

The TFG rejects as does Bourdieu the scientific “observer’s point of view”. Keeping in mind one’s own point of view, (emancipative) interests, and the impossibility of neutrality, there can be no attempt to place scientific interests on a pedestal. A completely different approach is realized in viewing the role of science as part of a process and, ideally, as a catalyst that helps all those involved to advance. ¹⁰

This approach has been described in the publication on the TFG-project “Vielfalt gefällt!” in which practice-projects in the academic field of migration/integration were given support from the TFG-team:

Research, from our standpoint, is a form of cooperation, in which researcher, practitioner and user are not bound to hierarchies but instead stand in intersubjective relation to one another, so that all retain their subject status. We want to support a process of social self-understanding, where the opportunities and distinguished characteristics of the respective project are made apparent to every participant.” (Held/Bröse/Kechaja 2015, p. 19, translation by TK ¹¹)

⁹ „Der Sozialwissenschaftler, der gewöhnlich nur gerufen wird, um das von Wirtschaftlern zerschlagene Geschirr zu kitten, könnte bei dieser Gelegenheit daran erinnern, dass die Soziologie auf jener politischen Entscheidungsebene eingreifen müsste, die immer häufiger Ökonomen überlassen wird. Die menschlichen Leiden, die durch neo-liberale Politik verursacht werden (wie wir es in der Studie ‘Das Elend der Welt’ beschrieben haben) müssen dargestellt und mit der Sozialpolitik der Unternehmen (Entlassungen, Art der Anstellungsverträge, Gehälter), ihren wirtschaftlichen Ergebnissen (Profite, Produktivität) und den typischen sozialen Indizien wie Arbeitsunfällen, Berufskrankheiten, Alkoholismus, Drogenkonsum, Selbstmord, Vergehen und Verbrechen, Vergewaltigungen und ähnlichen in Beziehung gesetzt werden. Erst auf dieser Grundlage kann man das Fundament zu einer Ökonomie des Glücks legen. Es wäre eine Ökonomie, die endlich berücksichtigen würde, was Wirtschaftsführer und -wissenschaftler bei ihren phantastischen Berechnungen alles außer Acht lassen - Berechnungen, auf deren Basis uns die Politiker regieren wollen.“ (Bourdieu 1997: 54f)

¹⁰. Basis and prerequisite for this are implicit: shared fundamental values and orientations regarding humane, solidary society, which receives no further mention.

¹¹ „Forschung ist also für uns eine Form von Kooperation, wobei zwischen Forschenden, Praktikern und Nutzern kein hierarchisches Gefälle bestehen soll, sondern eine sogenannte Intersubjektivitätsbeziehung, die jedem Teil seinen Subjektstatus lässt. Wir wollen also einen Prozess sozialer Selbstverständigung unterstützen, wodurch allen Beteiligten deutlicher wird, was das jeweilige Projekt auszeichnet und welche Möglichkeiten darin stecken.“ (Held/Bröse/Kechaja 2015: 19)

Such processes of social self-understanding in France were encouraged by the study “The Weight of the World”¹² (Bourdieu 2001/2012).

4. An outline: Cultural people – Individual cultures, orientations and scope of agency in fields

The focus of German Critical Psychology and the resultant orientation approach is the standpoint of the individual subjects (“each me and I”¹³), which is placed in relation to society and social context. The Bourdieusian approach is ideally compatible with this focus. Critical psychology’s perspective “from the subject’s point of view” corresponds with Bourdieu’s “understanding” (Bourdieu et al. 1997, pp. 79ff.). Bourdieu’s scientific tools make it possible to grasp and structure the relation between the subjects’ personal resources and social circumstances.

Society consists of social fields and individuals with specific orientations. The Bourdieusian capital approach provides a scientific tool with which to describe the resources available to the respective agents in social fields. The orientation approach makes it possible to become aware of the internalized basis for orientation (in various fields).

The U35-study of the TFG outlined an integrated model to illustrate the relation between the structural level and subject level. The goal of the integrated model is to avoid the misrepresentation of top-down models, in which individuals and their orientations are seen as direct results of social conditions.

An additional mediation level has been placed between the social structural level and the subject level (Held et al. 2011, p. 22).

Figure 1: Relations between the structural level and subject (orientation approach of the TFG)

Structural level:

- social structure
- social context
- structures of meanings/culture

Mediation level

- subjective meanings/orientations

¹³ In german: “je ich”. This kind of focus is fundamentally different to a neoliberal view and involves a perspective which enables and integrates solidarity to the other “each me and I’s”.

- subjective justifications
- Subject level
- lifestyle
 - everyday actions

On the structural level, various facts and circumstances are taken into consideration. Of particular importance are the economic structure and the political structure, both gathered under the umbrella term “social structure,” and the communication structure (media, social media, general public). The respective dominant language is also important from the standpoint of the subject.

The structural levels are mediated to the subject through subjective meanings, justifications, and orientations.

For example, neoliberal economic structures are increasingly accompanied by social insecurity (precariousness) on the subject level, which has an impact on subjective orientations and justifications, and affects an individual’s lifestyle and everyday scope of action. In this way, the middle class of economically-strong European countries is increasingly defined by the fear of job loss, which impacts subjective agency, as well as the subjectively-reasonable demands and possible courses of action.

The Bourdieusian structural level is defined as a “field” or “fields”. Agency in these fields is determined by the various types of capital individuals are equipped with. The *embodied cultural capital* plays a significant role in the subjective action at the level of mediation between the structural level (fields) and the subjects. This type of capital is linked to the body: “The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is called ‘culture’ in French, ‘cultivation’ and English, and ‘*Bildung*’ in German, presupposes a *process of incorporation*, which [...] *costs time*” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 244).

There are common and known “rules” respective to these fields and Bourdieu describes them with the term “doxa.”

Figure 2: Relation between the structural level and subject (Bourdieu)

- Structural level(s)
 - fields
- Mediation level
 - embodied cultural capital
 - doxa (the common and known rules in a field)
- Subject level
 - habitus

In order to be effective, specific cultural goods or achievements have their necessary equivalents and complements within the subjects' internalized cultural capital. In music, for example, it is necessary to be able to read music and play an instrument (internalized cultural capital) in order to use the reified cultural capital (a composition, piano or guitar).¹⁴ The whole of internalized cultural capital represents an ensemble of "individual cultures" that correlate with the related social fields.

Neither of the above-mentioned scientific models explicitly describe the levels of values and morality, which serve as the bases for individual action. These can be of religious or secular (such as human rights) nature.

The supposedly natural rules of a field (Bourdieu) and/or the structures of meaning in a society are determined by all kinds of social (power) structures. The various rules and/or meaning structures can be diametrically opposed and thereby trigger moral conflicts in individuals. They influence (free) action. It is possible, for example, that individuals oppose a political regime for religious or humanistic reasons (as based on rules, meaning structures, or "values"). In terms of concrete action, other aspects (such as fears, scope of agency in societal and social hierarchies, and relations between groups) play a role.

On the subject level, the individual's place in the society or, more precisely, in "various social fields" plays a role: of importance are both self and external definitions, as with, for example, categories such as gender or skin color, which likely intersect.

Societal situations and conflicts appear perfectly suited to be analyzed objectively. In concrete situations, history (historical aspect) plays an enormous role. Relations between various groups ("collectives") have already and will become "history." These histories are passed down in various ways and the individual cannot escape them. This can be realized on the level of the "each me and I" (Klaus Holzkamp's "je ich"). In reality, where concrete, subjective experiences and feelings are also playing a role, dynamics can develop in which objective analyses seem immediately a *reductio ad absurdum*.

5. Upheaval – Orientations and actions

Bourdieu developed his approach in Algeria during times of upheaval under the influence of the French colonial empire. The tools he developed there he later applied to French society under the influence of neoliberal upheavals.

¹⁴ There are also individuals who can play a composition without knowing how to read music.

This approach differs in its application to refugees, in which case the structural levels are in flux (as mentioned in Bauböck's "train-analogy"). The old and familiar social fields that formerly directed their usual scope of action and determined their cultural capital are disappearing. Refugees are forced adjust to new fields both during and after their journey. Certain structures are replaced by others.

Growing up, child refugees become acquainted with uncertainty and, in severe cases, (sexual) abuse as a quasi-normality.

In response to the orientation uncertainties of their attachment figure, children living in such conditions are hardly able to learn stable social relations. Ethnic background and gender roles present themselves in such situations as stable and obvious foundations for personal orientation and "identity."

The social anthropologist Joke Schrijvers (Universiteit van Amsterdam) describes the latter using the example of internal refugees in Sri Lanka (Schrijvers, 1997). The researchers made it possible for those being interviewed to express their subject-standpoint as freely as possible:

I did not work with a questionnaire, but left maximum room for the refugees themselves to come up with their own subjects and points of view, their own needs and analyses of the situation they found themselves in after their flight. (Schrijvers 1999, p. 48)

Of interest are Schrijvers' findings with regards to the actions and various orientations of men and women in the refugee camps resulting from the civil war in Sri Lanka. The conditions and circumstances can be described from Bauböck's depiction of the confusions caused by changing backgrounds. Schrijvers observed internal refugees living in Sri Lankan camps, where life continued to go on: informal schools were established, religious rituals were observed and festivals were celebrated. Schrijvers was able to identify a pattern that made it possible for social and cultural life to keep going in the camps (Schrijvers 1997, p. 8). Ethnic background and gender became the most important tools with which to "normalize life" (ibid., 3). At first glance, it seemed that women in the camps were in a better position. They did what they had done before: domestic work and arranging the everyday life of the family. Their gender identity remained stable. Men, on the other hand, experienced a complete rupture with their past (ibid., 13). They lost their work, wealth, and the socio-economic position that came with it: everything that had defined their identity as men fell apart. One possible way of escaping the situation was through alcohol. Some men tended towards emphasizing their ethnic background or their masculinity as a way to reclaim their identity. Others used violence against women as a way to restore the old dynamic.

This example demonstrates how differentiated the various orientations of refugees are, and how fundamental categories like ethnic background and gender become the most obvious refuge when trying to regain some semblance of stability in life.¹⁵

The same categories seem to apply also to the receiving societies. Thus, in Germany, polarizing positions that create a division between “us” and “the refugees” (regardless of origin) become stronger. The disrespectful behavior of some male refugees against (German) women was and is depicted and justified in public discussions in terms of ethnicity. Insecurity on all sides seems to increasingly provoke polarizations. Ultimately, the only way to avoid or fight against this is through establishing meetings and creating enough space (and time) to do so. Such a thing takes time and considerate, engaged people working on it, along with financial resources and profound knowledge e.g. of intercultural communication.

This presents the problem and task of finding ways to sustainably achieve this in societies where the national budget has come under the neoliberal austerity mandate and where, for years, everything has been set in motion to ensure that the free market and individualization are the best solutions.

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