

Empirical research on the basis of Critical Psychology: The evaluation of a social integration program as an example

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Abstract

The Tübingen Research Group works on the basis of Berlin Critical Psychology (CP). CP supplies the basic terms, the framework and the strategies for empirical research. At the heart of the categorial approach of CPs is the concept of “agency”. Individuals desire to expend their agency and this applies in a special manner for migrants.

From 2013 to 2016, we have evaluated a program with 60 integration projects. We have extended our definition of integration for this purpose: we define integration from the standpoint of the subjects. What are their needs and how do they try to expand their agency? The development and expansion of agency in the integration-process require some resources. We sorted the 60 projects in our evaluation research into four dimensions. We used Bourdieu’s forms of capital as a point of orientation and interpreted these as resources for integration. This enables us to ask what the resources are that supported by the integration projects? Our understanding is that the increase of resources promotes integration. Meanwhile we have noticed that the development of resources secures neither the level of respect and status of a person nor the automatic advancement of a person in our society. Society has distinctive criteria of what is accepted as capital. For example, mastering different languages is not automatically an advantage. Subtle mechanisms of power take care of reproducing a hierarchic structure. In addition to the development of resources, it is necessary to fight for acceptance/recognition of the resources. Projects of integration can support the user in their “fight for belonging and acceptance/recognition”.

Keywords

evaluation, integration, subject-scientific approach

The Tübingen Research Group (TFG) works on the basis of Berlin Critical Psychology (CP). CP supplies the basic terms, the framework and the strategies for our empirical research. At the center of the fundamental category approach of CP lies the concept of *agency*. Agency means, on the one hand, the general human ability to act, and on the other hand the empirical amount of individual agency. The individual desires to expend his or her agency and this applies in a special manner to migrants, because they are in an extraordinary restricted situation. The human ability to act and empirical agency are both part of the Subject paradigm.

The term *subject* emphasizes the active momentum of human action. It reaches back to the philosopher Immanuel Kant and the tradition of German idealism. The analytical quality of the term lies within its ambiguity: *subject* means on the one hand – especially in German – the autonomous individual, and on the other hand, because of the Latin stem of the word, it refers to the individual who is submitted to the totality of social circumstances. The English and French expression still contains this specific meaning. In CP every action and every orientation of the subject is seen as societally mediated, i.e. the societal context has to be considered.

For research methodology this means the following: If research – the same goes for practice – is a process of cooperating with individuals, then individuals should be seen as acting subjects with their own intentions, their own history and culture, living under their own societal circumstances. Their personal living conditions have to be included. This leads in terms of research methodology to case studies (Held, 2001; Riegel, 2004).

Respecting individuals as subjects isn't the full solution yet, it is only the starting point of another kind of methodological approach. The relationship between researcher and subjects must fundamentally undergo a critical reflection process. The question is which perspective research should take, especially in the field of social integration research: the perspective of the majority or of the minority? The constellation of the relation should be reflected on critically, especially if the researcher is part of the majority (Riegel & Kaya, 2002).

In an evaluation project researchers have to choose either to follow the perspective of the majority or the perspective of the minority as the main perspective of their research. Both ways are possible but not simultaneously; and both of the perspectives have significant consequences on the outcome of the research.

The recognition of the subject-nature of the research-user cannot really prevent that the research-user gets the role of an object after all, so that the control over the research-user is reinforced. In the subject-scientific approach

there is a distinction between *subject-orientation* and *the standpoint of the subject*. A longer quote thereto:

Holzkaamps (1996) critique (on qualitative research) involves the distinction between subject-orientation and “science from the standpoint of the subject”. Subject-orientation is concerned if the individual ways of thinking and courses of action are in focus from an external point of view, with the purpose of gathering knowledge about possible causes of individual action with the aim of gaining influence.¹ (Osterkamp, 2001)

This critique articulates that on one hand the individual can be taken seriously in the context of research and as a subject they can be treated with respect, but on the other hand it could simultaneously result in a subtle method of gaining a lot of information about an individual and thus of gaining a lot of influence and control. For this reason the Berlin critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp pleads for a “Science from the standpoint of the subject” and favors another approach: “It isn’t about the assessment (Erfassung) of individuals, their way of thinking and their course of action, rather the subject-matter of the analysis are concrete living conditions in their subjective meaning” (Osterkamp, 2001).

This is similar to a simple sentence of the famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin, that the nature of the action (Handlung) of a person depends directly on his recognition of the situation. How a person perceives his or her own environment cannot be grasped from an external point of view:

Because concrete/specific living conditions in their subjective meanings can be only perceived from the person involved in the living conditions, individuals involved aren’t on the object side but on the side of the “researchers”. (Osterkamp, 2001: 8)

The subject approach in evaluation research

An evaluation from the perspective of the subject must be practiced from *the standpoint of the subject*. The subject is participating in the research and therefore stands on the side of the researcher and not on the object side. Everyone involved in the research is in an *intersubjective mode of relation* to each other. The subject-matter of the analysis are experiences from the standpoint of the subject, which are articulated and communicated in the language of subjective reasons.

¹ All translations by Josef Held.

Evaluation research as a subject-science approach is close to practice and is relevant and promising for practice. But in practice there is mistrust against evaluators (e.g., Köbberling & Lux, 2007: 77). There are fears of control, valuation and discipline and evaluators are often considered as agents of the employers and sponsors/investors. A negative evaluation can risk the progress or damage the image of the project. This negative attitude is mainly based on negative experiences with evaluations and is hard to change. The principles of loyalty and fairness of the German Association for Evaluation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Evaluation) are not making a big difference in this case. Important is to establish an *intersubjective mode of relations* between researchers and practitioners from the beginning. A substantial requirement is that practitioners should count on that concrete information about their projects is not passed on to employers and sponsors/investors. If that is not possible, then subject-science “from the standpoint of the subject” is not possible either (Holzkamp, 1991).

An *intersubjective mode of relationship* can be established if the participants, i.e. practitioners and users, are not seen as objects of the research but as *co-researchers* standing on the side of research. In this sense research turns into cooperation, contains reflection of the practice and serves the “social self-reflection” of the participants (Holzkamp, 1996: 95ff). The substance of this is a dialogical analysis of possibilities of actions and societal mediated obstructions. The goal is the “emancipatory relevance“ of research for the practice (Köbberling & Lux, 2007: 74), i.e. that the participants realize their dependence, restrictions and discriminations and take countermeasures against them. This is not only a task for practice but also for research. One research question, for example, could be: What kind of practice can encourage “empowerment”, i.e. reduce powerlessness and helplessness? (Vossebrecher & Jeschke, 2007). Accordingly, the criteria of evaluation should reflect on the participants’ extension of agency.

Researchers cannot limit their focus to support a project immanently, they also need to consider the social, institutional and societal context and the societal relevance of problems in practice. The main goal of practitioners and their clients is not only to support a good project, but to see themselves confronted with social and societal conditions which interfere with their work. If practitioners meet the challenge of the latter, then research should be able to support them.

The above-mentioned remarks on the standpoint of subject should neither result in a distinct subject-scientific method nor in a distinct evaluation concept for the evaluation research. Previous methods and approaches – after a critique of their shortcomings – should rather be reinterpreted and reconstructed in order to meet subject-scientific requirements.

This applies for instance to the approach of the responsive evaluation (Grohmann, 1996: 79 ff). The concept of the responsive evaluation “*responds* to the information and evaluation requests of the stakeholder. The person who evaluates has a function as a *body of resonance* for the program. The person acts primarily as a survey instrument” (Beywl, 2006: 103). In this case practitioners and users of a program gather around a table to exchange and discuss ideas. Hence the method of “focus group discussion” is often applied (Bohnsack, Przyborski, & Schäffer, 2006).

This approach shows that there are different subject positions to consider: on one side the practitioners, who conduct the program, and on the other side the users of the program and the researchers. One task of the evaluative researcher would be the organization of the exchange between practitioners and users, or only between practitioners or only between users. The most important point is that users of the program take the crucial subject-position. Research about users of social work is still in its beginning (Bitzan, Bolay, & Thiersch, 2006; Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2006) and this research desideratum. This is the case of a “user-driven evaluation (Beywl, 2006: 107f). However a “Critical User Research” should be strived for. “It asks for the actual practical value for the user involved in social work.” (Hirschfeld 2012: 269).

The subject approach in social integration research

The subject approach in research and practice means that no person will be an object of evaluation. Participants are considered as actors and the aim is to strengthen their position. Practitioners and the users of the social integration programs are considered as target groups, i.e., it is about a dialogic process. The actions of both groups – social workers and users – are subjectively motivated, as well as socially mediated.

If social integration is understood as a subject-process, then it is hard to imagine how someone is capable of externally achieving objectives. It is possible to maintain the illusion of the direct implementation of goals of the individuals through staged measures at school. The goals are implemented in the curriculum and the syllabus, without asking pupils about their own goals. It is hardly the case in youth work. If a person doesn’t want to be changed, he/she can avoid or refuse it. This statement isn’t of a moral nature, it is only implying that external attempts to change an individual, even in social integration programs, don’t work. In the subject-scientific theory of learning this is called the “teaching-learning short cut” (Holzkamp, 1993: 417). The assumption of a direct connection between pedagogical action and effect is a short circuit. This is

because the subject character of a person, who is to be changed, has not been considered. The pedagogue has to realize if he/she needs intercultural competence to shape situations in a satisfactory way. As a result, the student for example has to have a motive to learn and thus has to make an effort to participate in learning programs. These reasons are called in the subject science theory of learning “expansive learning reasons”. These reasons differ essentially from the defensive reasons of learning (“defensive learning”), which are related to external pressure (cf. Holzkamp, 1993). Defensive learning reasons are unfortunately predominant in schools and also in intercultural learning arrangements. On the basis of subjective reasons, we can only decide what pedagogically has to be done.

The particular interest of a subject-science approach is the subjective view of the users of social integration projects. Social pedagogy uses the term “user research”, and there are also first the contours visible of a “social-pedagogical user research” (Oelerich & Schaarschuch, 2006). More detailed is the concept of the “critical user research” (Hirschfeld, 2012): “It asks for the actual practical value for the parties involved in social work” (Hirschfeld, 2012: 269). A distinction is made between the potential benefit and the actual benefit of the target group. The user research should at least distinguish “between the benefit of subjection and the benefit of autonomy” (Hirschfeld 2012: 272). This is why the feeling of subjective benefit has to be questioned.

Evaluation of a social integration program as an example

From 2013 to 2016 we evaluated a program with 60 social integration projects. We have extended our definition of social integration for this purpose. We define social integration from the standpoint of the Subjects. What are their needs how do they try to expand their agency?

The central factor for the success of a social integration project we have found is reaching the target group and this depends on the intensity and equality of the relationship to the target group. It is also a result of the political climate in the special region.

Reaching the target group means that the migrants accept the project and use it for their own purpose. This is the sign of seeing the chances to extend their own agency and it depends on the possibilities society gives or refuses. Society is the important context. In integration projects, the connection between migrants, project employees and institutions/organisations decides if migrants can use the project for their own purpose. We know that self-determination, in our society, is the exception rather than the rule.

The development and expansion of agency in the social integration process needs some resources. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed a theory of different forms of capital. They play a crucial role in the position of a person in the society. These forms of capital can be seen as resources. On the road to a “successful social integration”, based on the Bourdieusian theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1983), there are 4 dimensions to distinguish:

- *Structural resources* refer to the access to social goods and positions (this dimension relates to the Bourdieusian “economic capital”).
- *Cultural resources* refer to the (individual) acquisition of skills/competencies for the participation in the society.
- *Social resources* refer to the participation in private and social activities. In this dimension the respective social milieu is of particular importance.
- *Political resources* cover the fight for belonging and acceptance and thus for political participation. This dimension refers to the Bourdieusian “symbolic capital”. This includes the appreciation, acceptance and recognition which migrants experience.

These forms of capital are not independent of each other, but each of them can be converted into another. If a person, for example, has high cultural capital and thereby gains access to social goods or positions, he can increase his structural capital.

We sorted the 60 projects of our evaluation research into the abovementioned 4 dimensions. We used the Bourdieusian forms of capital as an orientation and interpreted these as resources of social integration. This categorization enables us to ask which kinds of resources these social integration projects support. Our understanding is that the increase of resources promotes social integration.

Meanwhile we have noticed that our concept of capital doesn't consider the critical aspect of the Bourdieusian theory properly. This is because the development of resources in itself doesn't provide either the respective situation and status of a person or the automatic advancement of a person in our society. The society has distinctive criteria of what is accepted as capital. For example, mastering different languages is not automatically an advantage. Subtle mechanisms of power take care of reproducing a hierarchic structure.

In addition to the development of resources the fight for recognition of the resources is necessary.

Projects of social integration can support the users in their “fight for belonging and recognition”. Richard Sennett proposes 3 kinds of basic conditions of recognition *in our society*: “The first way occurs through self-development, particularly through developing abilities and skills. [...] The second way lies in care of the self. [...] The third way to earn respect is to give back to others”

(Sennett, 2003: 63f). This is the basis of the fight for recognition. The dimensions of social integration do not only mark the structure of resources, but both the essential activation of resources and the joint fight for recognition of abovementioned resources.

Important for the project of our research group TFG at the evaluation of the program “Diversity likes – 60 Places of Integration” are the following work principles:

- The addressees are not objects but subjects (co-researcher principle)
- The principle of the “social self-reflection”, i.e. the reflection on the own behavior in focus
- Common interest in the improvement of the practice
- Support of the practice as principle
- Dialogue and participation
- Transparency and conclusiveness
- Subject-orientation
- Respect
- Distance and proximity

Research design

The first step was to determine our (critical) concept of “social integration”, on the basis of long-standing examinations of it (Sauer & Held, 2009). We developed so-called Integration Criteria of oriented on the Bourdieusian concept on forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2005). We distinguish between structural, cultural, social and political ways of integration. These categories aren't meant from a demand-perspective but they rather are on the offer-side to increase the agency of migrants. The 60 projects have been categorized along these criteria.

As a consequence of the discussion of the available material (project proposals and reports) and relevant academic literature basic hypotheses and first theories of possibilities and sets of problems are generated. This step of the evaluation is the *1st instance* of the above-mentioned framework, namely the formulation of hypotheses.

The second step was to visit all the 60 projects in their respective locations and conduct semi-structured expert interviews and ethnographic observations which helps at the self-reflection and encourages the reflection on the own activities and practice. The interviews were recorded on camera and tape. Our experience was that the practitioners welcomed this approach because they knew it wasn't meant as a way of control and that the recordings weren't made public. The interviews were a part of the *1st instance* (formation of hypotheses) but they

have drawn elements of the 2nd instance, namely the clarification in an open discussion between practitioners and researchers.

This dialogue is intensified with selected projects and is quintessential for the 2nd instance. In this formative phase of evaluation researchers are staying in regular contact with the projects for a whole year. In this way hypotheses and theories can be compared and discussed with the practice. Every project has the right for a feedback about the gathered information of the very project and this feedback can be discussed with the researchers on request. This 2nd phase focuses on the scientific support where a number of interesting projects are selected (out of the 60) for a more detailed view related to the dimension of social integration they are affiliated with. The focus isn't on promoting "Best Practices" but on identifying opportunities and sets of problems affecting the promotion of agency.

Users of the selected projects are intensively analyzed. The method of group discussions (focus groups) is the center of the analysis. Users aren't played off against practitioners but the collaboration between them was encouraged. Selected projects particularly were scientific supervised i.e. an intensified communication is taking place.

The 3rd instance is not a subsequent step but a part of the formative evaluation phase, since in this phase opportunities and sets of problems of the very projects are consistently addressed and solutions searched and tested. This corresponds with "data-driven problem and solution theories" (Reimer, 2011: 28).² This instance includes case studies and thematic analyses across cases.

The 4th instance is about identifying the scope of results, hence the generalization. By discussing current results with practitioners, they are automatically involved in the theory construction concerning the generalization of possibilities, i.e. which possibilities apply for whom.

The aim of all of the above-mentioned instances is to improve the practice. Only in the 5th instance, the summative evaluation in the last year of project terms is the focus on the solution theories developed in the course of the projects and if these theories were successful.

A documentary was filmed about the evaluation project on one hand for information purposes about the scientific results and on the other hand to give ideas on self-evaluation for projects not involved in the evaluation project.

² „...datengegründeten Problem- und Lösungstheorien“ (Reimer, 2011: 28)

The developing of resources in the social integration practice – An example of a single project

In a little city at the river Danube, in which many migrants reside, was a social integration project of a social institution taking place. A social educator (originally coming from Kazakhstan) is leading a group of migrants coming from Russian-speaking regions. The group undertakes lots of social and cultural activities and they increase they own resources.

The initial problem was that different migrant groups of the city were *“almost invisible in the life of the society”*. The disappointment was expressed by a person: *“We are here since 20 years and the natives had no interest at all!”* With many cultural activities the project is making an effort to make people with a migration background visible. As the leader of the group puts it: *“The project is helping us to find ourselves, it is helping to find a common path to integrate ourselves in this community, to make ourselves noticeable, and with the help of the many events our self-esteem has grown high.”*

All the participants of the group were stating that *“participation in the community”* is what they are looking for. They called with many cultural actions and activities for attention and it was *“well received”*. They don't deny their heritage, they rather emphasize it. That requires courage and major effort in the community. Important for them is making contact with people with and without a migration background.

The answers to the question, what the personal benefit of the program for them is, were *“self-affirmation [and] self-confidence (...)”*. This personal benefit of the program was described from a participant as follows:

“I took everything that was proposed to me. I am now a very different person as I was when I came here. I was in fear, should I ask this or that? (...) I was like a mouse, but now I am completely different and that is nice.”

The leader of the project continues: *“Yes, the pleasure of creating something on our own, [...] we are recognized, integrated with [the help of] our own creations. We shouldn't assimilate or pretend, we want to do what we love doing and therefore we get somehow accepted (nodding and consent of the participants).”*

The improvement of the own resources through theatre plays, dance events and exhibitions etc. has a prerequisite, namely overcoming fear, gaining self-confidence, enjoying to achieve something on your own and being recognized. The successful *“updating the mental resources”* isn't limited to cognitive learning

processes, but needs emotional support and involves structural, cultural, social and political processes as well.

“Integration” we understand as a mutual process in which the migrants, the professional supporters, the researchers and the majority their mental resources and their empathy arise. For this task all these groups are called on to participate and to create the assumption for participation. That would be a real *intersubjective* process in practice and in research.

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