Cultural Practice

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Why reading this text:

This text invites you to reflect about the following questions: What are cultural practices and how can they be understood? Why do people do the things they do? Is "culture" the appropriate explanation for people's behavior, or are there more apt explanations to describe it? And how do these questions affect the school environment? In the coming sections, these questions will be answered one by one. First, the historical development of the question why people do what they do will be traced. After the discussion, an example from school lessons is described. This should illustrate to you the significance, but also the difficulties of the questions in the school environment.

Historical Context

Nowadays, when we are dealing with the question of why people do what they do, it is highly important to keep the following in mind: Scientific attempts to explain human behaviour have a centuries-old history and this history unconsciously influences our present-day assumptions and attitudes. Since its birth, scientific research has helped shape public opinion, however, entire explanatory models in science have often turned out to be wrong and have been abandoned. Nevertheless, opinions and attitudes based on them are still widespread in society. Even if these have long been scientifically debunked, they live on in people. It is thus necessary to review history briefly in order to deal with today's issues.

The first thing that will be highlighted here is the science since its birth. Starting from the natural sciences of biology, chemistry or botany that emerged in the 18th century - with Charles Darwin as the central figure - the social sciences which emerged later initially oriented themselves towards these. In the beginning, models from the animal and plant world were applied to humans, and Darwin's vocabulary was used to subdivide humans into "races", to identify "subspecies" or to address the supposed "purity" or "mixing" of different groups. As a result, the question of why people do what they do was answered with a simple explanation: due to their genetics. This explanatory model is also called a *biologistical explanatory model* - it relates cultural diversity to biological characteristics and dispositions, different ways of life are explained by genetic differences. Not least because of the fatal use of this model by fascism, this attempted explanation was strongly criticized and ultimately refuted within the scientific community. Neither are cultural practices based on our DNA, nor are social differences genetically determined.

As part of this criticism of the biologistical explanatory model, a second explanatory model developed, which was shaped by anthropologists in the 1920s. The basic idea here was that humans are less influenced by birth than by growing up in societies and act accordingly. In this perspective, the term "culture", which describes the respective social environment, plays an important role. The prevailing values, norms, world views and beliefs are internalized by us. The respective local "culture" determines our actions and points of view. The question of why people do what they do is answered here with a different explanation: due to their culture. This view of seeing humans as cultural beings shaped by their environment is referred to as the *culturalist explanatory model* and is still prevalent in public today.

While this approach was able to replace the outdated biologistic explanatory model, it still falls into the same pitfall: presumed groups are still being identified - once through genetics, now through culture - which share similar patterns of behaviour and attitudes and are self-enclosed. The difficulty here is that this model is still very simplistic because it reduces humans to their cultural background.

Both scientific research and everyday experiences from one's own life show that people are complex and always have a certain freedom to shape their lives. We unconsciously take over many things from our society, at the same time we reject a number of things and thus shape our very own way of life. It is also often the case that perspectives within cultural groups can differ massively and that dividing lines do not run between cultural groups, but rather between individuals. Since the 1970s, there has been a heated debate in science about how to understand and explain the complexity of human interactions without using overly simplistic models. To describe the current approaches in detail would go far beyond the scope, thus only one explanatory model will be discussed here.

Discussion

What should have become evident so far is that we are certainly deeply shaped by our background and our experiences, but at the same time we also have many opportunities to choose and change things. We represent more than our cultural background, rather we define ourselves through our decisions and actions. This focus on actions is also scientifically termed a *praxeological explanatory model*, since it first looks at the concrete practice of single individuals rather than defining groups in advance. The general current state of social science, even if other explanatory models than the praxeological are used, is roughly speaking that people are complex - i.e. cannot be reduced to one aspect of their identity, but think and act in many diverse ways.

In this way, we can now define cultural practices more accurately. In terms of content, the term covers the entire breadth of cultural manifestations, be it carnival in Upper Austria or the Día de Muertos in Mexico City, be it Sunday masses in Munich or Friday prayer in Medina. But more importantly, less obvious practices are also included, as for example the grading and generally the institution of school as a specific cultural practice - terms such as "education", "general knowledge" or "achievement" are culturally coined. "Cultural" in this context generally implies that we have learnt the meaning and the rationale for the practice in our social environment. "Practices" refer not merely to the pure practice but also to the fact that there is always a dynamic transformation while doing it. Thus, for example, rituals around 24 December can differ massively from each other in German-speaking countries, perhaps due to different habits in different households or a conscious distancing from the traditions of the previous generation. The most problematic aspect, however, is that cultural practices are often associated with a national territory, thus developing national ideas of a dominant and "true" *Leitkultur*. In a world that has always been characterized by migration and globalization, this can lead to conflict by creating hierarchies and excluding different groups. This is particularly critical within school contexts when different perceptions and experiences clash, as shown in the following example.

Practical Example

The study of the educational researcher Avihu Shoshana (2017) highlights these challenges in the school context. The approach of her research was to compare a class in civics at two different schools in Israel, which differ greatly in the socio-economic background of the students. The reading and discussion of the book "Brown Morning[1]", a French political fable by Franck Pavloff, is prescribed by the curriculum and the focus of her study.. While the first school is mainly attended by children from the "Narkis" community - a wealthy community with a so-called Ashkenazim background (European Jewish groups) - the second school is attended by children from the "Tavor" community, an economically weaker community with a so-called Mizrahim background (Jewish groups from the

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[1] It is a anti-racist allegory describing the process in which the two protagonists allow a totalitarian regime to take charge of their lives. First, the authorities prohibit the possession of dogs or cats that are not brown. New laws are gradually emerging, including the use of the word "brown" at the end of each sentence. The two protagonists find different justifications for accepting these increasingly drastic laws. Only too late does it become clear to them that they have become victims of a dictatorial government and that the possibility of resistance has disappeared.

Middle East, Asia and Africa). All teachers interviewed had an Ashkenazim background. Shoshana describes "dramatic differences in school routines" (2017:65) in the discussion about the book in the respective classrooms of the two schools. Two things were particularly notable: the varying interpretation of the content by the students and the differing reactions of the teachers, which led to completely different dynamics in the teaching in the different schools.

While the students of the wealthy Narkis community perceived the book as an intriguing narrative from the past, the students of the Tavor community spoke in the first person about their experiences with racism and brought up personal painful experiences. Furthermore, the Tavor-students were mainly concerned with the conditions that promoted racism and inequality in the book and not with the misconduct of the protagonists. However, the students were not given the opportunity to discuss their personal experiences and the emotions that arose in the classroom. Thus, a conflict developed in the Tavor school in which the pupils accused the teachers of not seeing their world and of imposing an interpretation of the book on them. In contrast, the discussion at the Narkis School went smoothly - the students' reactions were more intellectual and less emotional, linking the content not to experiences but to books already read. In the Narkis school, the teachers felt that the lesson was a great success, whereas the teachers in the Tavor school considered the lesson to have failed.

At this point Shoshana argues that the difficulties in the Tavor School are not the fault of the students. Rather, the narrow curriculum and the behavior of the teachers prescribe a strict interpretation in which the students do not feel valued and thus refuse further discussion since their emotions and views are not acknowledged. This is not an isolated case, but is based on a national educational system that prefers a single perspective and is not designed to incorporate alternative experiences from cultural groups. From a praxeological perspective, the specific implementation of the lesson ignored the complexity of the groups of students and favoured only one viewpoint - that of the majority Ashkenazim group. The cultural difference vis-à-vis the Mizrahim group, reproduced by the cultural practice of the lesson, is not based on natural differences, but on different social experiences. Therefore, in conclusion, it is necessary to point out that cultural practices are more than national or family traditions, but are closely linked to experiential worlds, personalities and perspectives. This complexity requires a sensitivity to perceive life worlds other than one's own, whether in school or elsewhere.

Thinking further:

How have the prevailing values and perspectives shaped me in my family?

Have I myself experienced conflicts between the values and views in my family and what was demanded of me at school?

To what extent do the backgrounds of experience of my students differ from mine?

Am I able to comprehend the realities of my students' lives and to provide space for personal experiences in class?

How often do I experience irritations in class? Do I attribute this to cultural differences?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES

Reflexivity, Doing School,

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