

Key words: Space and agency in refugee research.

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Paradox and missed opportunities

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Colleagues,

The introductory words delivered by Professor Schroeder have shed some light on the rather deficient state of refugee social research. This deficiency can be characterized by sporadic, descriptive, and unsystematic isolated studies – all of which with an evidently extremely low symbolic value in the academic setting. This point of departure, which both forms the basis of and justifies our current workshop, seems to me, however, to be a paradox in the light of the topicality of the refugee problem in Europe.

- After all, according to the statistics of the UNHCR, from a global perspective, the refugee phenomenon is on the rise for various reasons such as natural catastrophes, wars, poverty, and bad governance, among other things. Since the causes of flight are largely structurally determined, the EU, as one of the wealthiest, most stable, and structurally sound regions in the world, continues to constitute a preferred destination for many refugees from crisis areas despite its rather repressive refugee policies both internally and externally.

- The fact that refugees have also been granted access to EQUAL, one of the most politically important education and employment programs of the European Social Fund (ESF) in the last 6 years, can be interpreted as an indication that the social relevance of this target group can no longer be ignored on the level of European politics if a successful and sustainable integration and migration policy is to be framed. What is paradoxical in this respect is the low esteem in which such an important socio-political phenomenon or rather target group has been held by the social sciences.

- In addition, the fact that the evaluation as part and parcel of the EQUAL program was carried out by scientists in a significant number of the asylum Development Partnerships did not substantially contribute toward changing the appalling situation of refugee social research, since it is easy to see that most of the evaluation reports are rather descriptive and provide to varying degrees a critical balance of the implemented activities. They may also provide valuable empirical insights into the life situations or lived-in worlds of the refugees and into

the efforts of the Development Partnerships to improve their situation using various instruments for implementing the aims of the program provided under usually unchanged structural conditions and national legal frameworks. However, they lack any analysis guided by or generating theory as well as any stringent methodological examination which could serve as an impulse and thus also generate structuring effects on the scholarly discourse in this field. A survey on behalf of the ESF on the research initiated in the framework of EQUAL which was published last week unfortunately confirms the rather unflattering state of refugee research, both qualitatively and quantitatively. A mere 12 out of a total of 38 Development Partnerships active in the thematic area of asylum indicated that they had carried out accompanying research in the second funding period. Nonetheless, a closer inspection of the design of these research projects, that is, the problem under investigation, the research aim, method, and results, shows that they cannot evade the criticisms formulated here, as they are all chiefly concerned with the collection of practical knowledge in relation to the target group, the legal framework, types of flight, reasons specific to flight, etc. and thus rather constitute preparatory work for the formulation of consistent and fruitful research hypotheses in the sense indicated above. A research undertaking in the sense intended here can admittedly be better implemented in separate research projects which are able not only to devote themselves to basic issues, independent of the practical and strategic aims of the program, but also to continue their activities beyond the lifespan of the program in order to study the program's impact and sustainability, in other words, to study the transfer of the instruments – developed and tested to remove the disadvantages specific to this target group – in social structures. As is generally known, this is because well-founded statements concerning the success or failure of transferring project results of an experimental nature to regular structures can only be made with some time delay after the end of the experimental phase. However, since the evaluation in the EQUAL framework has to end at the end of the program, it can do little more than describe the mainstreaming activities of the Development Partnerships which aim at carrying out this transfer process and provide relatively unreliable prognoses concerning the likelihood of their success or failure. In this respect, too, EQUAL was once again, with few exceptions – such as the previously mentioned Swedish case for social research – a missed opportunity to scientifically deal with the problem complex of refugees.

- However, from the perspective of educational policy, what EQUAL has without doubt achieved (apart from being, in my view, a participant-orientated program with exemplary socio-philosophical intentions and strategic goals due to its consideration and inclusion of

refugees with uncertain residence status) is clarification of the difficulties that arise when funding instruments originally devised for national citizens are applied to refugees. In other words, extending EQUAL, a policy instrument designed for the European employment market, to include refugees and asylum seekers living in the EU occurs in a mode that is far too hesitant in terms of its non-discriminatory intention and at heart still too oriented toward nationalistic principles and interests to seriously question the discriminatory policies of the member states toward this group. In so doing, a “we” of national or EU citizens is constructed whose inclusion in the functional systems of societies – that is, health, education, social services, the economy, etc. – is taken for granted and occurs in the modus of excluding the "asylum seekers" and those who do not belong.

Explanation of the three fields of research

This basic observation makes it clear that, if social sciences dealing with Asylum seekers and refugees aim to generate impulses for a truly effective praxis intervention, then research is necessary that is capable of providing a differentiated and rigorous analysis of the disadvantages specific to this target group, since it is quite obviously not sufficient to simply indiscriminately apply funding instruments that are valid for other disadvantaged groups. This necessity lies at the basis of our decision to focus on the three research perspectives (subject, structure and intervention orientation). These allow both a qualitatively refined analysis of the target group with its shared characteristics and differences in terms of flight, educational biography, resilience and coping strategies and the analysis of the modalities or mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from the functional system of their host society and finally the analysis of the appropriateness of intervention concepts and their concrete effects on the users as well as the theoretical and normative postulates on which they are based.

If we proceed from two assumptions, namely that flight can be defined as a change of location for the purpose of gaining opportunities of inclusion in the functional system of a host society and that the inclusion of refugees can be hindered, as indicated above – among other things by egocentric nationalistic calculation expressed in a repressive asylum policy – then the question of how agency – understood as the ability of a subject to act – under structurally unfavorable conditions can be reinstated becomes of great interest for application-oriented research. This is because the question of agency allows us to focus on the correlation of structural and subjective determinants, which is necessary for the consistent research into and removal of the disadvantages particular to this target group.

In order to clarify some parameters which might be useful for constituting a theory, I would like to outline one central modality that makes this question operationalizable in social research, that is, the modality of space. This occurs in the framework of the so-called resource-orientated approach, that is, a perspective that does not focus on what refugees need or do not have, in other words, on their deficits, but rather on what they can do or their available competences.

Apart from the valorizing effect for the refugees that the normative postulate underlying such an approach possesses, its relevance and advantage in terms of educational policy and theory are obvious if one wishes to seriously counter the social stigmatization of the refugees, for instance as “criminals,” “slackers,” “profiteers from or unwarranted recipients of welfare money” or the redundant and practically inefficient victim discourse of their welfare officers and other so-called helpers. On the other hand, the advantage of such an approach for educational theory is that instruments of educational sciences and of an employment program like EQUAL, which aim to dismantle the structural disadvantages refugees are subject to in order to be successful, require a scientifically well-founded base of information on the resources and competences of refugees.

2. The modality of “space” and agency in refugee research

Due to its structuring power, space – whether geographical or social – constitutes in many respects one of the central categories of analysis for understanding the phenomena associated with flight. In my view, the following space-dependent parameters should be considered in an investigation that focuses on the question of how agency can be reinstated in a resource-oriented or competence-centered approach:

- The effect of space on the acquisition of competence
- The effect of space on competence transfer contingent to flight
- The effect of space in making use of competences in the receiving country

2.1 The effect of space on the acquisition of competence: The socio-contextuality of competences

One of the departure points of the resource-oriented approach in migration social research is the assumption that, as a result of their multi-contextual biographical path, that is, their socialization, upbringing, and education prior to flight, refugees have competences at their disposal that constitute valuable resources. Thus taking recourse to these resources in the host

country is not only educationally productive, because this sets its stakes on the strength of the target group in question, but also economically practical, because it avoids starting from scratch and thus saves valuable learning time and teaching resources. However, the operationalization of this approach postulates that not only will appropriate competence diagnoses or procedures to establish competences be elaborated, but also and above all that clarity will reign over what is to be understood by the term "competence" and which phenomena will be associated with it, since the everyday use of the term is characterized by radical polysemy.

An ontogenetical analysis is necessary for this. In other words, to clarify competence as a concept as well as the phenomena associated with it, two things must be established: What is competence in itself (the ontological question), and how does it emerge (the question of genesis)?

The answer to these questions requires an ideohistorical reconstruction of important competence theories to advance the semantic deconstruction process of competence in a broad interdisciplinary and comparative synopsis of linguistic, developmental psychological, and cultural-sociological competence theories, until the concept has been stripped of all phenomena external to it and has been reduced to its essence. As a result of such a multiperspective analysis which I undertook for the purposes of its ontogenetic clarification (cf. *Seukwa* 2006: 38-103), the competence concept can be characterized as follows:

Competence can be understood as a human ability (linguistic ability, higher mental function, or cognitive structure, etc.) that generates an action potential which instantiates itself in the form of performance in explicit situations in a particular field of activity. Its genesis and acquisition are, in an initial approximation, the result of a constant, that is, never fully complete, construction process that occurs between an individual and his sociocultural surroundings. After they have been constructed in this manner, these abilities only achieve the full status of a competence if they are assigned a value in a given social environment which transforms them into capital that is capable of bringing gain to the person who possesses it.

In this sense, the social context or social space has a double significance in the determination of what a competence is: firstly, as the departure point and resource for the formation of the cognitive ability that forms the foundation of the competence, and then as the space or

framework of the production of the meaning, value and legitimation strategies thanks to which this competence is transformed into a commodity or capital.

Thus my first thesis is that, considered ontogenetically, space or context is constitutive for competence.

3 The effect of space on competence transfer contingent to flight

How are competences transferred in flight or migrant situations? The above-mentioned characterization of competence shows that this is a disposition or action potential that generates performance and, depending on area of activity and context, can become capital. That means that competence as a potential does not correspond to something material, such as a school report or an academic title, since these are rather products of certain performances, the transfer of which in the migration situation is frequently associated with problems of institutional recognition. In fact, competence is implicit to the individual. This implicitness poses an epistemological problem, which consists of understanding the existence mode of competence. Thus, how is it possible to depart from a postulate of its existence and arrive at a phenomenology of competence? It is imperative to clarify this issue if we wish to understand the modalities of the individual transport or transfer of competence in people who have experienced flight.

In my view, the concept of habitus developed by Pierre Bourdieu offers a plausible answer to this question. The concept of habitus aims to view human “ways of doing” or performances as the product of their incorporated collective and individual history and thus as a product of their differing socialization. Due to its “embeddedness,” that is, its being anchored in the social environment as a structuring structure, habitus enables the generation of “ways of doing” or practices spontaneously adapted to the situation and the demands of the environment or space of socialization. Thus, considered from a functional perspective, habitus also corresponds to incorporated cultural capital. Finally, according to Bourdieu, habitus, considered as a concept to account for socialization and action, allows us to recognize not only the similarity in practices or in performance of individuals that come from the same space or sphere of socialization, but also, and above all, their tendency to reproduce these practices in other contexts insofar as these contexts exhibit similarities with the context of their acquisition.

In summary, two things can be observed in this regard: (1) As an incorporated, that is, internalized, social structure, which in turn structures our actions or performance, habitus constitutes a valuable concept for comprehending the transfer modalities of competences,

since these are transported as such by individuals in the case of flight or migration. (2) Equally, habitus constitutes an interesting heuristic instrument for the analysis of the conditions of possibility of transfer and the application of competences in the new context, since a property of habitus is that it reproduces itself in the new context according to the rules of the context of its acquisition.

3.1 The effects of space in making use of competences in the receiving country

The thesis of socio-contextuality postulated here, that is, the fact that competence is tied to a specific space or sphere, thus assigning the location of the acquisition of this competence a constitutive roll in its formation, necessarily leads to the question of what becomes of this competence in the new context should a change of location take place due to flight. The answer to this question requires not only that the focus of the analysis be shifted to the new context with respect to its effects on and reactions to the competences acquired prior to flight but also empirically well-founded substantiation. In view of the variety of functional subsystems (politics, health, work, education, etc.) with differently coded restrictive access which make up the entire context of flight in the receiving countries and in which the previously acquired competences can be made useful, it is appropriate to examine each of the subsystems with regard to its specific inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in relation to the integration needs of the refugees as well as their individual ways of dealing with these restrictive mechanisms (resignation, positive accommodation, resistance, etc.).

3.2 Competence as the habitus of the art of survival

The results of such an investigation, carried out by Ursula Neumann, Heike Niedrig, Joachim Schroeder and I with young refugees of African origin living in Hamburg, has shown that, on the one hand, the refugee sphere in Germany displays “total” characteristic traits. What is meant by this is above all the legal, structural, and social restrictions that transform the everyday lives of this target group into an open prison. On the other hand, we established that despite the structural heteronomy they are subjected to in the host country, a significant number of the young people surveyed demonstrated remarkable educational success. These almost paradoxical findings prompted me to delve more deeply into the question of which resources form the basis of this success. Thanks to an empirically underpinned action analysis, I was able to clarify the modus operandi or schemes of action that the dominated but not passive subject applied to evade the alienating power of the social structures. The forms of expression of these actions reveal a whole series of tactics which constitute just as many ways

of playfully circumventing repressive measures. These microprocesses as an impressive subversive “manual” for dealing with the repressive technologies of power characterize the subtle, determined activity, the resistance of a subject, the subject of his own will and action, but not of his own ability, who, because he lacks his own place and “propriety” “has to get along in a network of already established forces and representations.” This competence expresses itself, among other things, in the resilient capacity to evolve forms of selfdetermination i.e. agency even in situations of extreme restriction and to achieve educational success, for instance as in the situation given by the precarious status of asylum seekers and refugees in Germany. This competence is what I call “the habitus of the art of survival”.

My final thesis is that refugees who have been socialized in a context that is configured with heteronomous structures have this habitus at their disposal. Its transfer to the new context constitutes an invaluable competence for dealing with the biographical disruptions and existential upheavals that are often associated with transnational migration. However, in terms of its heteronomous effect on the refugees, it is also an alarming indication for Germany’s – and by extension, Europe’s – democratic pretensions that the new context, that is, the receiving country, displays similarities with the sphere or context of acquisition of this competence, namely the country of origin or escape, then according to Bourdieu, the habitus tends to reproduce itself when the conditions of its acquisition are similar to those of its application.

The results of these investigations, which were published last year by Waxmann Verlag, have been translated into English, thanks to the financial support of various transnational partners represented in EQUAL and the University of Hamburg, and will be published two weeks from today by Koeppel Verlag publishers. The release announcement appears in your conference file.

Thank you for your attention.