

Figurations in Everyday Life —A Research Program of Cultural Psychology

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Abstract: With the term "figurations in everyday-life" we discuss a psychological view on behavior as derived from cultural patterns more than from individual traits. Developing methods of Gestalt and depth psychology makes it possible to break up self-evident clichés and characterize some basic configurations of everyday-life. Within a research project at the Cologne university we have explored different trends of modern life by means of depth interviews and their psychological description and reconstruction: "Girly" cultures, "soap operas", the "fitness"-cult, "Sunday neurosis", educational cultures and the like. We not only found a schedule of modern ways of living, but were also able to delineate a scheme of present-day culture as a whole.

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1. Introduction

The following overview on the psychology of figurations in everyday life briefly outlines the background of the concept, its basic characteristics and usage in research practice. The overview presents aspects that should be of contribution to the general discussion of qualitative research. [1]

2. Overcoming the Opposition between Theory and Practice

The concept of figurations in *everyday life* is a practical one. It is based on everyday occurrences. It represents a phenomenological orientation and opposes method-monism. The concept is a response to the demand for an object appropriate approach and the necessity of "fit" between theoretical modeling and methodical development. [2]

The concept of *figurations* in everyday life is based on a theoretical frame of reference, evolving from experiences made in both depth and Gestalt psychology. These consider psychological reality to be complex and predetermined, and subsequently organize experience and behavior in terms of

dissonance and consonance. Based upon this, a psychology of figurations searches for culturally developed patterns that organize the specific forms/reality of everyday life. [3]

3. Revision of Scientific Routinizations

Modern science has almost caused us to forget a maxim which Kurt LEWIN's generation brought forth: "Nothing is as practical as a good theory!" Respectively, the psychology of figurations of everyday life lays claim to practicability and to theoretical reference. In contrast, modern-day scientific understanding is in many ways surrounded by irreconcilable oppositions: Closeness to everyday practice vs. systematic, quantitative vs. qualitative research, hard vs. soft methods. Oftentimes, the fact that these divisions rest upon historically determined conventions is overlooked. In order to rectify this, a revision of scientific history and a confrontation with uncomfortable and possibly suppressed aspects is necessary—e.g. the "constructedness" of scientific objects (compare HOLZKAMP 1968), the origin of research in human problem solving processes (compare HERRMANN 1979) and the "interwovenness" of research subject and research object (compare DEVEREUX 1984). [4]

The historical perspective is not only of interest for the conceptualization of science, but also for what it brings forth. Since the objects of study in the cultural sciences are in themselves historically determined, Sociology and Psychology must be aware of the transformations these have experienced throughout history. Figurations Psychology has always been historical Psychology, centered around the creation and transformation of culture: NIETZSCHE considered the highest and lowest human forms of cultivation, which the Greeks and all following generations have shown, to be an expression of a shaping force in creation (NIETZSCHE 1969). By going back to historically early patterns of collective cultivation and their potential for development, FREUD showed us both the possibilities and limits of cultivation (FREUD 1930). [5]

4. Dealing with Historical and Modern Culture

In the 1930s Norbert ELIAS, influenced by the discussions around Gestalt and depth psychology, began to uncover the manifestation of cultures in seemingly banal everyday occurrences such as eating and drinking and the respective rules in manners and behavior. According to ELIAS, cultures are represented by complete images or "figurations". Through the figurations, all everyday manifestations—institutional and individual ones—are given meaning. The usage of knife and fork, for example, are thus less a result of psycho-motorical possibilities or socio-hygienic necessities. Instead, they are a part of the development of culturally carried standards of embarrassment occurring in the transition from the middle ages to modern day (ELIAS 1969). [6]

Wilhelm SALBER also reconstructs the history of psyche and psychology on the basis of fundamental patterns or "Gestalten". According to SALBER, these patterns are always configurations of reality as a whole, through which the

succession of cultural human history—in the early phases as well as in times of advanced civilization—is held together and carried forth (SALBER 1993). The origin of the standards of embarrassment, which ELIAS describes, would thus be connected to the transformation of "societal" figurations—transforming from Middle Ages variants of figuration into modern day ones. It is a transformational phase that led to a new understanding of individuality and along with it a new sense of privacy and shame. [7]

With the concept of figurations in everyday life, the psychological characterization of modern day cultures and its everyday practices is possible. In contemporary forms of cultivation, the learned patterns of cultural history live on. At the same time, present day culture—in all of its variety of cultivation patterns—has developed its own figuration variants. Thus, the psychology of figurations in everyday life is at the same time both historical and modern Cultural Psychology (FITZEK & LEY 1999). [8]

5. Psychology Begins with the Description of Concrete Everyday Cultures ...

Psychological analysis of everyday occurrences always begins with concrete life situations. As human beings, we experience who we are not only through our own successes and failures, but also through the objects that surround us, through living conditions, through media, clothing, and art. The system of the everyday is discoverable in the requisites of modern life. But usually, clichés and conventions overlay this system. [9]

In order to develop a profile of contemporary culture, we began a research project. Our main interest was to study new and conspicuous phenomena in modern everyday life. In a number of masters theses in psychology, we studied trends, latest fashions and short-lived phenomena. In a publication which resulted from this project, the research findings are presented. The findings apply to topics such as the "girly"-look, "Internet"-sessions, "fitness-cult", "jeans" as a constant in clothing style, "collegial conversations" as an invigorating element in modern organizations, and disturbances in modern cultivation proceedings as seen in the "Sunday neurosis" and the "migraine" (compare FITZEK 1999a). [10]

It is amazing how complex everyday culture becomes once it is no longer taken for granted in our everyday dealings and routines. In order to find out what motivates, holds together and what endangers each individual form of cultivation, a thorough methodical schooling is necessary (compare FITZEK 1999b). This applies even in the first methodical step—the one to two hour depth interview. Impressions that are made during the interview lead to basic and distinctive features that describe the researched phenomena. Following an idea taken from Gestalt psychology, that the "pre-Gestalt" phase is of importance in arriving at decisive Gestalt qualities, the interview does not follow a given or pre-constructed scheme. Instead, the interview is considered to undergo a process of development; a process in which the everyday form being researched gains contour. [11]

In the research on the "girly"-phenomena, Gestalt qualities proved at first to be a problem. The overall impression of "superficiality" or "fleetingness" was already quite obvious and disruptive upon first contact with the interview partners. But by recognizing these kinds of qualities as being a part of the whole, it was possible to show how exactly the "girly"-culture can be consolidated within the image of "fleetingness", an image that subsequently led to a psychological characterization of "girlies" as a way of "eye-catching" (see FITZEK 1999a). Similar qualities were observable in the case of the daily soap opera "Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten" ("Good times, bad times"). "Smoothness", "harmlessness" or "innocuousness" were in this case the indicators for pinpointing the function of entertainment programs in daily life (DOMKE 1999). [12]

Thus the principle of Gestalt enables the creation of an image by making use of the qualities of the material. Images are complex, ambivalent, and can be easily dismantled into main and side images (ambivalence of the "eye-catcher"; the in and out of "soap operas"). In consequence, Gestalt proves to be a suspenseful whole, which opens up a respectively specific sphere of application—with respectively specific angles, moments, markings, and supporting pillars. In a second methodical step, this productive logic of Gestalt is described, going from interview to interview: What fits together? What is supportive? What challenges or invites? Are there polarities? First, a description of a long row of depth interviews is necessary before the various perspectives can be seen as variants of one theme. [13]

In the case of "Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten", the "soapiness" and "slipperiness" continued in further traits such as: "Maintenance of non-committal, superficial stance", "Ability to come and go", "easy-going shooting of further scenes", "endless-cycles" (DOMKE 1999). In the research on the "fitness"-cult, the main quality of "form strictness" (fitness = make something fit, bring something in form, "a good Gestalt") was broken down into further traits of description such as "finding support", "being able to influence", "pleasurable heightening", but also the "pressure" and "constraint" of a given guiding principle (MILLER 1999). [14]

6. ... and Finally Leads to a Reconstruction of Psychological Reality

The steps in data collection—interview and description—are an important element in the further evaluation of the data. They are used in finding constructive traits of everyday occurrences. The "figuration" concept takes for granted that civilization always deals with psychological problems of construction. In this respect FREUD spoke of "civilization and its discontents". They arise from a general dissatisfaction with the incompleteness of cultivation underlying all individual possibilities and demands. Reconstruction means working out the dominant treatment and relational patterns from case to case. In the frame of the concept of figurations in everyday life, construction analysis searches for the constructive characteristics of Gestalten. In this third methodical step, different "Gestalt-like" patterns or relations begin to take form: proximity/contrast, wholeness/outline, similarity/diversity, contiguity/ambiguity. [15]

Seen as a construction the "fitness"-cult is a part of the search for a feeling of wholeness and (in)tolerance of the "unshaped" ("schlechte Gestalten"). The fight for form (staying "in shape") can be taken literally. It is the struggle to find a guideline in our unforeseeable and incalculable times (MILLER 1999). In the research on the "Sunday neurosis", we found tendencies to turn everything upside down and at the same time wish that all ends well (pattern of change and intervention; compare FITZEK 1999a). [16]

Once constructive patterns are found, it is possible to confront the everyday culture with basic historical models. Along with ELIAS, FREUD and SALBER, we assume that contemporary forms of cultivation can be traced back to historical models (compare especially SALBER 1993). In the fourth methodical step, these historical model-cultures can help to find a relationship between the many different forms of living. A typology serves to present distinctive, overall applicable modes of coping that can be found for a respective construction. These then also correspond—often in terms of "funny analogies"—with respectively historical patterns of cultivation. [17]

The various forms of dealing with "fitness", for example, show similarities to practices found in the late Middle Ages, where a very dominating and standardized guideline (for religious belief) existed. The exercises for the practitioners of fitness likewise have a flourishing number of methods in regards to sin and penance, indulgence and secretive settlements (MILLER 1999). Correspondingly, our studies on current forms of teaching show in one and the same institution concurrently "idealistic", "revolutionary" and "restorative" movements (FITZEK 1996; LEY 1999). [18]

A method such as this one cannot be learned mechanically. It needs proper practice. In the step by step modelation of figurations, as it was described here, it is important not to consider experience as happening successively, but instead as a product of going back and forth. Interestingly enough, one can compare the reconstructed figurations with fairytales. Myths and fairytales contain the problems of construction which belong to a given culture. Thus, in fairytale figurations one can discover what was lived, searched for and avoided in the various forms of cultivation (compare SALBER 1999). [19]

If one takes a look at the many research studies of the everyday that were conducted at the Psychological Institute of the University of Cologne, one finds that the incorporated cultures found in modern-day life do not only have historical models, but that contours of contemporary culture as a whole become obvious. Modern everyday life experiments with an unbelievable variety of patterns of cultivation that are lived concurrently and side by side. But within them, one also finds another side of the variety: as a compulsion to indecisively maneuver around things and as an addiction to unity and simplicity (compare SALBER 1993; FITZEK 1999a). [20]

7. Culture Sciences are in Need of an Interdisciplinary Exchange—for the Sake of the Issue

One should be aware that the demand for cooperation and integration at all costs is in itself a trend in modern-day science. An accelerated circulation of everything—often without a convincing and integrative concept—is observable. Often, the advantages of a firm methodological standpoint are forgotten. The concept of figurations in everyday life presents itself as a definite psychological standpoint. [21]

A regression to the traditional monopolies of the individual sciences is as damaging as a diffusion of scientific interests and questions. It is an incredible waste of resources when the Culture Sciences take so little notice of one another. Both aspects are not contradictory: Cooperation in the sciences is a great advantage. But it should not be led by secretive, Unitarian utopias. Instead, it should be a product of a decision made from case to case. FREUD can once again serve as a role model: In comparison to those concepts developed by academic psychologists, who are anxiously urging on an integration of the contemporary field of sciences, FREUD's autonomous psychological concept has come to have on its own a great deal in common with other Cultural Sciences. [22]

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