"Doing Bedeutung" (Doing Meaning) – How children construct differences

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Resumen/ Abstract

In a society structured by migration and globalisation difference and belonging (man/ woman, National/ Non-national) are decisive for one's life. From my theoretical point of view these belongings are no anthropologically constants or categories, on the contrary, they are produced in complicated social processes. In my doctoral – thesis I analyze this processes of the production of difference and belonging, referring to the idea of "Doing Difference" in a socialconstructivistic way, as well as the Cultural Studies. The focus lays on children and the institutional context of the Kindergarten in Germany. As the research follows a 'discovering- research-style' I don't focus on any specific difference at first, but only assume that in social practices differences are produced interactively. Which specific differences they are, stays open at first. Within this idea of ethnographic research I give relevance to the context and to the children's own importance.

Understanding children and childhood as well as nothing natural and unspoiled, opens up the perspectives one can have on them and leads to the thesis that childhood can't be a place to go for to examine the world before it is determined by socially relevant practices of differentiation.

In my paper I firstly do a short overview on my theoretical and empirical assumptions of the ethnographical children's-research I realize. Secondly I'll focus on one 'result' from the first research-phase. I'll show that one object of the interaction done by children is a process I'd like to describe with «Doing Bedeutung» (Doing meaning). After explaining the idea of the concept of "Doing Bedeutung" as a social practice and how it is related to "Doing Difference", I thirdly think about it as a rather general principle of the production of social reality by connecting it with Foucaults understanding of discourse. I'll finish by asking for possible consequences and challenges from my 'result' for the educational science and pedagogic.

Palabras clave / Keywords: childhood ethnography, Kindergarten, difference

1. General framework of the study

In a society structured by migration and globalisation difference and belonging are decisive for one's life. Every single day differences and belongings become relevant for the individual life – like, for example, man/ woman, National/ Non-national, Handicapped/ Not-hindered. They have on one hand an impact on the individual possibilities to participate in and use socially relevant resources and on the other hand on identities. From my theoretical point of view these belongings are no anthropologically constants or categories, on the contrary, they are produced in complicated social processes. For my doctoral thesis exactly these processes of the production of difference and belonging interest me.

It becomes interesting for educational science once educational institutions as well as the interacting individuals are focused for this question. The construction process of difference is frameworked on the one hand by the educational context, by its concepts, rooms and professionals. On the other hand the social relevance of this context is produced by individuals while producing meaning in interactions. From the point of view of educational science it is interesting to analyse the relation between educational institutions and individuals in the production of difference and belonging.

1.1 The construction of reality – theoretical assumption

With this I'm referring to the approaches of "Doing XY" which assume that there is no objective reality, but reality is interactively done. My work is therefore grounded in the social-constructivism and my perspective follows the idea of finding out how reality is produced in a a certain context by its members. Taking the context into account is inspired by the Cultural Studies, With Grossberg I assume that social practices are not outside of the contextual forces by which they are made. Nevertheless, the respective contextuality of practice only arises by their definition through the empirical analysis (Grossberg 1999: 59). As I said before for educational science it seems interesting to look at the relation between educational institutions and individuals in the doing of difference and belonging. In my doctoral thesis I've chosen the pedagogical institution of the Kindergarten which is institutionally separated from school in Germany and covers children usually at the age of three to six.

My focus on the elementary-educational context - here the Kindergarten -, founds itself in the following: Within the discussion in Germany around the educational task of the elementary education, the idea raises that 'Bildung' needs to become more important for the elementary phase. So far the Kindergarten – which is institutionally separated from school and covers children usually at the age of three to six in Germany – had rather the function of care. This raised can not fall back on a sufficient number of research studies, so that educational demands are fast formulated without being empirically founded. Besides this political interest in 'Bildung' educational programs for the early-childhood exist which want to influence children positively in terms of tolerance and recognition of difference. But they are also – at least in the German-speaking space – rather not based on knowledge about how differences become relevant

in the early-childhood. As I focus on the children within this context I'd like to say some words about them.

1.2. Research-Subjects: children

Educational theory on childhood was long time exclusively dominated by theoretical perspective of the developing psychology and theory of socialisation. The first one recurs – for example -on Piaget and implies, that children at the early ages can not yet understand or use social differences like Gender or Ethnicity. Research - and as well ethnographical research - done under this theoretical perspective has its focus on cognitive structures of the children.

The theoretical perspective on childhood taken in my research is associated to concepts of social constructivism like Alanen (1988) represents. I assume that children and childhood as well as other belongings are socially constructed and interactively produced in social practice. This also means that, e.g., developing-psychological theories on early childhood, are adult's concepts, which reproduce the child as being different over and over again, a process which can be described as 'Othering'. I'm trying to dissociate from this kind of previous knowledge about children, instead trying to investigate the culture of differentiation by children; thus I focus on social practice instead of cognitive concepts and assume that children like adults are competent actors in their environment. That children are competent in giving meaning within their social life is shown in research mostly done in the English-speaking space about the relevance of gender, class, 'race' and ethnicity in childhood. This is pointed out exemplarily by the following research. In the English-speaking space this kind of research can already look back on a longer tradition. Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) show the relevance of the category 'race' and ethnicity for children in the US-American society by critical discussing Piaget and supporting Vygotsky. Connolly (2000) also points out the relevance of racism in childhood by showing the constitutive role of contexts like school, educational policy and district. In the area of gender differences Thorne (1993) is to be mentioned. She shows the interactive production of the gender difference by children at primary school. For Germany I would like to point out three works: first Breidenstein and Kelle (1998) who examine the interactive production of gender at school; Tervooren (2006) uses the concept of 'Performativität' and shows the production of gender in the later childhood. Diehm and Kuhn (2006) realised a pilot-study with the focus on ethnicity and race in the Kindergarten. Even if this researches stand partly in different theory traditions and are not necessarily in the tradition of a "Doing Ethnicity" or "Doing Gender" their results show, nevertheless, the high relevance of 'differences' in the childhood.

1.3. "Doing Difference"

As important as this research is, focussing certain differences – for example in the reconstruction of "Doing Gender" or "Doing Ethnicity" – always runs the risk of their reproduction by the research and of directing the ethnographical look straight on this pre-thought phenomenons. 'Doing Difference' – how West and Fenstermaker (2001) have explained it – focused on the categories of Race, Class and Gender. Lutz and Wenning have extended it in 2001 for the German-speaking space by other difference-lines, like National/ Non-national, Handicapped/ Not-hindered (2001). Now within the

scope of my research I would like to extend the "Doing Difference" - or read maybe rather differently - in so far as I don't focus on any specific difference at first, but only assume that in social practices differences are produced interactively, which means that difference is done. Which Differences they are, stays open at first. Thus, to reproduce neither a certain category nor a certain previous knowledge about the culture of the children, I widen the "Doing Difference".

This allows an explorative ethnographical research – in the sense of a discovering-research-style, like it was named by Amman and Hirschauer (1997). Within this idea of ethnographic research I give relevance to the context and to the children's own importences.

As I don't want to make the impression to have found the solution for the Reproduction-Problem in the research – it always remains as a Dilemma from my view - I would like to mark at this point the second level of the problem. The second level of the Reproduction-Problem (the first one is the focus on certain differences or categories which leads to their reproduction) is the investigation of a certain group. Within the scope of my research: by examining the group of the children I produce them as a group, again. This is a not unknown mechanism: Another example is a research which does research on migrants, and therefore has to define people as migrants. If I – in my research – speak about the other 'culture' of the children I'd like to analyse, the dualism and the with it connected power-relation of adults and children is even reinforced. This dilemma can not be solved, but one can work with it by following the suggestion to tie together an ethnographic investigation of child-culture with a reflexive look on what is (re)produced in this research. This was only to be marked, but can't be explicated in this paper.

In the research-process I'm geared to the methodology of the Grounded Theory (Glaser/ Strauss 1998). Without explaining too much what it is about I just marc two central aspects concerning the research-process: firstly the idea is to enter the field just with a question and not with hypothesis or a pre-thought theory. The aim is to produce a theory which is grounded in the field; secondly the process is understood as being circular which means that getting new information from the field goes together with interpreting and theorizing and once you find a concept you look at the theory and afterwards go back to the field and so on until your datas are saturated. This is important for the following because the concept of "Doing Bedeutung" I will be talking about is a kind of sensitizing concept which I found in the material of my first field-phase.

2. "Doing Bedeutung" as a practice of differentiation

In this first research-phase I used the method of participant observation. Without expounding the problems of it further, it is worthwhile to think about how and if an adult researcher can ever become participant in the children's 'culture '. I started with the idea of the least-adult-role (Mandell 1988) which assumes that the difference between child and adult can be reduced to the point that only the physical difference exists. I have been quickly taught by the field that the difference adult's-child is not to be overcome in this Setting - and probably also hardly in another.

My participant observation took place during more than six weeks, five hours daily in a Kindergarten. It is a non-confessional Kindergarten, operating the whole day and covering two groups. The first group consists out of 15 children in the age of 1 year to 6 years and two educators. In the second group are 20 children at the age of 3 to 6 years with 3 educators. The children are brought by their parents between 7:30 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. They do free-play without a differentiation in the groups; in addition they have the possibility to join in voluntary offers from the educators. Around 11.45 a. m. a circle in which the children sit down together takes place with each of the two groups. Afterwards is meal-time, dental-cleaning-time and than again free-play. My observation ended in each case around 1:15 p.m., a time at which the first parents pick their children up.

I have interpreted the observation protocols from this first field-phase under the question "What the hell is going on here?" (Geertz 1983) and with the support of the idea of open and axial encoding of the Grounded Theory.

The following argumentation is exemplarily grounded in one 'scene' from the protocol. The observed 'situation' occurs at a table which is covered by a wax blanket and on which pencil are laying:

Michael and Stephan come to the table. Stephan goes to Annas place and sits down on the chair. (...) Luna says to Stephan "you also want to paint city?" Behind me Sanne comes and sits down on the right beside me, after she has got a chair. Michael says to Stephan: "Watch Stephan, I am quite far ahead." Stephan says to Michael: "Watch, this is fire." Sanne answers "Fire doesn't look like that." Stephan: "Sure." Michael and Stephan look to Sanne. Sanne "Looks like Krickelakrack." Stephan bends over his picture and puts his left cheek on it. Besides, he has the hand with a red federal pencil near in his face, does back-and forth movements with the pencil on the paper and giggles.

2.1. "What the hell is going on here ?"

It can be seen as a social event taking place in an educationally provided place – the painting table - in which group-building processes occur. The table is the centre of the interaction; it makes it possible to come there and to leave. The children refer in their statements to their own pictures. The painting-practice becomes the object of the communication. Sanne breaks with this kind of egocentric communication while she does two things: she uses on the one hand an abstract language which reflects that the thing painted doesn't correspond to real objects. She therefore initiates a meta-communication about the painting-practice. On the other hand she takes up the category of the "true reality" of painting (*"Fire doesn't look like that"*), which was introduced by Stephan, and uses it for the disqualification of his painting, while she implements the difference between "fire" and "Krickelakrack". I'd like to leave the word "Krickelakrack" in German because I think that the word itself transports the meaning. It could be translated maybe with the term "scribbling." Sanne uses then a negative formulation *"Fire doesn't look like that"* and questions the self disclosure of Stephan radically. Stephan reacts with a "Sure", but falls silent straight away. The effect of Sannes interpretation is the disqualification of the significance given by Stephan. He

covers his picture and continues painting-movements. With this the verbal communication ends.

This rather short interpretation already gives different answers to the question, "What the hell is going on here?" And the question "What are they *Doing* here?" In the following I'll focus on one answer which seems to me to be central: The object of the interaction is a process I'd like to describe with "Doing Bedeutung"/ "Doing Meaning" in English. The people in the scene are 'doing' interpretation or meaning.

What exactly is this "Doing Bedeutung" and how is it related to "Doing Difference"? In the following I will **firstly** explain the concept of "Doing Bedeutung", **secondly** talk of its understanding as a social practice and **thirdly** read it with the perspective of discourse-theory.

a) Concept of "Doing Bedeutung"

The meaning of "Doing Bedeutung" can hardly been translated into English. It corresponds to "Doing Meaning", but also "Doing Interpretation", "Doing relevance" or "Doing sense", and not exclusively to one of them. As in German these quite different ideas are all in this one word, I'd like to leave it in German and explain its meanings. There are at least three categories of concepts which stand behind the word "Bedeutung". They will become more clearly if I look at them separately:

Deutung: Interpretation; production of knowledge, production of sense;

Be-Deutung: point at something, indicate something, give relevance to something;

Bedeutung: have a certain meaning, have a certain sense.

By adding the "Doing" to the concept "Bedeutung", "Bedeutung" becomes a social practice. It becomes something which is interactively produced. "Doing meaning" usually is rather understood at the symbolic or textual level. An object, a word has a certain meaning. But I want to show in the following how meaning can also be thought as a specific form of social practice and afterwards connect this idea with a more textual understanding of the doing as the case may be of the production of meaning.

b) Doing Bedeutung as social practice

If we look at the scene it appears that Stephan, on the level of interpretation, gives a certain meaning to his painting *"Watch, this is fire."* With this, he points (symbolically) at it, because he makes it the object of the communication. Sanne questions the meaning given by Stephan radically by saying: *"Fire doesn't look like that"* and introduces a different interpretation: *"Looks like Krickelakrack."* The interesting point in the concept of "Krickelakrack" is that it misses the 'signifikat', which means the concept behind it or the idea which is signified by it. In contrast the idea of fire, something real, stands behind the word fire, the sign fire signifies the concept of fire. The difference between "fire" and "Krickelakrack" made by Sanne implies therefore the difference between paintings with real concept and meaning and paintings without concept and without meaning. Thus originates a contrast between

meaningful painting(s) and meaningless painting(s) and Sanne produces the meaning of a difference between "fire" and "Krickelakrack"

And this difference can now be seen as socially relevant because "Doing Bedeutung" is an interactive practice of negotiation social power-relations. This appears in the fact that "Doing Bedeutung" depends on interactions, it only makes sense in social situations. The social relation between Sanne and Stephan is negotiated in this scene trough the power of interpretation or meaning. In this scene Sanne possesses this kind of power and enforces her 'truth' about painting on Stephan. The 'truth' which she constitutes is that his painting is a "Krickelakrack" which stands in a normatively significant relation to "fire". By doing so, a socially relevant difference between Stephan and Sanne as the one interpreting and the one being interpreted is produced. Stephans way of getting out of the situation is to cover the picture. Interpreting becomes socially relevant for him, he finishes the communication and withdraws his picture from being interpreted. Thus, the "Doing Bedeutung" out of a "Doing Difference" becomes as well a "Doing Hierarchy". The question arises by what social position Sanne is legitimised. It could be the age difference, because Sanne is five years old and Stephan is three years old and like that this interaction can as well be seen as a "Doing Age".

We have seen how meaning is done in social practice and how it becomes relevant for the relation of the children.

c) "Doing Bedeutung" from the perspective of discourse-theory

Now I'd like to comment the recently presented way of reading the material under a specific theoretical perspective. These are thoughts which leave the level of the interaction and which discuss from another perspective the question where Bedeutungen/ meanings come from. By using the concept of "Doing meaning" I tried to show meaning as a social practice. Besides, I already mentioned that these practices are not in a space without context. The disadvantage – from my point of view – of an interactionistic research is that it doesn't give any clue to the question why exactly the used themes get relevant and why exactly a certain difference is done. Where does the "Doing Difference" between "Krickelakrack" and "fire" come from? Why does it get important for the production of hierarchy? This is something which can't be answered just out of the scene, but is nevertheless important. In the following I will briefly explain this by referring to Foucaults concept of discourse.

A discourse is a group of statements which make available a way of talking and certain knowledge for how to speak about an object. Discourses determine reality because they decide what or whom becomes an object and how to talk about it. Thus, discourses produce reality trough knowledge and language, because they construct its meanings. Besides, the interest lies not in finding the "true knowledge", because knowledge only appears to be true. It is produced in discourses; they determine what becomes a right and 'true' meaning. Beyond discourses and the reality produced by them, there is no reality. Everything what is known is discursively produced: Things don't have an essence which they would have had before linguistic description.

Thinking about discourses doesn't only mean to think about knowledge, it always has to be seen connected with power because discourses produce "the truth" about how the world is. In addition, they are not only tieding together knowledge and power, but discourses themselves are systems through which power circulates. As soon

as this knowledge is used in practice the ones known about become in a special way the object of submission.

Indeed, discourses are not freely floating and do not only remain at the level of the language and knowledge. Rather they are involved in the production of society: while they are produced by the individuals through their discursive practice they determine their institutions, structures and subjects. Thus, discourses enter into the social practice; they give them a certain meaning and in that way produce social reality (Hall 1994: 154). Here I follow Halls reading of Foucault.

The presented scene of interaction can now be read under the focus of how discourses enter the social practice and become relevant in acts of individuals. In that way the relation between "Doing Bedeutung," "Doing Difference," and "Doing Hierarchy" gets clearer.

A formation of the statements becomes relevant in the social practice of Sanne and Stephan which ties together two things: the images of children as being in a development state on the one hand, with a certain dominant art-understanding of meaningful painting on the other hand. In practice it gets important by the "Doing Bedeutung" which produces a power relation between Stephan and Sanne. Reference to these understandings are the educational discourses, the educational knowledge about the early childhood which say that children need to develop their motor and cognitive abilities and cannot paint realistically but will learn so during their development. A certain meaning of the movement a child does with his/ her pencil is produced with it. The movements of an three-year old are generally constructed as still „Krickelakrack", which means not yet meaningful or realistic and this implicits a deficit. That „Krickelakrack" has the connotation of meaningless, shows the effectiveness of the European discourse on art which sees meaningful painting as art. Therefore it comes to a double deficit for Stephan: His painting is ascribes as not-yet and as meaningless. Sanne can get by these discourses into the position of having the power of meaning – she implements her knowledge and with it her truth- At the same time the discourses unfold her power through Sanne. She is authorised in this context to produce this kind of meaning, she can make a difference between already and not-yet, what is possibly legitimised through her age. Her development is further away from the 'not-yet'. That's the way how out of "Doing meaning" trough "Doing Difference" originates "Doing Hierarchy".

3. Conclusion

I tried to show how in a children's interaction within the context of the Kindergarten, meaning is produced within a process of differentiation which results being socially relevant. Doing Bedeutung can be seen as a social practice taking place in a certain context. Further more I've looked on "what is going on" by using discourse theory and tried to give an idea of how discourses enter the social practice and effect the social relevance of the interaction. What I did in the methodologicals sense was to theorize the childrens practice by identifying one concept and exploring it.

As some kind of outlook I would finally like to raise the question if Doing Bedeutung maybe alsways goes together with Doing Difference and Doing Hierachy.

From the perspective of the cultural studies one would answer this with a "yes". Hall (1997) e. g. understands cultural practice in general as signifying practices which produce differences by doing differences. Answering this question rather by empirical penomenos it needs to be entered the material again. And that would be the circulation I talk about before.

As I said in the beginning differences and belongings are relevant categories in a modern society. Therefor, for me it seems to be worthwhile looking closer to the ways they are produced and to understand the phenomen of practices of differentiation. As we have seen that children in this context seem to be competent in 'knowing' how meanings are produced by doing a differences it is as well worthwhile exploring their 'culture' and lookind especially on the effects given by the pedagogical context. But that is up to the next step of my research.

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