

Cultural psychology in a subject-scientific perspective¹

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Abstract

Constitutive for the subject-scientific perspective of Critical Psychology, on the one hand, are historically-empirically obtained determinations of the object of knowledge – such as its reconstruction of human nature as societal nature, its materialistic concept of human subjects as socially situated bodily actors as well as its determination of the intentionality of human action coming to bear in the practical possibility relation of individuals to societal structures of meaning – and, on the other hand, methodological principles of actual-empirical research that indicate the consistent transition to a generalised standpoint of the subject as the point of knowledge. This is in principle compatible with cultural-psychological programmes that analyse individual action and psychological phenomena in their dependent relationship to social-culturally handed-down artefacts, discourses and forms of life, and that include humans in research on an equal footing: namely as subjects acting on grounds. A Marxist-based subject-oriented cultural psychology focuses on the determinacy of cultural processes and forms through the mode of production of a societal formation and offers differentiated class-theoretical explanations for the structural intersectional relations of inequality, oppression and discrimination in the diversity of socio-cultural constellations. When put into perspective in this way, the concept of culture can in turn enrich the concept of society with a dimension relevant to action by opening up access to the actors' perspective on the diversity and change of socio-cultural codifications of lifeworlds and subjectivities.

¹ The text is based on an original contribution in German to the handbook *Kulturpsychologie. Eine Einführung* [Cultural Psychology. An Introduction], ed. by Wolfradt et al. (2022) which was published there in a heavily abbreviated version: cf. Maiers & Reimer-Gordinskaya (2022). We would like to thank Manfred Renken for his helpful assistance with the translation. Occasionally the conceptuality of Critical Psychology raises problems in that they cannot easily be transferred into common English terms without loss of (nuances of) meaning. This applies, for instance, to the distinction between *sozial* = *social* and *gesellschaftlich* = *societal* and, even more so, to derivations such as *Vergesellschaftung* = *societalisation* (instead of *socialisation*), *Gesellschaftlichkeit* = *societability* (rather than *sociability*). Other telling examples are concepts such as *Gründe/begründetes Handeln/Begründung/Begründetheit*, where *grounds/grounded action/grounding/groundedness* are a better match than the rationalistically biased *reasons, reasonable action*, and *suchlike*. In general, we have decided to expect the Anglophone reader to accept less common translations if they seemed to us to better convey the connotations of the German original terms. (In the interest of clarity, the latter are appended in brackets in each case.)

For a more detailed impression of the sometimes awkward problems that one encounters when translating German Critical Psychological terminology we refer the reader to the notes in Tolman's (1994) pioneering introduction.

In order to illustrate how subject-scientific studies break down culture as the contradictory meaning of the mode of production and life for individuals in such a way that they can understand external and internal impediments to action and open up possibility spaces for their action in an emancipatory perspective, exemplary presentations include: the critical further development of the methodological guiding concepts of the so-called 'developmental' and 'stagnation figure' respectively, the elimination of the blind spots of the constructivist discourse-analytical 'new childhood research' in the Critical-Psychological view of the dialectics of children's development of agency, as well as the investigation of children's re-/construction of societally prefabricated social categories, stereotypes and prejudices in the living environment of day-care centres, which is shaped by intersectional power relations, by the research project *KiWin*.

Keywords

cross-cultural psychology vs. cultural psychology (- as diverse directions of culture-inclusive psychology), Cultural-historical School, developmental figure (- as a movement form of emancipatory research), German Critical Psychology, grounded action / discourse of groundedness, historical-empirical method, restrictive vs. generalised agency, societal nature (human nature as -), subject science / subject-scientific research and practice, unity of comprehension and change

Critical Psychology - subject science - cultural psychology: Conceptual localisations

In the title of the article, it is assumed that *Critical Psychology*, with its *subject-scientific* orientation, can be classified as a *kind of cultural psychology*. This seems to be beyond question if one considers that in its transformation of radical psychology criticism into the elaboration of a positive psychology conception, it took up the *Cultural-historical School* of Soviet psychology founded by Vygotsky and continued after his death in 1934 by his co-workers Leontiev, Lurija, Galperin and others (cf. Kölbl, 2022). This, in turn, is consistently acknowledged in relevant cultural psychology treatises as a contribution to the "profiling of an advanced cultural psychology" (Straub & Chakkarath, 2010, 195f.) - both directly and by way of explicitly referring to it by various proponents of research into experience- and action-relevant cultural structures of meaning and significance, such as Bruner (1990) or Cole (1996). Critical Psychology is often included in the circle of concepts that are at least partially related to cultural psychology. Billmann-Mahecha (2003), for example, states: "From the 1970s onwards, Klaus Holzkamp's Critical Psychology was added, which, closely following Soviet activity psychology, emphasised the cultural-historical contextuality of human experience and behaviour, without understanding itself in the narrower sense as cultural psychology". Kölbl (op. cit., 18) expresses a similar view.

The positioning of Critical Psychology in the tradition of the *Cultural-historical School* (both in its own and in external perception) must admittedly be relativised in certain respects: Vygotsky's original works (insofar as they were

available at all in German at the time²) were not really constitutive for its emergence. Rather, it was primarily the so-called *activity-theoretical* approach to the study of human consciousness presented in A. N. Leontyev's collection of texts *Development of Mind [Probleme der Entwicklung des Psychischen]*, published in 1963 in the GDR and ten years later in West Germany (Leontjew, 1963/1973), that provided decisive guiding principles for the discussion about the transformation of psychological science on the basis of dialectical historical materialism conducted at the Psychological Institute of the Free University of Berlin.

Differences between Leontyev's and Vygotsky's views will not be explored in detail here (cf. Keiler, 1999), but Keiler's research on the topos *cultural-historical* (cf. Keiler, 2012) should be taken up. According to him, the term "cultural-historical theory" or "school" (this is the name that runs through the original works) was not coined by Vygotsky and the researchers working with him themselves, contrary to the common opinion (also handed down in Critical Psychology: cf. Holzkamp & Schurig, 2015 [1973], 33ff.), but was brought into play by their opponents in the mid-1930s with the intention of bringing the conception of a "[historical] theory of the [development of] higher psychological functions" dangerously close to German *Kulturpsychologie* [cultural psychology] and thus discrediting it as an idealistic, anti-Marxist, pseudo-scientific reactionary theory. In 1956 (the year of the XXth Party Congress of the CPSU), Leontyev and Luria (in their introduction to Vygotsky's *Selected Psychological Research Works*), seizing the bull by the horns, so to speak, appropriated the term *cultural-historical*. In the 1970s, it finally became a valid trademark in international literature for the school of Soviet psychology, which was by then recognised as leading.

Only one problematic aspect of this topos should be mentioned here: On the one hand, the compound term *cultural-historical* fosters a *culturalist* dissolution of the materialist concept of *societal relations/practice* which Vygotsky and his colleagues take as a basis, by means of fuzzier notions of *culture* qua system of linguistic-symbolic meanings, which may even be caught up in linguistic idealism. To speak of a conception of the *cultural* or *cultural-historical* determinacy of development with reference to Vygotsky, as Keiler points out, can only be valid on the proviso that he always emphasised the *sociality* of the human being as an essential (inner) condition of specifically human psychological development and explicitly regarded *culture* as something *derived*, as the "result of the human's social life and communal activity" (Sobr. soč. , 3, 145; as cited in Keiler, 2012, 119). On the other hand, the term *cultural-historical* obscures the fundamental point of Vygotsky's approach, which is to overcome the common dichotomisation between the naturalness and societality of human development of consciousness and to grasp its mediation process theoretically.

² In the 1970s, we mainly had a German-language version of *Denken und Sprechen* [Thinking and Speech] (Russian original: 1934; German: Berlin/DDR: Akademie Verlag 1964; Frankfurt/M. : Fischer 1977) available, which was problematic because it was based on a misleading and erroneous Soviet republication from 1956. It was not until 2002 that a new critical edition based on the original manuscript, previously thought to be lost, appeared by Rückriem & Lompscher (Vygotskij, 2002).

However the relationship to Vygotsky's ideas is to be assessed in detail, his central epistemological concern of approaching the study of the human psyche *from a comprehensively historical perspective* comes to full fruition in Leontyev's book. Scientifically understanding the concrete human being in his or her culturally specific individuality and subjectivity – in a well-understood sense of *cultural history* – means explicating him or her in the unity of his or her *natural, societal and individual historical development* from the objective necessities of the material life process. Following Marx, it is worked out how historical development in its human specificity has developed with objective labour and takes place in the accumulation of societal experience mediated through material, iconic and linguistic-symbolic objectifications. Through the practical process of their individual-historical appropriation, each individual human being participates in this societal process and thus also unfolds his or her personal life. Accordingly, the structures and forms of human consciousness must change with the various stages of objective production and the relations of production entered into in the process. The individual development of consciousness – this is fundamental for Vygotsky's as well as Leontyev's psychological approach – also takes place through the *objective activity of the human being*. The historical-societal forms of consciousness (mediated by psych[olog]ical tools) emerge in each individual person from external activities, which are then gradually transformed into internal, mental activities (*interiorisation*).

This *historical-genetic paradigm* has decisively inspired the methodological maxim of Critical Psychology, which is still valid today, to work out, in a *historical analysis of origin and differentiation* [*Ursprungs- und Differenzierungsanalyse*], the essential inner connections of the psychological phenomena in question together with the mediating processes leading to their manifestations. Through the *categorical determinations* of the *subject matter* [*kategoriale Gegenstandsbestimmungen*] thus obtained, it attempts to arrive at a concrete-historical theory of human-societal subjectivity that overcomes the bourgeois-psychological presupposition of an "abstract - isolated - human individual" (Marx, 1845, MEW 3, 7) along with the associated mystifying construction of a *universal-societal* [*allgemeingesellschaftlich*] human being.

The term *subject science* [*Subjektwissenschaft*] was first used in the context of Critical Psychology at its 1st International Congress in Marburg in 1977³, when the aim was to justify both the possibility (proven by the facticity of Critical Psychology) of a Marxist-based psychological science of the individual and the necessity of such an internal expansion of Marxism. In doing so, it was necessary to refute objections that were unanimously based on its misguided economistic-reductionist interpretation but led to contrary conclusions – such that, for example, the *Projekt Klassenanalyse* (*Project Class Analysis*: see, e.g., Bischoff, 1973) considered the political-economic analysis of capitalism sufficient to derive statements about human subjectivity, while the *Kritische*

³ If we associate the *subject-scientific perspective* with *Critical Psychology* (cf. Holzkamp, 1988), this is by no means to ignore the fact that other critical positions also oppose the denial of the subject by the psychological mainstream with explicit subject orientations.

Theorie des Subjekts (*Critical Theory of the Subject*: see, e.g. Lorenzer, 1974) deemed it necessary to supplement Marxist societal theory with an independent extra-Marxist (namely psychoanalytical) theory of subjectivity.

In contrast, in his opening lecture at the congress Klaus Holzkamp (1977 [2015]) argued that although a Marxist individual science is essentially determined by the analysis of the overarching societal-historical process and is thus secondary, it can nevertheless be distinguished as a special science with a specific object and specific procedures that can be derived from it, since in their life activity the individuals are the permanent result of their individual-historical development, the laws of which do not coincide with those of the historical process, however closely they are interwoven with them.

Holzkamp (op. cit. , 232) described the historical materialist conception as "the *general historical subject science* par excellence" because, as a revolutionary theory, it aims at the empowerment of collective human actors. With regard to the psychology to be developed within this framework, which aims to help release the efficacy of concrete individuals against external and internal resistance, it is then said:

If the general object of Marxist theory is the relationship between objective determinacy and subjective determination of the historical process and its practical goal is the development of the *subjective* factor in history, then (. . .) the *remaining object of Critical-Psychological approaches is the relationship between objective determinacy and subjective determination in the life activity of concrete individuals*. Its character as a '*special subject science*' within scientific socialism would then consist in the fact that it has as its *practical goal the development of the subjective-active component, i. e. self-determination, in individual life activity*. (op. cit. , 232f.)

In the writings of the 1980s, this critical-emancipatory basic concern of the Marxist-subject-scientific knowledge approach, to understand the surrender of individuals to (capitalist) conditions and the subjective necessity of overcoming them, taking into account the developmental interests of the respective others, and in this practical understanding to critically *sublate* views of traditional psychology caught up in bourgeois ideology, is affirmed on various occasions (cf. Holzkamp, 1988). On the other hand, concrete provisions of a subject-scientific psychology were elaborated in that period (especially in Holzkamp's magnum opus of 1983, *Grundlegung der Psychologie* [Foundations of Psychology]), even though terminologically *individual science* is consistently spoken of).

Psychology from the generalised standpoint of the subject

Under the premise of the prevailing *nomological-functionalistic variable psychology*, which in its experimental-statistical conditional analyses seeks to grasp human behaviour and experience as effects, consequences, correlates of situational conditions conceived as causal determinants, subjectivity is

naturalistically failed to recognise in its historical concreteness of respective life situations. If the programmatic critique of this reifying reduction of human subjectivity not only wants to rehabilitate the everyday experience of human intentionality and reflexivity as an inescapable thematic starting point of research, but also to develop a thoroughgoing methodological alternative, it needs other, substantively more sustainable concepts of human subjectivity. In Critical Psychology, the *historical-empirical categorial analysis* – distinguished from *actual-empirical* research methodology – fulfils precisely this function of developing scientific basic concepts of psychological theorising in a methodical, i. e. empirically verifiable way, in which (in a specialisation of dialectical-materialistic developmental knowledge) the essential relations of the psychological object (psyche/consciousness) are derived in their historical determination and concreteness from the developmental logic of its having become. (Holzkamp, 1983, 48ff. , 207ff. , 249ff. ; Maiers, 1999; Markard, 2009, 106ff.).

In particular, this conceptuality must grasp the specific human-world relationship associated with the effective implementation of the societal-historical process, characterised by a *gnostic distance* fundamental to human consciousness: The objective-social meanings refer to historically produced forms of practice that, from the standpoint of the individuals, only represent generalised possibilities of action, to which in principle (within historically set limits) they can behave consciously - and that means: with alternatives. Against the traditional naturalistic reduction of individual subjectivity to its mere conditionality by the circumstances of life, and against the idealistic exaltation of the autonomy of the subjects in this respect, it is a matter of mapping in the psychological categories the two-sidedness of human action in the material intermediary context of individual and society – the relationship between *objective determinacy* and *subjective determination*. The essential quality of human subjectivity, being able to consciously relate to the objective-social world and to oneself, does not entail the abandonment of any idea of determination: individual action, though not simply causally determined by conditions, is nevertheless grounded in them. The circumstances of the material-social context of life, as they are *experienced* in their significance as objective preconditions for action at the respective location of the individuals and according to their current needs and interests, provide the essential *premises* for someone's *grounds* for acting now in this way and not otherwise. For others, such *grounds for action* [*Handlungsgründe*] are in principle comprehensible in that people cannot consciously act contrary to their own experienced life interests. This is the *material apriori* of human self-awareness, of interpersonal understanding – and thus also of subject-scientific knowledge.

Let us summarise: Relevant are, on the one hand, *categorial determinations of the subject matter* [*kategoriale Gegenstandsbestimmungen*], in which human subjectivity is conceived in concretisation of the scientific humanism inherent in Marxism and for the purpose of overcoming both the naturalistic objectivism of the dominant psychology and the abstract opposition of the natural and the societal or cultural found in various subject-oriented critiques of *subjectless*

psychology (cf. Maiers, 1993; 2019a). This essentially includes an empirically anchored human-scientific concept of human nature, which as *societal nature* establishes the "*human potentiality*" (*Menschenmöglichkeit* - Tomberg, 1978, 76) of individual socialisation under concrete-historical societal conditions; furthermore, a *decentred materialist concept of the subject*, which grasps the individual experiencing his or her world and himself or herself in his or her "real, sensuous activity" (Marx, 1845, MEW 3, 5) as an objectively and personal-biographically *situated* subject bound to his or her *corporeality* (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 336ff). Constitutive of human subjectivity is the characteristic of *intentionality*: action and experience are always directed towards an objective-meaningful reality and, as a *centre of intentionality*, the human being relates to his or her living conditions in a subjectively grounded way (*bewusstes Verhalten zu [conscious behaviour towards]*: Holzkamp, op. cit, 237ff.); this practical *possibility relation* of individuals to the societal structures of meaning is specified in subject-scientific terms as the *double possibility of acting* in the direction of securing *restrictive* or gaining *generalised agency*, (Holzkamp, 1983, 342ff. ; Markard, 2009, 180ff.), etc.

On the other hand, *methodological consequences* for (actual) empirical research arise from these content-related subject-theoretical conceptualisations. It goes without saying that the claim to understand the world- and self-experience of individual subjects psychologically without any reduction in methodical rigour, rather in the perspective of objective explanation and generalisation, is incompatible with any psychology from a third point of view, in which (other) subjects are *researched* from a distanced observer perspective. If subject-scientific psychology specifically aims at the subjective mode of experience of objective societal possibilities and limitations of action, the subjects as the origin of such experience cannot be placed on the object side, but must stand on the side of the researchers. Some of the methodological research principles and objectification criteria mentioned in more detail below also apply to other subject-oriented positions in a similar way, while others represent Critical-Psychological specifics.

Actual-empirical studies from the standpoint of the subject share with *qualitative research* the maxim of not being bound by a fixed canon of methods, but regarding methodical development itself as part of the research situation; likewise the view of data collection and evaluation being continuously linked in a dynamic optimisation process of hypothesis-guided data acquisition and data-based revision of hypothesis formation.

With *action research* in particular, it shares the orientation towards a research setting designed as a *meta-subjective scientific framework of understanding* [*metasubjektiver Verständigungsrahmen*], in which the epistemic interest of professional researchers is to be included in a methodologically reflected way, while those affected, whose challenges of practical life (self-) clarifications are elevated to a more general problem of subjective modes of action and inner states to be grasped scientifically, actively participate and become qualified as *co-researchers* (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 540ff. ; Markard, 2009, 263ff.). Furthermore, subject-scientific empirical research as *emancipatory*

action research includes a *unity of comprehension and change* [*Einheit von Erkennen und Verändern*] in such a way that the assumptions developed in the joint cognitive process, how an expansion of the disposal of one's own impeding life situation and an improvement of the subjective ability to act and quality of life could be achieved by including the point of view of others, are tested and verified in a *controlled exemplary practice* [*kontrolliert-exemplarische Praxis*] (cf. Holzkamp, op. cit. , 560ff.).

The *specific difference* of subject-scientific actual-empirical methods lies in the methodological foundation of empiricism through object categories that are suitable for opening up the *manifestations of subjective agency/mental situation* [*subjektive Handlungsfähigkeit/Befindlichkeit*] and the *contradictory meaning-grounds nexuses* [*Bedeutungs-Begründungs-Zusammenhänge*] of human action under the historically concrete living conditions of bourgeois society, and guidelines derived from this for the *generalisability of subjective experience data*. From the fact that the grounds for action, in whose medium human life activity is carried out in its specificity, are *first-person* and can only be negotiated from *ever my* point of view, it necessarily follows that epistemologically the subject point of view must be brought to bear as a scientific point of view of knowledge. This means that both in theory formation and in research practice, the corresponding *discourse of groundedness* [*Begründungsdiskurs*] must be maintained as a "discourse form of intersubjective interaction that is centrally specified by the nexus between meanings, grounds and action intentions/actions" – in contrast to the *discourse of conditionality* [*Bedingtheitsdiskurs*], "whose nexus . . . is specified as a 'cause-effect relation'" (Holzkamp, 1996, 64 [2013, 294⁴]).

Conveyed by the research context, the practical development and validation of a subjectively more satisfying everyday way of life also provides an approach to the generalised identification of possibilities for action for others in comparable life situations. The concept of the so-called *structural* or *possibility generalisation* [*strukturelle Verallgemeinerung/Möglichkeitsverallgemeinerung*] (Holzkamp, 1983, 545ff. ; cf. also Markard, 2009, 287ff.) – developed in rejection of average statements and thus in limiting the validity of the model of statistical generalisation, as well as in connection with Lewin's concept of *generalisation* from the *individual case* to the *pure case* – does not refer to dimensions of randomly recorded characteristics of people, but to *premise-ground connexions* and the use or expansion of subjective scopes of disposal of action. The ultimate criterion for confirming such determinations of *typical possibility spaces* [*Möglichkeitsräume*], which are developed in the course of intersubjective understanding between researchers and the co-researchers concerned and are validated as presumably accurate (and applicable) through self-subsumptions, lies in (life) practice.

It should have become clear: *Sensu stricto subject science/subject-scientific* means a subject orientation in the radical way of a consistent transition of

⁴ The translation of the technical terms *Bedingtheits-/Begründungsdiskurs* as *discourse of conditioning* and *reason discourse* respectively in the edition of *Selected Writings of Klaus Holzkamp* by Schraube & Osterkamp (2013) differs from our definition – see in this regard our comment in footnote 1.

research from a supposedly uninvolved external standpoint and its 3rd person observation perspective to the generalised standpoint of the subject and its 1st person perspective - and this *change of epistemic standpoint* forms a distinguishing feature of Critical Psychology.

In the following, we will set out the framework within which its perspective of subject-scientific research can be subsumed under the term cultural psychology.

Linkage to cultural psychology

In the field of *culture-inclusive psychology*, one encounters two basic directions, starting from different (social) ontological or anthropological presuppositions and leading to corresponding epistemological-methodological consequences: The so-called *cross-cultural psychology* – as a sub-discipline of nomological-functionalistic variable psychology – assumes the psychologically interesting phenomena to be universal biopsychic conditions of human nature, whose causal laws are to be uncovered in preferably experimental conditional analyses. Under this premise, it attributes interculturally observable differences to moderating influences of specific socio-cultural environments (cf. e. g. Berry et al. , 1997).

In this kind of *culturally sensitive contextualism*, culture is seen as a separate sphere, independent of natural individuals and their activities. *Cultural psychology* sensu stricto breaks with such naturalistic ontology and the variable-analytic methodology of conceptualising culture as an external condition, a set of antecedent (independent or moderator) variables of behaviour and experience.

Attempting to draw a basic (meta-) theoretical and methodological understanding that connects the various currents of cultural psychology from relevant representations (e. g. Boesch, 1991; Billmann-Mahecha, 2003; Cole, 1996; Shweder, 1990; Straub & Chakkarath, 2010), it can be outlined as an interdisciplinary general perspective that takes a look at psychological phenomena (structures, processes, functions) in their *constitutional relationship* to the meanings handed down in a historically specific social-cultural environment. Cultures are conceptualised as systems of signs, knowledge, rules and symbols that fulfil orientation functions for corporeal, language-enabled, sentient subjects capable of acting by allowing them to give meaning and significance to their world and self. The arrangements of action-guiding discourses, practices, forms of life are perceived from respective individual standpoints in different perspectives. They form dynamic spaces of experience and horizons of expectation that are shared by members of respective cultural collectives, whereby multiple (possibly conflictual) cultural affiliations are not only possible but also to be expected in societies that are complex and, not least, culturally differentiated. Insofar as the relationship of the individual subjects of a cultural group (also) to (their own) culture is not assumed to be an unproblematic appropriation of/adaptation to the cultural meanings/means (*enculturation* in the harmonistic sense of traditional structural functionalism), power and domination relations can be thematised.

This cultural knowledge, which on the one hand opens up and limits people's spaces of experience and action, and on the other hand is (re-)constructed and changed in the course of individual conduct of life and social exchange, can take on different forms: It can be explicit, articulated and reflected or remain implicit, physically embodied and staged performatively, objectified in institutions, materialised in non-linguistic things, spaces and places, embodied in symbolic representations (such as club badges) or present in traces (for example, in "narrative abbreviations" that refer to identity-forming and preserving stories such as 9/11). This is where the cultural-psychological interpretation of action comes in.

In order to understand "how people make personal use of their customary practices, traditional institutions, symbolic and resources, inherited conceptions of things to construct a world that makes sense and to constitute a life-space in which they can feel at home" (Stigler et al. , 1990, vii), the conceptualisation of such mutual constitution of culture and individual requires a concept of subject that emphasises the intentionality of human consciousness:

Sociocultural worlds are understood as intentional worlds that are factual and effective only through people who draw action-guiding meanings from them: 'no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independent of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while every human being has her or his subjectivity and mental life altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from some sociocultural environment and using them' (Shweder 1990, 2). (Staeuble, 2002, 100)

In their *methodological rationale*, research programmes in cultural psychology are therefore guided by a subject model that assumes the human being as a socially situated, reflexive and intentional actor who pursues goals and broader life orientations in his or her actions and gives meaning and significance to all his or her experiencing and doing as well as to the adversities of life. Cultural knowledge is not seen as a causally effective condition of human action, but as a reservoir of manifold, systematically distinguishable types of *determining reasons* [*Bestimmungsgründe*], to which the always *polyvalent* structure of meaning and significance of actions is owed (cf. Boesch, 1991). Actions (such as the ritual eating of a host) refer to cultural (in this case: religious) representations of the world and practices, through which their occurrence becomes understandable in the first place. Accordingly, they cannot be conceptualised as discrete variables that are logically independent of them and stand in purely empirical-contingent relationships to them; their interrelationships cannot be described as laws of nature according to the causalist model – neither in the strictly deductive-deterministic sense nor in the weakened inductive-statistical sense, in which strict laws of nature are replaced by probabilistic statements. Since constructions of meaning and signification can only be deduced reconstructively and interpretatively, the hermeneutic problem of understanding meaning is at the centre of the methodological reflections of cultural psychology. In general, its empiricism follows the principle of connecting to everyday or lifeworld experience and practices of giving meaning and adapting its methodical

instruments to the respective research topic of interest, if necessary also developing them in the course of the research. This open understanding of methods does not exclude the use of standardised quantitative and experimental methods, but relativises it considerably in favour of a methodical repertoire consisting primarily of qualitative, reconstructive or interpretative procedures.

Finally, it follows from the above that cultural psychology shares the *criticism of the epistemological ethnocentrism* of the dominant (culture-blind and thus all the more culture-bound) psychology, which is pronounced by the so-called *indigenous* psychologies, and accordingly endeavours to include the so-called others and strangers as research partners and subjects who bring in their own cultural (psychological) knowledge. The concept of culture as an intentional world, as a *processed experience* of events, practices and artefacts, includes recognising and acknowledging the plurality of cultures "as their creation, not ours" (Schwartz, 1992, op. cit. , 345).

If one takes the key aspects outlined above as the quintessence of the cultural psychological approach to knowledge, then various affinities with the Critical-Psychological definitions of the subject-scientific perspective are unmistakable, which justify their classification as cultural psychology – provided certain criteria are observed.

This reservation is not without reason, considering that in the course of its social-scientific boom, the concept of culture has tended to displace the concept of society: "As comprehensible as the societal constitution of subjectivity and action once appeared in the concepts of the mode of production and social structure, it sometimes appears as blurred in concepts of cultural lifeworlds and practices". (Staeuble, 2002, 97). However, as stated at the beginning, Marxist individual science is essentially bound to the prior analysis of the societal process overarching the individual life processes in its historical specificity. In this respect, a subject-scientific perspective within cultural psychology can only be maintained under the double precondition that it does not misunderstand culture as an external boundary condition of the actions and experiences of individuals, but rather grasps it as their *medium* (Cole, 1996), which contains both the objects and the means of mental development to which individuals enter into an active relationship of appropriation; and that at the same time it does not idealistically reduce this historical socio-cultural world to a system of linguistic symbolic meanings (whose intersubjective signification is created and secured in communicative processes of negotiation), but materialistically understands it as a totality of objectified meanings created in the historical process of societal labour, which includes the differentiation of the level of the symbolic-linguistic.

In contrast to the theoretical isolation of the cultural from other societal practices and contexts of effects, it is important to recognise that the societal totality forms a complex structure with the inclusion of a dominant factor. The mode of production and relations of production of a societal formation determine cultural processes and forms (while recognising their relative autonomy and their own logics).

Set in relation in this way, culture does not have to be an omnibus concept for everything societal and cultural coinage does not have to be an indeterminate

conceptual substitute for the societal determinacy of human subjectivity. This fact was already shown in the late 1950s by the cultural theory writings of Hoggart, Williams, and Thompson and the subsequent work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall, Willis et al.) (cf. Ampuja & Koivisto, 2012).

Understood as "the actual, grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific historical society" (Hall, 1986, cited in Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg 1992, 5), the concept of culture, for its part, can add an action-relevant dimension to the concept of society by opening up access to the perspective of the actors, the world and self-understanding of social groups. The insight of theory of society (eminent in comparison to the naturalism prevailing in psychology) that sustainable constructions of the psychological should reflect societal-historically specific forms of individuality/subjectivity would thus be supplemented by the cultural theoretical idea of a diversity and changeability of *socio-cultural codifications of life worlds and subjectivities* (cf. also Staeuble, 2002, 97).

However, today's social sciences – especially since their postmodern distancing from Marx – are only partially suitable for the foundational reference of psychological theory formation to critical theory of society. In particular, they lack a concept for understanding the class societies of the 21st century. Scientific and political progress in terms of class analysis achieved in the wake of the 1968 movement has in many cases been forgotten and replaced by interpretations of society that merely duplicate in descriptive terms what is happening on a global scale on the societal surface of capitalist relations through the development of productive forces and the permanent restructuring of class contexts: The dissolution of old and the emergence of new social milieus, the mass increase in precarious living conditions with the intensification of class antagonism and horizontal class-specific inequalities, the formation of plural identities that often appear fragmented, the development of altered subjectivities linked to the change in forms of individuality and subjectivation, the consumerist lifestyle stagings of the so-called "high achievers" of high-tech capitalism, but also the public articulation of new emancipatory claims of the subjects, and so on and so forth.

In our conviction, the social-scientific penetration of such rapidly advancing transformation processes of capitalist society requires, in particular the (re)appropriation, critical further development and connection of Marxist, Marxist-feminist and praxeological class theories (cf. for example Candeias, 2021). Only on the basis of their conceptual foundation and material basis do we – Critical Psychology and cultural psychology alike – see ourselves as sufficiently equipped to understand the processes of interpretation and practical appropriation, in which people give meaning to their lives in such changed social-cultural constellations characterised by intersectional structural relations of inequality, oppression and discrimination (with regard to class or gender, categories such as ethnicity, sexuality, age, etc.).

Anchoring a subject-scientific perspective in cultural psychology thus also requires introducing the most advanced class-related theoretical and political concepts into its discourse in order to gain a differentiated, empirically

underpinned theoretical explanation of the diversity of cultural references to life. At the same time, this serves to sharpen the subject-scientific perspective on the active moment of human subjectivity: grounded action, insofar as the *analysis of grounds* [*Begründungsanalyse*] of human action can connect to more concrete *meaning-analytical* [*bedeutungsanalytisch*] findings.

Following a subject-scientific research orientation, a systematic ambiguity and corresponding need for clarification is assumed on the part of affected subjects with regard to the connection, experienced as ambiguous or contradictory, between life interests, circumstances and actions to be grounded on them – an ambiguity through which the subjects are at the mercy of certain dependency situations in their life practice and are thus hindered in exercising control over their life circumstances and in their quality of life. *Analyses of (objective) meaning and (subjective) grounds*, as intertwined systematic tasks of knowledge in the actual empirical research process, aim at understanding the subjective functionality of restrictive coping strategies by first determining the different possibilities and limits of action existing in a historically concrete constellation of economic, political, legal, ideological and cultural conditions, and secondly, by understanding how and on the basis of which premises these objective spaces of possibility are realised individually and how subjective agency and mental states are formed (cf. Holzkamp, 1983, 349ff; Markard, 2009, 160ff, 180ff.).

Application: Actual-empirical subject-scientific research and practice

In its actual-empirical research and practice, Critical Psychology follows the psychological traces of societalisation in capitalist, patriarchal and further historically specific forms from the standpoint of the subject. In view of the (not only) mental costs of living in a society permeated by domination, it emphasises the emancipatory potential of psychological research and practice, which can contribute to the expansion of human possibilities of action in the perspective "to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable being ⁵" (Marx, 1843/44, MEW 1, 385). And while *traditional* psychologies with their individualising concepts, passivising research methods and technologies of differentiation and selection stabilise domination, psychologists can also help shape the conditions of the culture of a mode of production and life (Gramsci), in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx & Engels, 1848, MEW 4, 482).

⁵ In the English source to which we refer, the translation *essence* is used for the German word *Wesen* in the Marx quote. Outside the context of his critical discussion of Feuerbach, in which Marx speaks of the "essence of man" as "[in] reality [being] the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx 1845, 6), this expression is out of place and has therefore been replaced by *being*. This does not cut off the controversial issue of a "theoretical anti-humanism" (Althusser) in Marx's thought, or, in contrast, of whether and in what way a theory of *human nature* occupies an important place in Marx' critique of capitalism and his materialist conception of history. On this, see e.g. Sève (1972); Rückriem et al. (1978); Geras (1983); from a Critical-psychological perspective: Maiers 1993; 2019a.

The Psyche in a Problematic Culture of the Capitalist Mode of Production and Life

Over a period of more than 40 years, four generations of Critical Psychologists have presented alternatives to existing psychological concepts and practices in almost all fields of psychology.⁶ The fund stretches from the *Projekt Analyse psychologischer Praxis (PAPP)* (project analysis of psychological practice), which showed, among other things, how psychological concepts serve to maintain the power-relation between client and therapist by reinforcing the latter's sovereignty of interpretation without easing the suffering of the former, through the work of Critical Psychologists in *Berliner Weglaufhaus* (Berlin's house for run aways) as a practical alternative to psychiatry and the approach of a psychotherapy of everyday life (Dreier, 2011) to the critique of the concept of psychic/ psychological disorders (Weber & Brensell, 2015) and behavioural therapy of depression (Knebel, 2021); from the exploration of institutional racism in shelters for asylum seekers in the *Projekt Rassismus als Selbstentmächtigung* (project racism as disempowerment) to the clarification of the interplay between psycho-social counselling for victims of right-wing violence and civil society mobilisation against racism (Köbberling, 2018) as well as of potentials for alliances against antisemitism (Reimer-Gordinskaya & Tzschiesche, 2021); from the analysis of the ambivalent meaning of changes of productive forces for employees in the *Projekt Automation und Qualifikation* (project automation and qualification) to the reconstruction of how trade union strategies can enhance collective agency, if they encompass not only the workplace but also the seemingly private context of life (Schmalstieg, 2015); from the *Erinnerungsarbeit* [memory work] on female societalisation in the *Projekt Frauenformen* (project shaping women) through the critique of prevailing sex education (Zirkel, 2008) to the development of feminist trauma work (Brensell et al. 2020); from the foundation and elaboration of a subject-scientific concept of human learning (Holzkamp, 1993; Maiers, 2018, 2019b) and the critique of education and 'teaching-learning' in various pedagogical settings, such as *Umgang mit Kindern* (interacting with children) in the family, adult education (Faulstich & Ludwig, 2004), neoliberal higher education (Thiel, 2010) and extracurricular education (Reimer, 2011), to the debate on the validity of related theoretical assumptions under the conditions of neoliberal subjectification (Kaindl, 2005; Langemeyer, 2005; Markard, 2005).

Regardless of the range of content, the common impetus of subject-scientific research is to reconstruct connections between seemingly purely individual phenomena with social contexts and underlying societal structures. In this context, *culture* is understood as the contradictory meaning of the mode of production and life for societal individuals and is analysed more concretely with respect to external and internal impediments to action and, alternatively, spaces

⁶ Although there is a lack of more or less complete overviews, for reasons of space, older, classical approaches that can be found on the web via the italicised proper names are named below without individual references (cf. also the compilation in Markard, 2020), while more recent contributions are referred to directly.

of possibility for individual and collective action in an emancipatory perspective (Markard, 2009, 64ff u. 92ff). The societal conditions to be taken into account are subject to potentially fundamental transformation, which a psychology that understands the psychic as societally mediated must keep up with by referring to relevant theory of society. In addition, inner-scientific controversies and findings also give rise to criticism or revision and further development of subject-scientific concepts and theories. For instance, the societal and science-political consequences of the historical caesura of 1989 brought challenges with them and initiated efforts and controversies through which Critical Psychology as a Marxist approach was updated and renewed in the sense of the principle of *critique and further development* [*Kritik und Weiterentwicklung*] (Markard, op.cit., 152ff and 209ff).

In view of the wide range of content of subject-scientific research, its concrete, actual-empirical methodology cannot be reduced to a simple denominator. Basically, the spectrum of qualitative research methods is used, so that very different types of data (verbal and observational data, documents, media products, diaries, pictures, etc.) can be included. However, the data-based theorising, takes place on the basis of the above-mentioned methodological regulations and concepts. It is also specific to subject-scientific research that it has concretised concepts of action research in terms of a generalised standpoint of the subject. In the following, essential aspects of this research conception will be illustrated in its emergence, critique and further development.

The developmental figure as a movement form of emancipatory research

In the concept of the *developmental figure* [*Entwicklungsfigur*] the claim to realise research that intervenes in problematic conditions with an emancipatory intention has been methodically concretised. It was developed in the *Projekt Subjektentwicklung in der frühen Kindheit* (SUFKI) (project subject development in early childhood) (cf. Markard, 2009, 279ff). The fact that twelve researchers and parents met at approximately fortnightly intervals between 1977 and 1983 to jointly analyse critical situations in the coexistence of adults and their children indicates three essential characteristics of this type of action research: 1. it is about recognising and changing everyday practical problems, not problems constructed for research settings; 2. Those who in traditional research take the role of *test persons* (here: parents) are *co-researchers* who, as those affected, have a practical interest in the research process that converges with the researchers' scientific interest in a phenomenon that is in general need of clarification (here: early stages of ontogenesis); and finally, 3. it is about de-privatising and publicising seemingly individual problems of life in a capitalist society (here: child-adult coordination in the institution of the family). In SUFKI, the temporal and financial resources as well as habitual similarities of the participants made such a research practice possible. The concept of developmental figure is a critical regulative for subject-scientific research in other settings, and at the same time itself needs modification, expansion and

concretisation (Markard, 2009, 277ff), as will be illustrated in comparison with another example about dilemmas of critically intended extracurricular civic education (ECE - cf. Reimer, 2011, 34ff).

Ideally, a developmental figure passes through four instances.

1. First of all, it is necessary to circumscribe a subjective problem of action that the participants are interested in analysing and overcoming in practice.

In SUFKI, for example, relevant scenes were highlighted from the extensive data material of parents' diaries on the interaction of children and adults – for example, the fact that conflicts between children and parents sparked off because several children wanted to have or do the same thing at the same time, even if this is objectively impossible (e. g. sitting in the middle). The initial problem in ECE, viz.: to often fall short of enabling fundamentally critical debates on the interrelations between individual actions, social contexts and societal structures, resulted from the reflection of the author's professional experiences, but was shared by colleagues who therefore participated as interview partners and to a certain extent as co-researchers.

2. The next step is to generate a problem theory formulated in the discourse of groundedness, based on Critical Psychological categories and anchored in the data material, which captures the premises and reasons for the genesis and reproduction of these problems. In doing so, it is conceptually assumed that those affected are involved in the reproduction of their own problems in the context of gaining restrictive agency.

In the aforementioned context of SUFKI, this was the case, for example, when parents made the concept of equality regulation their own premise for action and believed that this would allow justice to prevail in their relationship with their children and prevent conflicts. In ECE, it was demonstrated how the educational practice – contrary to the intention – stays within the limits of progressive neoliberalism (Fraser) insofar as it conceptually and didactically addresses societal structures selectively, for example by ignoring class relations, and predominantly in their immediate significance for the subjects, instead of making collective experiences the starting point for learning about this specific form of capitalist modes of production and life.

3. Insofar as the co-researchers acknowledge their practice to be a case of the presumed premise-ground nexus, alternative courses of action can be generated, practically tested and reconstructed in so-called solution theories.

In the SUFKI case, it was assumed that the concept of equality regulation was adopted and utilised by the children as a predominant mode of rearticulating their needs, thus hindering interactions between adults and children oriented towards real needs; the alternative – not to be gained without conflict – was to abandon the idea of equality regulation and to learn how to address needs more adequately. In ECE, an alternative course of action lay in developing didactics that correspondingly enable a more comprehensive examination of the reproduction of

domination under neoliberalism. While those involved in the SUFKI project adopted the theory of the problem and tested alternatives accordingly, the views of the colleagues in ECE remained divided regarding the solution theory developed at the time.

4. The changed practice is documented and evaluated and, if it has succeeded in expanding possibilities for action, the developmental figure comes to a provisional end and can serve as a theoretically and empirically sound good practice for others who face similar problems. If the attempts to change a problematic practice fail, the premises and reasons for this failure are examined, passing through all instances (so-called *stagnation figure* [*Stagnationsfigur*]).

The extent to which parents and children in SUFKI succeeded in overriding the validity of the problematic premise-ground-relation – "if we elevate equality regulation to the guiding principle of our relationships with children, we reproduce and exacerbate a problem that should thereby be defused" – was not publicly documented. Due to the much more limited time span of ECE, it was not possible to go through the third and fourth instances of the developmental figure. However, the work represented an intermediate stage in a process that preceded it and continued after it. And while the attempts of the author to restructure her educational work in the following years often failed due to the hegemony of inadequate, but popular concepts in the field of civic education, many professionals have begun to adopt a more critical stance, i.e. towards capitalism and class relations in recent years. This may contribute to a broader adoption of the solution theory presented in ECE.

The comparison of the two *figures of development* and *stagnation* indicates the further development of the concept. The starting point was the self-critical diagnosis (Holzkamp, 1996, 159; Markard, 2000, 238) that although the SUFKI de facto referred to a specific societal-social constellation (the interaction of children and adults within the institution of the family in Fordism, etc.), the original version of the method did not sufficiently reflect the (possible) significance of these circumstances for the problems of action and their transformation. The same applies to the above-mentioned study of the reproduction of institutional racism in shelters for asylum seekers, whose function in institutionalising racism was not sufficiently taken into account (Fried, 2002). Here, the concept of personal agency, which is used to ask about impediments and possibilities of living in the face of the overall societal mediatedness of individual existence, and actual-empirical research methodology diverge, or the methodology falls short of the theoretical concept. More adequate is a methodology in which the genesis of (inter-)individual problems of action and perspectives for change are not merely contextualised, but in which questions are asked about how the social contexts are institutionally integrated and societally structured.

As will be shown below, the object of human development can also be used to illustrate one of the above-mentioned specific features of the Critical-Psychological perspective in cultural psychology.

Contradictions and limits of psychological cultural theories using the example of child development

Contradictions of a certain cultural-theoretical perspective in psychology or on the psychic become apparent from a Critical-Psychological point of view when it comes to subject areas in which natural and societal-historical developmental moments are interconnected. Exemplary for this is human ontogenesis with the fact that human newborns come into the world in a state in need of help, in which they are not able to survive on their own and – in a relatively long time compared to other mammals – must fundamentally acquire individual abilities to use the historically specific societal possibilities for action. The natural (-historical) dimension of this developmental fact has been absolutised in the dominant developmental-psychological paradigm, so that child development and childhood have been understood as quasi-natural conditions and accordingly made the object of research with quasi-scientific methods, which designed age-normalised developmental courses on the basis of observational data and assumed universal regularities (Woodhead, 2009).

This developmental thinking arose from a societal approach to children that subjugated them in the form of education – and at the same time legitimised this practice. In the 1970s, critical voices from psychology and the newly emerging sociology of childhood turned against the inherent naturalisation and universalisation of childhood. Instead of perpetuating it as a quasi-natural phase of life, childhood was understood here as a societal structural moment with its own history. In a materialist reading, modern Western childhood emerged as a structure and as a concept of a moratorium through the separation of children's and adults' worlds in the course of the dissolution of household economies, the exclusion of (first proletarian, then tending to include all) children from gainful employment, and the location of (first bourgeois, later tending to include all) children in the private space of the (generalising bourgeois) family and (increasingly including all children) the public school (Held, 2010, 13ff; Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2019, 117f). Historical discourse analyses also trace how elements of the dominant developmental psychology (techniques of observation, use of statistical measures as a basis for determining age-normalised stages, categorisation, placement and selection of children on the basis of tests, etc.) emerged from the 17th century onwards (Tervooren, 2008). They also show how the dominant developmental thinking combines with an androcentric epistemology as well as colonial racist and social Darwinist constructions (Burman, 2017, 238f, 243f, 246ff). While it is central, and initially sufficient, for a sociology of childhood to address societal reactions to, or ways of dealing with, the so-called developmental fact, it cannot ultimately ignore that development and childhood are not mere discourses (Prout & James, 1990, 25f), but a natural-historical and societally material reality. And in various variants of an alternative developmental psychology, it has been recalled that the criticism of developmental thinking, which is incidentally shared, does not apply to developmental psychology *per se*, but its mainstream (Woodhead, 2009;

Kleeberg-Niepage, 2018). Furthermore, it was shown that developmental thinking is sometimes wrongly identified with Piaget's work (Reimer-Gordinskaya 2018) and that it is rather the selective modes of reception of Piaget's work in the dominant psychology that should be analysed and criticised (Burman, 2017, 235ff).

Even more: from the perspective of alternative developmental psychology, the predominantly constructivist and discourse-analytical orientation of childhood sociology can be problematised in various respects: 1. it uses quantitative methods largely unquestioningly, although these tend to contradict its own premises (Mey, 2018, 234ff); 2. the *abstract* negation of universalist-normative developmental thinking in the emphasis on children as *beings* rather than *becomings* (Qvortrup, 1994; Hungerland, 2008) disperses its own object (namely the difference between children and adults) and makes it difficult to realise the claim to reconstruct children's perspectives and give them a voice (Mey, op.cit., 240ff); 3. the repression of children as developing *becomings* tends to be anti-emancipatory, because development for children (and adults alike) is a prerequisite for overcoming impediments (Markard, 2013); 4. the programmatic emphasis on child *agency* runs the danger of underestimating the real oppression of children in society as well as becoming blind to the danger of fitting harmoniously into the neoliberal mobilisation of subjects that accompanies the development of productive forces (Held, 2010, 27ff).

Materialistic (developmental) psychologies (cultural-historical school, Critical Psychology) open up ways out of contradictions and limits of in this sense *culturalistic* approaches in childhood sciences: 1. with the historical-empirical reconstruction of the psychic, the relationship between bio-physiological and societal-social dimensions of human agency can be determined and the opposition of nature and culture can be overcome (Maiers, 1993; 2019a); 2. with its action- and activity-theoretical foundations, the programmatic heuristic *agency* (Betz & Eßer, 2016) can be conceptually executed in such a way that children are understood as simultaneously being and becoming (*be[com]ings*: Mey, 2018, 241), who 3. carry out their (developmental) activity in social contexts and institutions in the historically specific form of the capitalist mode of production and life.

The implementation of a resulting programme of a materialistic-cultural theoretical research on the relationship between children and society is illustrated below and in conclusion.

On the societal agency of children

From a perspective following the cultural-historical school, it has recently been recalled that children's *understanding of society*, i. e. an extremely relevant subject area in terms of cultural theory, has largely remained a desideratum of (developmental) psychological research (Kölbl & Mey, 2018). While this diagnosis is generally shared from a subject-scientific perspective (Bandt, 2018; Markard, 2018), it should not be overlooked that children develop their

understanding of society within the framework of their social activity, which they carry out in concrete social contexts and institutions and starting from a specific position and situation in societal relations. In this sense, over a period of three years, the subject-scientific research project *KiWin* investigated how children act in intersectional power relations by means of participant observation in several day care centres. On the one hand, condition-meaning analyses were used to determine the way in which class and gender relations as well as racist and generational relations are represented in everyday life at the day care centre; on the other hand, with reference to the position and situation of the children, it was reconstructed to what extent they can (or could) gain the ability to act in restrictive or generalised forms in these relations, whereby cognitive, emotional and motivational dimensions were taken into account and, indeed, could be considered due to the chosen methodology.

Starting from circumscribed spheres such as economy and politics or from specific concepts such as tolerance, traditional research in developmental psychology, which nevertheless sees itself as cultural theory, constructs the understanding of society in the form of age-related developmental phases of their cognitive realisation on the basis of often standardised surveys far removed from the real world and ignoring the actions as well as the emotionality and motivation of the children (Barret & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005; van Deth et al. , 2007). Similar reductions characterise the relevant social psychological research on racial prejudice in early and middle childhood (Quintana & McKown, 2012). Its critique and reinterpretation, however, created partly illuminating guiding questions for *KiWin* (Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2018): Instead of trying to identify age-related cognitive developmental phases of prejudice on the basis of aggregated data from laboratory experiments, it was important to be attentive, on a case-by-case basis, to which social categories, stereotypes and prejudices children (re)construct in their social interactions in the life-world of daycare centres in the course of acquiring forms of restrictive agency in intersectional power relations.

The latter perspective proved fruitful in *KiWin*, for example, when analysing the use of age-related or generational categories (Reimer-Gordinskaya, 2020). Thus, the children's association of the category adult with power was revealed by the fact that some children did not easily classify the observers as adults because, unlike educators, they did not give orders except in dangerous situations, offered themselves as play partners and let the children take the lead in the interactions. And the fact that children tried to take advantage of their older age compared to others or to employ the categories of child and baby in a pejorative way in order to assert their interest in the use of a coveted object against other children can be understood as the realisation of a possibility of action in inter- and intragenerational power relations, through which these are simultaneously reinforced. In this context, generational power relations and their representation in the semantic meaning of social categories are understood as an implication of the above-mentioned enforcement of the structure of modern childhood. In a certain way, the fact that this structure includes the exclusion of children from gainful employment refers them to a non-position in class

relations, in whose conflictual dynamics they are caught nevertheless. For example, children suffered from being excluded from lunch when their parents owed payments (Reimer-Gordinskaya, op. cit.). On the part of the specialist staff, this practice is also justified by the fact that they and/or other parents feel it is unfair if some make the payments despite low income while others do not. From the children's point of view, they become victims of a conflict in which they can hardly intervene effectively from their position and situation in life. And the conflict carried out among adults at their expense, with reference to research on the transformation of class relations in neoliberally regulated capitalism, proves to be a reproduction of the competition between class fractions in the zones of precariousness and inclusion, illustrated there by the example of the competitive relationship between core industrial workforces and those employed in the form of temporary work (Brinkmann et al. 2006). In the context of day care centres, this conflict takes on an educationist flavour towards parents who owe payments – they are supposed to *learn to pay*. In addition to this classist dynamic, racist grounding contexts also come into play, insofar as the children concerned come from families with a migration history, who also (have to) live in precarious circumstances due to institutional discrimination. Starting points for changing this practice, which is directly problematic for the children, lie in the emotional ambivalence of specialist staff who feel sorry for the children. In the sense of the developmental figure and based on the definition of a common problem of action provided for therein, it can be possible to design alternative and solidary possibilities of action, such as the redistribution of leftover food, support in applying for funds from the *education and participation package* [*Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket*], or the medium-term strategy of advocating for a provision for children that is generally free of charge for parents, i. e. organised as a publicly financed common good. Such a practice would be evidence of a solidary workers' culture that counteracts both class factions and racist divisions.

Conclusion

In order to clarify the benefit of a subject-scientific perspective for cultural-psychological research into cultural structures of meaning and significance that are fundamental to experience and action, we have first determined the respective positions in this context in more detail in terms of their relationship to each other and possible connections: Cultural-Historical Theory, the Critical Psychology that builds on it, its understanding of psychology as a particular subject science, and cultural psychology, which sees itself not as subdisciplinary but as an overarching perspective.

Contrary to what culturalist constrictions of the meaning of "cultural-historical" suggest, Vygotsky's approach aimed at explicating human subjectivity in the unity of its natural-, societal- and individual-historical determinants from the objective necessities of the material life process. This historical-materialist paradigm of developmental theory decisively inspired the Critical-Psychological programme of gaining scientific basic concepts for a concrete-historical theory of

societal subjectivity through a "historical-empirical categorial analysis" of the natural and societal history of the human mind. By uncovering the social contexts of seemingly purely individual phenomena and the underlying overall societal conditions, such an analysis is able to critically sublate traditional psychology, which – with its personalising concepts and pacifying social technologies – is trapped in bourgeois ideology, and to contribute in a practical-emancipatory way to empowering a self-determined individual conduct of life.

The subject-scientific determinations of the subject essentially include overcoming the dichotomisation of the natural and the societal or cultural, which can be found both in the naturalistic-subjectless psychologies and in their subject-oriented critiques arguing in terms of cultural theory, by means of a concept of human nature qua societal nature gained in the reconstruction of psychophylogenesis/anthropogenesis – which constitutes the "human potentiality" (Tomberg, 1978) to form societies and to societalise individually in respective historical conditions. Also central is a decentred, materialistic concept of the subject, which is secured against emphatic notions of the omnipotence of the ego over external and internal reality, and which understands the individuals experiencing their world and themselves as bodily actors situated in their objective life circumstances and personal biographies. Such a practice-theoretical concept is eminently important to counteract any kind of objectivism, which is by no means limited to the naturalistic conditionality thinking of traditional mainstream psychology, but may also manifest itself in the form of degrading individuals to passive appendages or mere functions of societal-cultural systems. It is a matter of simultaneously understanding human behaviour in its objective determinacy by (natural and societal) conditions and the subjective determination about the conditions, i. e. the reality of people as practice. Human individuals are not causally determined in their behaviour by existing (historically produced) circumstances, but can consciously relate to them as societal object meanings and possibilities of action. The intentionality of human action comes to the fore in the practical possibility relationship of individuals to the world.

A decidedly subject-scientific, actual-empirical research with its methodological guidelines – discourse of groundedness, meta-subjective scientific framework of understanding, co-researcher principle, unity of comprehension and change, etc. – distinguishes itself through making a consistent switch from a supposedly uninvolved external standpoint to a generalised subject standpoint as the point of knowledge. In principle, this is capable of connecting with cultural-psychological research programmes that take a look at individual action and mental phenomena in their constitutional relationship to the artefacts, discourses and forms of life socially and culturally handed down in a specific societal-historical constellation. i. e. that examines these meanings of human life circumstances as results of and contexts of grounds for human action, thus starting from people as socially situated, reflexive and intentional actors and including the so-called others as producers of knowledge in their research settings.

A subject-scientific orientation of cultural psychology grounded in Marxist societal theory can thus prevent tendencies of certain discourses in the social

sciences and humanities (for example, of post-structuralist provenance) to use culture and socio-cultural imprinting as fuzzy omnibus terms for everything societal and the societal determinacy of human subjectivity by recognising cultural processes and forms as determined by the mode of production – the productive forces and relations of production – of a societal formation. The incorporation of advanced class theoretical and political concepts into the discussion of cultural psychology enables a differentiated theoretical explanation for the diversity of socio-cultural constellations characterised by intersectional structural relations of inequality, oppression and discrimination and the subjectively grounded action in contradictory life situations associated with them. As a product of human practice, and thus changeable on a historical scale, the societal structural relations determine the possibility spaces of personal agency – a fact that is easily glossed over in idealistic-social constructivist conceptions of culture.

In that materialistic way set in relation to each other, the concept of culture can widen the concept of society by a dimension relevant to action in that it opens up access to the perspective of the actors, the world- and self-understanding of social groups and the diversity and changeability of socio-cultural codifications of life worlds and subjectivities. In this respect, cultural theories refer to a level of theory formation and empirical research that is basically laid out in Critical Psychology with its concept of *meaning analysis*, but is not sufficiently differentiated. To achieve this differentiation, of course, systematically requires the further elaboration of a Marxist concept of culture, from which available cultural theories can be reinterpreted. From a subject-scientific point of view, it would be important to comprehend culture as contradictory, everyday practical patterns of meaning of the mode of production and life for societal individuals in such a way that, compared to the objective restrictions on action and self-acting impediments, expanded spaces of possibility for self-determined action open up for them.

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