



Dissertation abstract

The enacting of belonging and difference: An ethnographic discourse analysis

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KEYWORDS: History education; negotiation and appropriation processes in class; ethnography; belonging and difference; imperialism and colonialism

Introduction

The dissertation explores the significance of history for the enculturation and subjectification of the individual into society, and the production of social reality in the context of history lessons in school. Based on a two-year-ethnography in school, this research asks how *belonging* and *difference* are enacted in the contemporary history classroom of today's post-migrant societies. It does so through a detailed analysis of a selected lesson on imperialism and colonialism. It argues that three core elements of a shared European/western social imaginaries are enacted in this process: Eurocentrism; nationalism; and racism.

Methodology

The study is based on a two-year-ethnography following the history lessons of a class in Grade 9, through to Grade 10 (age 15 – 17) in a high-school in Lower Saxony, Germany. In the first six weeks, this class was accompanied to each lesson throughout their whole school day, regardless of subject. For the next two years, only their history lessons were observed. Contact with the students was not limited to the lessons, it also included taking breaks together, meetings outside of school, and participation in extra-curricular class activities. All actors of the class considered themselves to be 'white'¹ Germans without a conscious migration history. Approximately half of the students had parents with a university qualification. The setting can thus be described as relatively privileged.

The study traces meaning production across curricula, textbooks and other teaching materials, classroom practices, informal talks, and interviews with students and teachers. Its goal is not to show that Eurocentrism, nationalism and racism are reproduced in history lessons. Instead, the focus is on the question of how these imaginations are learned and produced in subtle, indirect and inadvertent ways in the course of teaching negotiation and appropriation processes, and often despite the actors' stated intentions. Particular attention was paid to "rich points" (Agar, 1994, p.231), moments in which unexpected things, breaks, contradictions or

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unvarnished reproductions become visible. Such moments guided the analysis. The focus of the study rose in part from unexpected moments during the first month about how belonging and differences are enacted in school.

Theoretical-analytical framework

The dissertation is located at the intersection of several disciplines and conceptual approaches. In particular, it contributes to the debate on racism and postcolonial education and the contents of teaching and learning (Marmer, 2013; Marmer & Sow, 2015; Mecheril & Scherschel, 2011). It orients to pedagogy and history education from a cultural-anthropological perspective and by means of cultural-anthropological methods. It adds to the research literature about postcolonial and racism-critical education in an as-yet understudied site: a 'white' privileged school. This shifts the attention from people who are directly targeted by discrimination to an understanding of nationalism and racism as social imaginations, which are important for all because of its effects on thinking and social reality. Furthermore, the study combines ethnographic analyses of the field and of the collected data with a discourse analytical look at that corpus. It does not focus on the actors, but on their practices.

In order to make sense of these processes, and some of the dimensions that structure them, the study utilises four approaches from practice theory which are set in relation to the other approaches, with each addressing gaps in the others. First, Bourdieu's (1983; 1998; 2012) cultural sociology with the key concepts, field, capital and habitus; second, Butler's (2001; 2006) understanding of subjectivation as result of performative discursive practices; third, Foucault's (1978; 2010) reflections about techniques of governance; and fourth, Taylor's (2004; 2009) analysis of modern Western societies as specific social imaginary.

Bourdieu's (1983; 1998; 2012) reflections about field, capital, and habitus enabled the inclusion of the dimensions of familial socialization and its significance for the subjectification of the actors as well as their habitus-specific behaviour in field. Butler and Foucault's approaches make it possible to include the level of communication as a powerful act. Butler's (2001; 2006) concept of subjectification as a product of performative interpellations (Althusser, 2010) shows the discursive agency of the actors and their active, dynamic role in negotiation processes. Foucault's (1978; 2010) considerations underscore the necessity to include techniques of governing and their influence on subjects and institution as well as on schools and history teaching in the analysis. Taylor's (2004; 2009) idea of social imaginaries points to a specific societal background knowledge which structure actors practices in a dynamic way.

Key findings

The complex interplay of enacting and negotiation is analysed in multiple steps. *Chapter 2: The field*, introduces (i) the positioning of the school and its specific consequences for the composition of actors, and the status of history teaching; (ii) the spatial and temporal arrangements; (iii) the researcher's creation of a relationship to the actors and associated positioning dynamics, which are a result of the ethnographer's participation. They show clearly the difficulties of handling closeness and distance in the field situation and the central importance of techniques of examining, valuation, and control in the context of the school.

Chapter 3: Imaginaries of the "self": Eurocentrism and nationalism begins with an overview of critical research on the Eurocentric and nationalist foundations of history and history education. It illustrates the intimate connections between a Eurocentric perspective and the progress narrative. According to the literature, the historic development of Europe is described as exemplary, unique, and independent from external influences, and the 'rest' of the

world as deficient (Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2015; Conrad & Randeria, 2002; Loomba, 2005). The chapter also overviews classic and critical research on nation-building and makes sense of it for this approach to analysis (Anderson, 1986; Brubaker, 1998; Geulen, 2004; Gellner, 1991; Hobsbawm, 1983).

The following outlines the steps of analysis in this research. First, the political documents which build the foundation for history teaching in Germany are analysed for the prescribed imaginations of belonging and difference (Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium, 1998, 2008). They are critiqued for the explicit statement that Christianity is a fundamental part of the cultural memory of society, and that to participate in this collective memory is a goal of schooling and history education. Second, the content, topics, and methods set by the curricula in general, and particularly for the lesson about imperialism and European colonization of the world, are elaborated and included in the analysis. Showing that they promote a national perspective by including dealing with imperialism as an aspect of the German Imperium respectively as the prehistory of World War I. Third, the textbooks are included in the analysis, which reproduce the narrow focus of the political documents. The book used in the lessons however undertakes some shifts. These shifts become visible in a more global history perspective and a focus on case studies about colonialism in Asia and especially in Africa. They find expression also in the way the history of the 'rest' is presented, the conception of their agency, the consideration of their voices as well as the used language and means of representation.

The core of Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of teaching practices and classroom discussions. In addition, ethnographic observations, informal discussions and interviews on the subject are included. The analysis touches on several aspects: the blurring of motives and justifications which obscure the underlying capitalist logic of colonialism; an understanding of colonisation as a virtually natural and inevitable process; a relativisation of the German role as a colonial power. The chapter also includes material from interviews with the students, which shows their narrative competence to recognise the underlying discourses and make them far more explicit than it was intended for the classroom (Macgilchrist, Ahlrichs, Mielke & Richtera, 2017).

Chapter 4: Imaginaries of the "other": racism and colonial discourse begins with an overview of research on racism and the societal norms and normalisations which lead to the longevity of colonial-racist imaginaries of an 'Other' (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1992; Bhabha, 2000; Kalpaka & Räthzel, 1990; Farr, 2009; Hall, 2000; Miles, 2000). The focus is explicitly on these logics and the societal processes that make it almost impossible to live outside racist logics. The aim here is not to describe the actors as racist but to describe the racist system of differentiation and hierarchy, which in turn has strong socialization/subjectification effects on the members of society.

Based on a second detailed analysis of classroom practices, the chapter shows a variety of attempts to challenge dominant narratives and how these attempts are unsuccessful due to the habitual backgrounds of the actors, the discursive negotiation processes, and the background knowledge of society. It highlights the importance of previous images, caricatures, discourses and narratives, which, like an echo (Halbwachs, 1980) of colonial discourse, prevail even when the teaching material has changed. This was evident during a class discussion on colonial advertising images in which the teacher stresses the nakedness of the local population, even though the people in the pictures are very differently dressed. Additionally, this is underscored by a change in the language the teacher uses and the sudden recourse to colonial terminology.

The chapter explores not only what is taught, but what is not taught (for example, entangled histories, migration histories, and the creation of racial theories to justify colonial crime). Furthermore, the analysis shows how the Eurocentric and national perspectives remain dominant even in working phases that touch on aspects of the history of the 'other'.

Additionally, the chapter includes reflections about my role as an ethnographer when I took up an intervening role during a group discussion about iconic pictures in the context of the genocide on the Herero or when provoked by the students' anti-Semitic and racist language; and, the role of institutional everyday school practices, such as, whether a class is scheduled for Wednesday afternoon or Monday morning or the disruptions to cohesive lessons through vacations or illness.

Conclusion

This study clarifies the importance of the political guidelines for the negotiation processes in class by providing the central perspectives and logics as well as contents, topics and methods of history education. It points to the interpretive power of 'white' members of society regarding the question of whose story is told (Apple, 1993). Findings show that a stronger political will would need to include entangled and global-historical approaches and postcolonial, post migrant and critical race perspectives in history teaching. Instead, the students are interpellated as 'white' Germans or Europeans. At the same time, by almost exclusively telling a 'white' national story an implicit equation of being German and being 'white' is made.

Second, the analysis shows a multitude of discursive practices that reproduce dominant narratives and discourses in history lessons, even when the actors indicate other intentions or when the teaching material has changed.

Third, it also emphasises the discursive agency of the actors, which is shown in picking up, decoding and reformulating underlying narratives and discourses. The focus in the study prioritises the students' perspectives and their narrative competence in deciphering the imaginaries into which they are encultured.

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Endnotes

¹ The labeling of people and/or groups as 'black' or 'white' is a construction produced by the ideology of racism. From a critical whiteness perspective and due to the conditions of the investigated field the study focus among others on the structures, practices and processes which reproduce racism and therefore white privileges in everyday negotiations in history class, even if it might not be intended by the actors.