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The Powerlessness and the Power of Shame

My talk deals with the powerlessness and the power of shame in relation to the phenomenon of blame. This relationship will be argued based on audiovisual empirical data, captured in a youth centre for girls in the framework of my dissertation, and analysed with the method of video-interaction-analysis (Knoblauch 2006). The interpretation focuses on two questions: (1) under which conditions does shame constitute and (2) how do female youth and professionals handle shamefaced situations?

The presentation explicates that the possibility of being ashamed is an anthropologically universal phenomenon, which is founded in the human constitution of existence, respectively in the ex-centric position according to Plessner. The analysis of the scene makes transparent that an anthropological reflection of shame on its own constitutes an essential but not sufficient condition of the ascertainment of the complexity of this phenomenon, as the forces of different social situations are not taken into consideration.

The necessary relatedness of shame to normativity and intersubjectivity will be made plausible by the conjunction of the anthropological perspective of Plessner with the sociological approaches of Agnes Heller and Sighard Neckel. Both Heller and Neckel specify shame as an affect of relationship to the social regulations (cp. Heller 1980, 111) and norms. Neckel defines it as negative affective self-evaluation, which is imposed on the subject by breaching of cultural standards (cp. Neckel 1991, 18f). Neckel identifies the emergence of shame in the perception of the other. In so doing he follows the theory of Sartre about the situatedness of shame in the gaze ("le regard") of the other. In the shameful gaze of the other the person perceives and sees herself / himself compared to the benchmark set by the other. This is Sartre's phenomenological argument of the awareness of the other as subject and not as object in the perspective of the person. Whereas Sartre regards the expression of shame first of all as an internalisation of power, Agnes Heller points out how (moral) power can emerge from shame.

Referring to the theoretical part about the conditions of the emergence of shame, the talk tackles the question of assurance of personal (bodily) integrity and of the constitution of agency in shamefaced and precarious situations, in the very specific context of a social pedagogical field of acting, characterized by processes of de- and re-subjectivation.

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