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Challenging Sociological Pessimism

Practices of Intermediation of Work and (a good) Life

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the shifts of boundaries between work and life and asks for the individual's psycho-social capabilities of self care to handle these shifts. The discussion about the dissolution of the boundaries between 'work' and 'life' is not new. Women's and gender research raised this question in the course of the new women's movement in the 1970s with the public/private debate. Today, this issue is discussed again, particularly in the field of sociology. Important questions that have been neglected so far in this debate are how individuals that are highly confronted with this shift proceed with it; how it is mediated in the daily life practices of these people and what ideas of a 'good life' are possibly important for this. This lack of current research needs to be tackled in a gender sensitive as well as a psycho-social manner.

Keywords

Care, Entgrenzung, Intersubjectivity, Recognition, Subjectivation of Work, Work/Life



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Introduction

I want to take up a discussion that is dominant in the sociological debate in Germany at the moment. This discussion even claims to be a societal diagnosis: it is the debate on the 'Entgrenzung' of work and life [I will use the term 'dissolution or shifting of boundaries' for Entgrenzung in the following for there is no appropriate term in English]. Today's shifting-debate stresses socially relevant diagnoses over the change of the work-life relation beyond industrial sociology. I am working on a qualitative empirical explorative study where I do semi structured (problem centred) interviews with employees, male and female, that work in typically shifted workplaces. My central question is which coping strategies and practices of self care do these employees develop in their everyday life and are there gender sensitive particularities?

The people of my sample work in flexible time, with programmes that are called 'time sovereignty' [Zeitsouveränität] or 'trust time' [Vertrauensarbeitszeit] which simply means, that there are no fixed times to be at the work place anymore. This is mostly accompanied by target agreements. The crucial point is, that these programmes are installed in the scope of a regular employment contract in industry or services and are no longer typical labour time of managers, freelancers or self-employed.

My focus is on their everyday life and the psychosocial intermediation in the tradition of a subject-orientated sociology. For that reason I will analyse the interviews in a psychosocial, and in some parts psychoanalytic, manner.

Structure

After giving a short outline of what is meant by the debate on the shifting boundaries of 'work and life' I will point out, that this debate touches on a central feminist theme: the daily life intermediation of the dichotomies of public and private in other words: of work and life.

Subsequently I will give you an outline of the methodological approach of my PhD project. This includes my understanding of the hidden dimensions within the work/life debate: life as embeddedness, which I call the 'perspective of care' and which is guiding my methodological approach.

Furthermore this is linked to analysis that regards the inner realm of the psychic as the intertwining of society and the individual. Finally I will point out, that only the methodological view on the daily life practices of people and their coping strategies and ideas of a good life that

are guiding these strategies can be an answer to sociological pessimism instead of following gloomy prognoses.

Blurring of boundaries [Entgrenzung] of work and life in the context of industrial sociology

Let me first give you a very short outline of the ongoing debate on dissolution of boundaries of work and life (Baethge 1991; Gottschall/Voß 2005). The core thesis is a declared dissolution or a shifting of the boundaries of work and life. This shifting marks a change from fordism to postfordism (Hirsch 1986). Following the regulation school approach postfordism as the successor of fordism is characterized by new information technologies, the globalisation of financial markets, the feminisation of the work force and a fundamental change of the work. Here we find two lines of argumentation.

On the one hand the blurring of definite boundaries between gainfully time and assumed private recreation time caused by new policies of labour time and place (time/place Dimension) and on the other hand the dissolution of boundaries of occupation and privacy in the sense of a 'subjectivation' of work. Integration of subjective attributes, as communicative and affective practices into the work process (Kocyba 2000, Kratzer 2003).

Here I stop going into details of this industrial sociological discussion. Important for my reasoning is the figure of the 'labour entrepreneur' [„Arbeitskraftunternehmer'] (Pongratz/Voß 1998, 2004): In contrast to the occupational worker of fordism this is a new type of employee in postfordism. He has to control and rationalize himself and works with flexible labour times. He is doing affective work and he is under permanent pressure to qualify.

Of course, with this I generalize a tendency within the debate, but this tendency is hegemonic in the discussion on labour at the moment and the reason why I am doing my qualitative research of this group.

These findings go along with the thesis about a new regime of self inspired by individualization theory (Beck 1986) and with this the idea of a change of intimacy in forms of posttraditional or 'pure love' relationships. These, Giddens argues (Giddens 1992), hold great promise for human freedom and happiness, but are so unpredictable that they also threaten to overwhelm people with anxiety and lead them to engage in compensatory addictive behaviours. Axel Honneth from the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt argues, that caused by the

developments mentioned above, individuals are now the centres of their own life and life planning (Honneth 2004). At the same time, cultural transformation (p.e. sexual revolution) generates a new compulsion to individuality: the desire for self-realisation is now an external command. The claim for individual self-realisation is now, as Honneth argues, institutionalised patterns of expectation of social reproduction. Honneth argues that the development of individual symptoms such as inner vacuousness and social affliction are consequences of this paradox alteration. From that Honneth (as well as Giddens and Beck) infers pessimistically that one can notice new forms of social affliction in a psychological sense. Increase of Depression caused by the overstraining of people to be them selves as Axel Honneth referring to Ehrenberg (1998) puts it:

‘The permanent compulsion to draw the ground of an authentic self-realization from the own inner life asks an enduring way of introspection, that someday must lead into blankness’ (Honneth 2004, p.156).

Gender

Well, how could this debate be interesting from a gender sensitive perspective?

This perspective serves the crucial points of my critique: The discussion of the shifting boundaries of work and life touches on one of the most central feminist concerns of women and gender research: the double integration of women in fordistic and postfordistic societies into the private sphere of reproduction (life) and the public sphere of work.¹

This demanded from them the temporal, mental and social linkage of both spheres ever since. In other words: Dissolution of boundaries [Entgrenzung] of work and life has always been a social reality for women (Gerhard 1999). Women one can say, are Pioneers of a development which is contrary to the argumentation that women experience a ‘catching up individualization’ as Beck and other advocates of Individualization theory formulates it.

¹ ‘All political actions, discussions and scandals aimed to shift the gender specific frontiers between the private sphere and the public that is only conceded to men’ (Gerhard 1999: 18)

In this new debate both linked categories of work and life are now separated artificially and brought together again by the idea of the dissolution of boundaries [Entgrenzung].² Moreover, the discourse of the changing work-life balance and the following new forms of work underlies a gender blind discourse by representing an andocentric model of the new work types. The category of gender – if it is considered at all – turns up only with regard to the women's employment (Aulenbacher 2005).

In the view of individualization theory the debate also is based on a classic concept of intimate relationships, in other words: family, with a male breadwinner and a caring wife. A feminist understanding of Life in the sense of care means recognition of neediness and vulnerability as well as the fact, that a life in relationships, intersubjectivity, precedes an autonomous life (Benjamin 1988, Chodorow 1985, Eckart 2000). Moreover, structurally neediness as well as caring for others and for oneself is not gender specific but universal (Tronto 1996).

This leads to the question of Self Care strategies the project is focusing on. How are the protagonists of this study able to draw the line of self-determination and over-direction? What ideas of a good life come up with the change of the work time?

What is most important for my research strategy is my understanding of life in relations and with this to broaden the view on relations. One can no longer assign care within the scope of classical family (Roseneil/Budgeon 2004). Care (care for oneself and others) is daily life reality of everyone and is much broader than the industrial family-centred sociological debate conceives it. With this one can say I follow a Leeds tradition, with the CAVA projects of Sasha Roseneil and others concerned with care and the centring on friendship in sociological research as well as the decentring of families.

This understanding of life as intersubjectivity that I am following is absent in the debate on the blurring of boundaries. I suppose, that the view on concrete Care can be a corrective opposite to the dominance of instrumental rationality in the discourse and opposite to the 'economisation of the social' (Bröckling et al 2000).

² This idea still follows the dichotomies instead of overcoming them, for that reason, my project aims to find new or more adequate terms for what is really meant. Are people dead while working?

‘Paying Attention to intersubjective relations of care is an opposition to the monadic programmes of self-improvement’ (Eckart 2004,p.3) as it is conceptualised in the idea of the ‘labour entrepreneur’ [Arbeitskraftunternehmer].

But let me pick up a quote by Sasha Roseneil to come to the point of my critique:

‘It should be possible to offer analysis of some of the negative psycho-social dimensions of individualization and transformation in intimate life, without embracing a normative pessimism about social change’ (Roseneil 2004, p.8).

It is essential to look at the way, care is lived and practised in everyday life, and above all, it is necessary to consider the practices beyond the normative model one can find and what ideas of a good life form the basis of these practices.

This could be an answer to the sociological pessimism of the debate on the dissolution of boundaries and can be a perspective against the dominant androcentric labor discourse. I will try to challenge this pessimism with my empirical research and the methodology I am following.

Methodology

Firstly it is necessary to figure out, what is articulated by the protagonists (or one can say even pioneers) about this blurring of boundaries and how this is done. Which space is available to articulate and what images of a good life are embedded in these articulations.

Secondly it is essential to look at the forms of relations and relationships emerging from the (new) situation of labor time. Thirdly it is central to ask for the ability and practices of Care for oneself and others and finally this makes a consideration of the everyday life practices of these people obligatory.

I am working with the concept of the sociology of everyday life. This was developed from a feminist critique of the concept of labor in sociology (Jurczyk/Rerrich 1993).

The dissociation of work- and family life and with this the gender specific division of labor is a central moment of industrial societies. The assignment of women to the realm of family as a place of emotions, non-production and men to a realm of rationality and economy was never a reality for most people but rather structuring a pattern as well as the distribution of resources.

The double socialization of women is for that reason the complementary side of gender hierarchic labor division.

The concept of the conduct of everyday life is trying to overcome this artificial division theoretically. The everyday life is to be understood as an active process of integration of all activities of the individual.

In addition these activities are led by different, maybe hidden, images of a good life and of course by the psychodynamics of the inner realm. This methodology tries to overcome not only the dualism of work and life, but also the dualism of individual and society by taking into account the intra-psychic, the intertwining of the psychic and the social. This takes seriously a subjective perspective of this methodology and makes a psychosocial analysis of the wishes and articulations of the interviewees necessary (Leithäuser/Volmerg 1979, 1988).

The aim is to integrate sociological, feminist and psychosocial analysis into empirical research.

Conclusion

What I tried to make clear was that it is essential to analyze the effects of modernization or individualization with a methodology that overcomes a pessimistic view on theoretical approaches that still work with an artificial division of a male coded labor sphere and a female coded private sphere. Against that I tried to put my understanding of life as intersubjectivity, care as essential and universal. Furthermore my understanding of the intertwining of the social and the psychic as essential for researching daily life practices. The ongoing debate on dissolution of frontiers of work and life is at its core a feminist issue.

There is ongoing social change, but spoken from a sociological and gender sensitive view one must not miss to look at people's articulations and practices of ideas of a good life instead of embracing gloomy, normative, and last but not least conservative prognoses!

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