

Selected socio-psychological research projects at the Sigmund Freud Institute

By Rolf Haubl

When the sociologist René König set out to publish a open-minded sociological journal at the end of the 1940's, he insisted that the journal should be called the "Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie" ("*Cologne Journal of Sociology and Social Psychology*"). It still bears this name today. He naturally understood social psychology to refer to psychoanalytical social psychology, as practised by the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in the further development of the cultural theory and mass psychology of Freud, for example in the "Studien zum autoritären Charakter" ("*Studies on authoritarian character*"). Frankfurt thus became a stronghold of this scientific discipline, and still remains so today, albeit with some limitations. The Sigmund Freud Institute plays an important role here, because all its members have always been aware of the social context in which psychoanalysis and its questions are embedded.

Since the founding of the Freud Institute was associated from the beginning with the task of keeping a critical eye on the social development of Germany in the post-war period, and promoting a democratisation process which would not exhaust itself in an "economic miracle", we still feel ourselves obligated to this task under the changed conditions of today. Anti-Semitism and right-wing radicalism are not subjects to be filed away in the shelves of history, and therefore remain subjects we must continue to address with regard to the development of hatred and propensity to violence, and their containment.

The situation has given rise to a field of research with an integrative focus: We have conducted a range of research projects on the subject of the historical transformation of totalitarian social systems into post-totalitarian and democratic social systems. We have so far examined the transition from Nazi Germany to the Bonn Democracy, the transition of the GDR into the Berlin Democracy, and most lately the transition of the China of the Cultural Revolution into a post-Maoist China. Each of these projects bring together socio-psychological and clinical aspects, since we are also interested in the trans-generational transfer of traumatic experiences, for which the Shoa research at the Freud Institute has become an exemplary model.

In order to illustrate the methodological challenges, I would like briefly to describe our China project: In the psychoanalytical training of doctors and psychologists in China, it is noticeable that in the treatment reports, there is no mention at all of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, although this must be considered as a period of collective trauma. This finding prompted us to reconstruct the conscious and unconscious psycho-social effects of this time in in-depth interviews with perpetrators and victims of this era, and with their children. Conducted by Chinese colleagues, translated by German-speaking Chinese and interpreted by a group of German psychoanalysts the interviews confronted us with the question of the culture-wide significance of psychoanalytical interpretation patterns. And more: The project also throws up the question of to what extent our western ideas, such as collective traumata should be dealt with, and whether they can be applied at all to the Chinese mentality. The analysis, which for the first time brings together psychoanalytical and sinological knowledge, also enables us to glimpse in an impressive way the extent of suffering which the rulers of China still refuse to acknowledge today.

Social transformations are of course not only historical facts. On the contrary: Modern societies find themselves in the course of radical change, which can be described accurately, although insufficiently, as the triumphal procession of neo-liberalism. This radical change deeply affects the way of life of the members of a society, and manifests itself in such ways as increasing numbers of psychic problems, which in many cases are triggered by psychic stresses at the workplace. Questions of gainful employment have been rather marginal subjects of psychoanalytical social psychology. Apart from a few exceptions, it has not concerned itself with economic questions and questions of experiences and actions in organisations, although this complete subject area characterises the life of people today more than hardly any other. Over recent years, we have attempted to open up this field for psychoanalytical social psychology, which of course can only succeed in cooperation with related social sciences such as work and organisation sociology.

In 2007-2009 we conducted a research project which examined the succession in family companies as a critical life event. Because succession processes stir up all the unresolved conflicts in a family company, and in many cases ruin the company, if these conflicts cannot be settled successfully. The response to this investigation was very positive, not least because the psychoanalytical understanding of supposedly irrational family decisions was welcomed as a necessary extension to the previous approaches. This encouraged us to address further subjects in this field.

Last year for example, under the title “Arbeit und Leben in Organisationen 2009: Psychosoziale Kosten turbulenter Veränderungen” (“*Working and living in organisations in 2009: Psycho-social costs of turbulent changes*”), we were able to conclude the first stage of an ongoing investigation planned to extend over several years, which is aimed at drawing a balance of the psychic consequences which the neo-liberal reorganisation of modern society has for working life. Some well-known keywords include: Economisation, desegregation and subjectivisation of work. We chose an innovative methodology by making use of the experiences of supervisors of the “Deutsche Gesellschaft für Supervision” (“*German Society for Supervision*”). First, several very experienced supervisors were questioned in extensive in-depth interviews about the stresses suffered by the workforce, including management personnel, then their evaluated reports were incorporated in a questionnaire, which was ultimately completed by a good thousand supervisors. The investigation resulted in the identification of a list of risk factors, which not only undermine work satisfaction, but also simultaneously the health of employees. In preparation for the next survey series, we are currently considering how self-care can be conceptualised as an ego-ability which can help to avoid over-stress. This research project also attracted encouragingly great public attention, bringing us a series of different opportunities to present the findings to decision-makers from the world of business and politics.

In the course of its neo-liberal reorganisation, modern society is increasingly becoming a consultative society. New consultation formats are coming onto the market with increasing speed, whose professionalization is in question. One of these formats is coaching, which is currently competing with supervision as the preferred form of consultation for work and organisation. We accept this development from various points of view: firstly, we are following how psychoanalytical knowledge, and increasingly more psychoanalysts, are in demand in this field; secondly, we are investigating what actually takes place in coaching and organisation consultation, using as a frame of reference practical psychotherapy research, such as that advocated by Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber; thirdly, we are attempting, against this background, to establish empirically founded standards for psycho-dynamic, systemic coaching, which prevent the inappropriate reference to psychoanalysis and group analysis. Cooperations have been instituted with the “International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations”, and these will be extended further.

The social changes of the last two decades can also be interpreted as a crisis of achievement-orientated society, which is expressed in a continual increase in the pressure to perform, coupled with declining subjective well-being. These changes also have their effect on the following generation, threatening the abolition of what civil society has institutionalised as childhood. The psycho-social stresses on children and young people are on the increase. We have therefore defined a focal point of research of “Prevention” at the Freud Institute, which brings together research projects looking into how children and young people can be supported so that they develop not only cognitively, but also become emotionally resilient.

There are many socio-psychological articles on this focal research area, of which two are named here: The first article uses the example of ADHD. While clinical colleagues deconstruct the diagnosis and Ritalin therapy of the syndrome, in order to open up a more sense-making therapeutic approach and have this adopted in health policy, social science colleagues, in a project entitled “Living with Ritalin” and involving 60 in-depth interviews with affected young people, are developing an empirically founded typology, which highlights what functions the medication can have for young people. We are interested above all in a use of medication which is aimed at enhancing academic performance irrespective of therapeutic necessities.

While one can summarise such a socio-psychological contribution under the heading of medicalisation of social problems, the second type of contribution focuses on institutions involved in this move: In this way, a research project based on group discussions with teachers, parents and children has developed a model for a health group, which helps schools to become learning organisations in matters of ADHD-related health promotion.

A further research project aimed at institutions, under the title of “Kein Einverständnis, ohne einverstanden zu sein” (“*No agreement without being in agreement*”), focuses on paediatricians’ practices as the place where affected children and their parents can find out about ADHD, and examines how this information is provided, and how the children and young people themselves can be included.

This almost brings an end to my brief overview of selected research projects with a socio-psychological focus. Let me however make one concluding remark:

In the late 1960’s, analytical social psychology underwent a definition as political psychology, and even politicised social psychology. It was overloaded with expectations on its critical social potency, which it could not fulfil. Since then, a disillusionment has set in, which is regarded and even condemned by some as a climb-down. This short overview of the socio-psychologically accentuated research projects at the Freud Institute should confirm that there can be no talk of such a climb-down. In view of the complexity of the social circumstances in question however, a careful position must be adopted, and greater attention must be paid to the separation of the roles as scientists on the one hand and political actors on the other.

In order to have more time to go into this problem, we are organising a conference from 7th to 9th May of this year, to go into the conditions of possible criticism: “Die Zukunft der Gegenwart. Zeitdiagnostische Fragen einer psychoanalytischen Sozialpsychologie” (“*The future of the present. Contemporary diagnostic questions of psychoanalytical social psychology*”). This will bring to a conclusion the series of events on the 50th anniversary of the Freud Institute.