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Formation and Psychology

The embodiment of a professional habitus of psychology students

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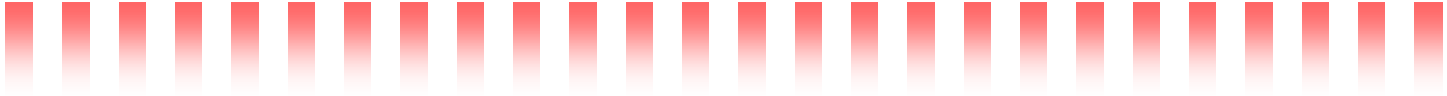
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HANDBOOK

Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education Conference

'Student Being and Becoming in the Future University' at
Middlesex University, UK, 10-12 September 2018





Formation and Psychology

The embodiment of a professional habitus of psychology students

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Abstract

What is the purpose of higher learning and the ideals of the university? What traits characterize the habitus of the profession that the students enter after completing their studies? Including such Bildung-perspectives (Gadamer) and profession-perspectives (Bourdieu) makes it possible to come to a deeper understanding of the challenges that Danish students of psychology are confronted with, and the possibility of processes of formation. Their direct influence on the study activities such as project work gives students a high level of motivation and involvement, and this is key to the embodiment of habitus as well as processes of formation: no commitment to the activity - no formation of a psychological and scientific habitus. And no personal involvement – no identification of one's own standpoints and ideals.

Proposal

At our department of psychology, we welcome every year 160 highly motivated students. But as the students' grade point average from upper secondary school increases from year to year, we meet more and more students that excel in individualistic performance and competition strategies in the pursuit of high grades, instead of corporation and immersion into the subject matter of psychology itself.

The continental-philosophical distinction between the formal educational system as defined by the study programme, learning objectives etc., and a Bildung (formation) perspective, enables us to address questions of ideals, values and processes of transformation that are usually not addressed in the everyday educational activities (Gadamer, 2004; Kemp, 2010).

Bildung, ideals, and the development of an independent mind are also central in Oscar Negt's work, *Soziologische Phantasie und exemplarisches Lernen* (1975). In a recent interview from 2004, Negt - now professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Hannover – expresses concern that our current times are marked by a problematic absence of a political awareness and a critical stance (Pohl & Hufer, 2016, p. 204, 206). “For me”, says Negt, “all real education is political”, and Negt understands politics in a very broad sense as related to ‘matters of concern to the community’ (Plato) (Pohl & Hufer, 2016, p. 204). The ideal of caring for a shared community as a human being (*lebbare Einheiten*) and developing one's own reflected standpoint via ‘corporative truth seeking’ (Habermas, 1986), are at risk of being lost in individualistic, strategic agency and competition cf. Negt (Pohl & Hufer, 2016, p. 204). Negt: “Education cannot be reduced to something special or particular. We have to develop something universal from the particular. Doing so prevents society from being fragmented into different experiential worlds or risk environments.” (Pohl & Hufer, 2016, p. 206).

The empirical data

This paper presents on the one hand empirical results from case studies of psychology students at Aalborg University (Feilberg, 2014, 2015). On the other hand, it presents theoretical perspectives on the potentials and the driving dynamics of the embodiment of a professional habitus as a psychologist. The findings presented are the product of a hermeneutical circle (Gadamer, 2004), meaning a process of fluctuation between research questions and empirical observations, between theoretical fore-understandings (existential phenomenology, critical theory) and empirically developed understandings, to a more developed interpretation (Ricoeur, 1991).

Through case studies it is demonstrated that personal involvement contributes to psychology students' embodiment of the habitus of the profession by setting wild processes of formation free.

Case-exemplification

Andrea, an ambitious student of psychology, spends a major part of her study adhering to a grade-optimizing strategy: telling the examiners what she thinks will impress them, and avoiding personal involvement in the subjects of her projects. But during working as a trainee psychologist she discovers that she does not know her own standpoints as a psychologist, and she cannot remember the rote learned concepts. From that on she chooses actively to 'prepare herself' to the profession of psychology by examining and taking up subjects of personal interest and conflict. These projects are 'harder to navigate in' emotionally, as she is no longer detached and uninvolved. However, she now develops personal-professional and theoretically underpinned standpoints, and she accepts the responsibilities that being a member of the psychological profession implies ethically (Feilberg, 2014).

How can we understand the background to Andrea's experiences with regard to A) Personal-professional values and ideals, and B) processes of a professional formation?

A) Bildung (formation) concerns both ideals (that we can strive for but never fully meet) and unplanned and wild processes of development (Gadamer, 2004). A Bildung perspective can both highlight aspects of the habitus of the profession (self-reflection, psychological sense, theoretical explanation) as well as the ideals of the university (collaborative search for truth, autonomy, independence, reflected standpoints), and at the same time it can emphasize Bildung as a process that we as educators can encourage and support, but not conjure up by force or planning (Bourdieu, 2000, Habermas, 2007, Gadamer, 2004). We have to set the students free to choose their own ideals and professional identities, and project work is an educational philosophy that can support this.

B) Inspired by Negt's *Exemplary Learning* (1975), I argue that an exemplary educational activity must pay regard to the following three dimensions to promote processes of a professional formation within psychology students (Feilberg, 2014):

- 1) The Subject/problem must be of a personal interest to the student, spark wondering curiosity and personal involvement, as well as relate to something *particular* and concrete.
- 2) The subject/problem must be further developed in light of a wider Societal (*universal*) context (not just personal), and within the course subject. The supervisor must challenge and educate students with respect to their prejudices and fore-understandings, e.g. with respect to the subject and its contradictions, their application of theory, method, ontology and epistemology (creative mimesis, Kemp, 2010).
- 3) The educational activity (et. the research process, the supervision, the group discussions, the reporting, the evaluation) must contribute to the student's process of embodying a self-reflective (emancipatory) and self-understanding use of psychological theory and method in a professional context, as well as to their identification of personal values and ideals as a human being and a professional.

When all three dimensions play together, students are supported – through peers, lecturers and scientific literature – in the process of embodying a habitus and getting to know their own personal-professional standpoints; a process made possible by experiencing a community (lebbare Einheiten) that eg. shares the same ideal of 'corporative truth seeking' and independent reflection. Experienced community, corporative truth seeking and independent reflection can be viewed as ideals for a modern university (human science departments), as well as for the profession of psychology.

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