

CAPTURING POSSIBLE FUTURES AND ASPIRATIONS OF STUDENTS IN KYRGYZSTAN APPLYING AN EMANCIPATORY METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

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In general, I would like to arrange my contribution to the conference along with the first findings of my field study in Kyrgyzstan. As to the current point of my research, this abstract describes the general theoretical setting of my study, empirical results are upcoming.

Globalization is one of the main factors influencing societies in the XXI. century, inducing major changes to everyday public and private life. In my study, I focus on the sphere of higher education, as universities are institutions extraordinarily influenced by globalization tendencies (see e. g. DeYoung 2010: 422). In order to investigate how globalization effects the everyday lives of young people in Kyrgyzstan, my approach is to take a closer look at their aspired futures: Where do students see themselves in the future? Which goals do they want to accomplish and do they reflect them to be realistic? Are these aspirations of a long-term character (e. g. Do they correspond with the chosen study programs)? How are the future plans of students socially embedded (e. g. the role of family and friends)? Do students' aspirations mirror underlying social change? To what extent are their plans oriented to a global scale and connected with aspirations for mobility?

Based on an understanding of place, following Doreen Massey (1991), which goes beyond distinct boundaries, emphasizing its implicit networks of social relations and including the local as well as the global (ibid.: 28), I conceptualize universities as places, where globalization is strongly emerging. Under this precondition Kyrgyzstan is an interesting frame for the study. There are about 50 higher education institutions in the country, including international institutions and about half of the Kyrgyz youth enters universities (DeYoung 2010: 423). The educational system in general is increasingly commodified (Abdoubatova 2020: 5), while simultaneously enrolling in university is becoming a factor of prestige (DeYoung 2010: 425 ff.). Studying is, in line with a global trend, perceived as an extended period of youth and parents are eager to provide this opportunity for their children (ibid.). Further, Kirmse (2010) states, that youth in Kyrgyzstan are actively involved in global cultural exchange (ibid. 390 ff.).

My main theoretical reference is Pierre Bourdieu, who explicitly links his concept of habitus to individual aspirations. Habitus emerges from (bodily) interaction with the world (Bourdieu 2017: 178 ff.) and is constitutive for the social capital of an individual (Bourdieu 2020: 228). It can be grasped as

“[...] the practical knowledge and mastery of the patterns of the social world that, without even organizing these patterns in conceptual terms, allows our behavior to adapt to these patterns and to be ascribed to these patterns as if they had been produced by them.” (Bourdieu 2020: 67).

The educational system fulfills a crucial function for the formation of the habitus (ibid. 135), as it works to gradually, unarticulated and insidiously reshape predispositions (Megoran 2006). As habitus the practical knowledge and mastery of the enclosing space, results from the material enclosure, the incorporation of social structures and objective possibilities (expectations, anticipations), it also preconditions individual aspirations (ibid. 167). Insofar, Bourdieu emphasizes the general tendency to adapt aspiration to chances and opportunities (ibid. 124 ff., Bourdieu 2020: 279).

For youth – in my case students - who they perceive it possible or desirable to become is closely intertwined with their self-perception and self-understanding and thus, with their process of identity formation (Geller 2015: 9 ff.). Accordingly, aspirations can indicate major sources of social and spatial influence (ibid. 14 ff.), locally and globally from their family backgrounds to “[...] broader horizons [of] mainstream media and globalization in general” (ibid. 50). So, inevitably, the person articulating an aspiration enables conclusions about her-/himself, their context of living (Archer et al. 2010: 79), as well as her/his wider embeddedness

in cultural, discursive, and institutional contexts (Robertson et al. 2018: 615), being even capable to reflect structural inequalities (Hoskins & Barker 2014: 100). Hence, aspirations provide interesting material to study change, encompassing a merged individual and societal perspective (Geller 2015: 15).

But the complex character of aspirations is also challenging its research. As they correlate to individual emotional and identity negotiations, they happen to be contradictory, unstructured and changing in the course of time, sometimes leading to parallel cultivated aspirations (Archer et al. 2010: 81 ff.). Further, choice patterns can be illusive in terms of structural obstacles, restricting choice to those students with a comparatively well-off background (ibid. 80 ff.). To a certain extent this will be definitely the case in the commodified educational system of Kyrgyzstan and I definitely need to position my findings reflecting on this critique.

A special field of interest in my study is how and to what extent students include plans for mobility in their aspirations. Therefore, the concept of “mobile aspirations” (Robertson et al. 2018), describing

“[...] how youth aspire to be mobile, yet also how they construct and create other aspirations for their futures (around education, work, marriage, family or lifestyle) through desires for mobility. ‘Mobile aspirations’ also implies that aspirations are themselves mobile – that they move and transform across places, times and cultures.” (ibid. 615).

Mobile aspirations are based on two underlying sociocultural imaginaries: (1) “Youth” as a phase of the ability to and longing for mobility, before the settled phase as an adult; (2) “Youth” as a phase oriented towards the future, establishing the preconditions for adult life; These are tendencies which can be grasped in existing studies on Kyrgyz students as well (e. g. DeYoung 2010). It is therefore important to note that aspirations for mobility need to be treated more as a migration potential of youth than a prediction, which is also embedded in the broader context of the individual (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson 2006: 4). I argue, that facing globalization, these mobile aspirations also gain a stronger impact on youth in Kyrgyzstan.

In order to investigate the aspirations of students I apply an ethnographic methodology, as it is feasible to illuminate categories of meaning in the field of self-identification (Megoran 2006: 627). Explicitly, I refer to Militz’s (2019) affective methodology, developing it in terms of an opening of the interpretive process and adding visual methods from the spectrum of participatory research methods (see e. g. Kindon et al. 2010). Owing to this methodology, the concrete contexts or categories of investigation are not predictable but rely on the collected material.

Depending on the progress of my field study, the focus of my contribution will either be on presenting my first findings, or on elaborating my methodological approach.

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