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Learning to navigate through social networks as competency in the 21ˢᵗ Century – similarities and differences in distinct socio-cultural contexts

Abstract:

Future and education are irresolvable interwoven with each other. Without future aspirations, most probably schools and universities would be fairly empty, as future aspirations feed educational institutions today. However, future is a cultural fact, as Appadurai (2013) puts it, and therefore pluralistic and contingent. To move at least from time to time successful towards a desirable future, one has to develop a navigational capacity lead by future aspirations, according to Appadurai. However, if futures are cultural facts and therefore diverse, obvious there must be alternative ways into these futures, too, and therefore the navigational capacity has to be culturally adjusted. My argument is that there are globally circulating ideas concerning an idea of universal education and a specific desirable future that do not connect well with certain socio-cultural contexts such as e.g. parts of India or some African contexts to avoid the misleading term 'Global South' (the focus on India derives from my personal scientific concentration on this context). In consequence, formal educational institutions (such as schools and universities) are not equally successful in diverse socio-cultural contexts to support the emergence of an effective navigational capacity for the majority of the population. Certain globally circulating aspirations and assumed ways of their fulfilment, e.g. getting a save and highly paid employment through invest in formal education might be part of the problem. They might have little connectivity with actual socio-cultural constellations in non-European-North-American contexts. Accordingly, I want to show that underprivileged in the so-called Global South are discriminated in two ways by these aspirations and the role, education plays in it.

Key words: futures, navigational competency

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Future, education and inequality

As any education is directed towards future, education and future are inseparably connected. Education should support the individual to achieve a good – or even better – future. The European Enlightment even wanted to improve the future of humankind as such through education. What should be done with the successional generation to prepare it for future challenges is one of the basic question of all educational endeavours around the globe and in all times. The answers to this question are highly relational to the socio-cultural context though, and societies and communities must fine their specific ways to cope this challenge. In addition, interrelated with education and future are always aspects of inequality, too. Success in education is unevenly distributed in societies, and members of socio-economic stronger families are much more likely to accumulate degrees. Nevertheless, there are more aspects that have to be taken into account with regard to future, education and inequality. In a post-colonial perspective, one must analyse globally circulating educational concepts and connected future concepts critically. In the following, I will analyse some of these aspects little more in detail.

 The future – or more specific, future imaginations and aspirations - are often neglected as important facts to explain inequality of chances for a satisfying life, Arjun Appadurai (2013) points out. De Haan (2008) too stresses the *plurality* of future*s* as important factor for educational sciences and insist on the need for the discipline to reflect upon this plurality. If there is not one future but many, there cannot be one education. This has fare reaching consequences. In general, future aspirations feed educational institutions. Going through educational institutions is like a bet on the future: without future aspirations most probably schools and universities would be fairly empty. However, following Appadurai, already with these aspirations social inequality starts, and cultural differences and inequalities get power. Furthermore, in times were lifelong learning becomes crucial for leading a satisfying professional life, future has become a lifelong issue. In the following, the capacity to aspire is needed during the whole course of life today: futures change sometimes fast and dramatically during life course now. Additionally, differences in divergent socio-cultural contexts are very significant when it comes to earning a livelihood, so it is essential that the *aspirations are culturally adapted*. Without permanent adoptions of aspirations and a related navigational capacity to act accordantly, assimilations or alternative actions will not emerge. According to Appadurai, future is a *cultural fact*, and aspiring something for ones' own future is a capacity that is not evenly distributed in societies leading again to inequality. More precisely, aspiring in his eyes is a navigational capacity, and differently positioned groups in society develop different navigational capacities which lead to inequalities. The capacity dependents on the social position though, it is *relational*. Aspirations as such are no resource then. Something must happen that initiates the transformation of the capacity to aspire into a navigational capacity. Beside others (e.g. the general socialisation leading to distinct forms of social skills), education seems to be an important factor here again. Hall (2017, p. 188) stresses that

educational "institutions provide a concrete empirical grounding for studying how the capacity to aspire becomes a navigational capacity in practice, and for examining how processes of navigation are hindered, stalled, or curtained". It seems Hall assume that the capacity to aspire turn into a navigational capacity within educational institutions. However, I will argue here that formal educational institutions are not equally successful in diverse socio-cultural contexts to support the emergence of an effective navigational capacity. Here lies another source of inequality, and certain individuals living in contexts of the so-called Global South facing such multiple structural disadvantages.

If futures are cultural facts and therefore diverse, very obvious there must be alternative ways into these futures, too. In Europe and North-America, a specific form of *employment* is the dominant organisation form of the working sector. Relational to this working sector and its demands, specific future imaginations and coupled with this, specific navigational competencies emerge. On the other hand, in contexts sharped to a great extend through an informal working sector - what can be assumed for India, were 90 percent of all workers work in the informal sector (Pilz 2016, Palanithurai 2016), and certainly for many African contexts as well - other aspirations are of significance, and other navigational capacities needed. In consequence, particular very dominant, globally circulating future imaginations and attached aspirations are rather problematic then helpful. What to do with formal educational degrees in a context were this most probably will not lead to employment and help making a living for the underprivileged? (Jeffrey, C./Jeffery, P./Jeffery, R. (2005); Jeffrey, C./Jeffery, P./Jeffery, R. (2004)) In consequence, we have an assemblage of diverse future imaginations, adequate and less adequate aspirations in relation to the context one lives in, and socio-cultural differences in the emergence of navigational capacities. Future imaginations and related aspirations must have connectivity in a given socio-cultural context, otherwise they can become dysfunctional for the actors. Imagining a safe white-collar employment and navigate through educational institutions accordingly in a context where this makes one disabled of earning a living due to different structures of the world of work is dysfunctional.

The capacity to see *adequate* alternative futures for oneself and practicing connected strategies to achieve them makes a difference, and education can play a double role in that: as mean for creating aspirations and way to achieve them. But in the same way, it can cause illusive hopes and unreachable goals and lead to frustration and dysfunctional life courses if education is not adjusted to the specifies of the given socio-cultural context (for the need for cultural perspectives in educational science Clemens 2008). We discussed that for India (Clemens & Biswas 2019), and my suggestion here is that this might be true for some African contexts as well. In the following, I will analyse supporting and constraining factors of the emergence (or: the learning) of navigational capacities and socio-cultural differences of those processes.

Relationality of navigational capacities and resulting socio-cultural differences

The capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity for Appadurai (2013), and the contexts in which he discusses it is that of so-called development and reduction of poverty. Ideas about the future as well as those about past are embedded and nurtured in culture. Although today, we think critically about the cultural contamination of the European-North-American view into the past we seldom think of future as a cultural fact as well. However, horizons are always collectively shaped by the shared living circumstances, recourses, myths etc., and these horizons constitute the basis for collective aspirations. These processes of collective imaginations are important aspects of what Appadurai calls culture (p. 180 ff.). Wants, preferences, choices and calculations (what can be subsumed under aspirations) have been regarded typically as the domain of the market and ascribed to individual concerns, and the discipline of economy has claimed to be responsible for these matters according to Appadurai. But other than suggested by studies on (rational) choices in economy for example aspirations are never truly individual. Aspirations are always part of a bigger system of ideas, and the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed in any society says Appadurai. What one wants or should want, which ways to achieve that goal are the right ones, how much effort one is supposed to put in etc., all these ideas are plausible in specific ways in specific contexts. Therefore, ideas circulating globally on what a desirable future is, are not necessarily functional in all contexts. In any case they have to be seen critical under a post-colonial perspective. However, some particular future imaginations and ways to achieve them, including especially careers in the formal education sector (leading to employment), have been massively supported by global players such as the Word Bank, OECD atc. In this perspective, education is an important aspect of an universally applicable human capital, a though promoted intensively by the World Bank (Khare 2016). And *universality* of education is a precondition for this concept (Clemens & Biswas 2019). But we saw: as there are multiple futures, there have to be multiple educations.

But what are the basic conditions in which the navigational capacity emerge or is hindered?

How the navigational capacity emerges, and differences arise

Appadurai calls aspirations a meta-capacity and claims, that richer and more powerful actors have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. He refers to lived *experiences* and their consequences to explain the emergence of the capacity to aspire in the first place. He explains advantages of certain groups as follows: "Because the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes, because they are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options" (Appadurai 2013, p. 188). Aspirations are not something 'in the head', idealistic impressions,

but interrelated with involvements in all kinds of trials to reach certain conceived goals and with the experiences made in this process. One has to experience various situations in which one invent aspirations, tries to get something (again) and uses different tools and ways accordingly, and one has to be at least from time to time also successful in doing so. This is highly dependent to the social constellation one acts in, and socio-cultural diversities gets obvious: what works in one contexts does not necessarily work in another. It is the connection of different ends and different means, of various aspirations and outcomes, and therefore processes of exploration and trial in multiple settings that let the capacity emerge. These thoughts are highly compatible with network theory: access to diverse networks will increase the probability of the emergence of navigational capacity then (DiMaggio 1987). Out of this process, knowledge about the connectivity of a given social context and of moving in it emerges (for general thoughts about the emergence of knowledge see Clemens 2020, 2020a). On the one side Appadurai stresses quantity in experiences - a *bigger stock* or an *archive* of experiences leads to more knowledge about acting -, but at the same time the quality of experiences is also important. The quality of experiences is different for actors with a privileged social embeddedness: they experience the fulfilment of their aspiration more often. For the underprivileged, the lack of opportunities to practice the navigational capacity leads to a restricted and a more brittle horizon of aspirations. Their embeddedness permits limited experiments and "less easy archiving of alternative futures" (ibid. p 189). Positive experiences of the connection between aspirations and outcomes are crucial, and this is a self-supporting process. Here again the individual experienced positive evaluation is not truly individual but always collectively sharped though. The differences in making experiences with aspiration and their realisation leads to a generalisation of experience on the longer run, says Appadurai. Through experiences with successful relations of aspirations and outcomes, the better off are more likely to "produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs" (ibid.). It seems reasonable to assume that such more accumulated and abstract forms of experiences can be *transported* in diverse social contexts and situations and make the actors more competent in *various* situations, although of course modifications are always needed. This is an additional advantage of the privileged. The same is true in reverse for the poor (or the excluded, the disadvantaged, and marginal groups in society). They have a "deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the society in which they live" (p. 185) due to the experience of restriction in navigation. They do not have access to a wide range of ends and means and knowledge about positive relations with both, their stock of available experiences regarding the relation of aspirations and outcomes is most probably very limited, plus that the experiences are more often unsatisfactory and discouraging. In consequence, Appadurai sees an ambivalence among the excluded towards the cultural worlds and their 'norms' in which they have to exist, and their strategies to cope with this

ambivalence differ from that of the privileged. I think the situation is even more complicated here, though, and education and its global promotion is a special case. I will elaborate this in the next section. I see here a doubled discrimination for the underprivileged in the so-called Global South that has to be taken into consideration.

Globally circulating stories regarding aspirations and education, and local multiplicities

Regarding education, which plays an extremely important role for aspirations and navigational capacities today as we have seen, Appadurais hypothesis of ambivalence to norms by the underprivileged is questionable. On the contrary, I see a tendency to overconform with certain norms related to education especially also in the so-called Global South. Many parents especially from underprivileged parts of society set all their hopes in education to improve possibilities for their children lives and invest as much as they can in it (for India De & Dreze 1999). Education is one of the hope-bearers globally and leads aspirations nearly all over the world and cultures today. However, also due to liberations in the state sector white-collar jobs are rare and difficult to attain, especially for disadvantaged (for Germany see Friedrich 2008). Very often, the underprivileged are excluded from the networks jobs are awarded through (Gilbertson 2017). Despite enormous unemployment rates of academics for example in India (Gilbertson 2017), but also in parts of Africa such as e.g. Ethiopia (Mains 2012), Nigeria (Masquelier 2013) etc. the believe in education as road towards a better future is still strong among the underprivileged. These stories are not necessarily made for the majority world inhabitants (Dasen & Akkari 2008). Hall (2017) talks even of a *cruel optimism* here, as the hopes will most probably not be fulfilled for lots of them. This let the individuals alone with the feeling of failure, having spent sometimes many years and resources for an formal education that is of little help for them (Jeffrey, C./Jeffery, P./Jeffery, R. 2005), moving in the informal sector without any hope for an employment (Clemens & Biswas 2019). Mathew (2017) follows *betrayed futures* here. On the other side, they lack important knowledge e.g. about farming etc. because they have been absent (Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery 2005). What we learn from a lot of studies about educational aspirations in general is that there is no lack of aspirations, and that they are quite similar globally. Contrary, the dominant norms or ideas regarding education - such as work hard to be a good student, accumulate as much education as possible and get a high, deserved position through it - are shared by the underprivileged as well to a large extend (D & Dreze 1999). This is heavily supported by globally circulating stories created and promoted by many powerful global actors. However, these aspirations and assumed ways of fulfilment, e.g. getting an permanent, well payed employment through invest in formal education might be part of the problem, as this imaginations will most probably not come true for the underprivileged. They discriminate underprivileged in the Global South in two ways. Firstly social mobility through education it not easy everywhere, as there is in general a closure of privileged circles or elites (Friedrich 2008). Secondly as showed above, these future imaginations and connected

aspirations invented in the so-called Global-North are not fitting well to the majority world (Dasen & Akkari 2008) and the structures of the world of work there. Some dominant stories concerning future imaginations and aspirations that are circulating in the networks globally are highly problematic, especially the narration of 'development' and connected promises of a glory future, for nation states as much as for individuals. Education is an important part of this idea of 'development' and attached with positive connotations. Due to this, education is an inherent part of aspirations and the strategies to make them come true. However, this kind of 'development' has massively destroyed environment around the world. In addition, the related ideas of *desirable futures for individuals* such as the image of highly payed employments based on a successful educational career are misleading. If they are translated in individual aspirations and related navigational actions in other contexts then the so-called Global North, they might will discriminate again especially the disadvantaged, because this imagination will most probably not come true for them. This might even be true for the underprivileged with relatively successful educational careers (see for India Jeffrey, C./Jeffery, P./Jeffery, R. (2004)) Accordingly, and having in mind the 'cruel optimism' (Hall 2017) as well, it seems also future imaginations and related aspirations have to be de-colonized, and navigational capacities have to be seen under a relational perspective: they emerge in relation to specific social constellations and are therefore socio-cultural specific. The idea of a good future through a specific formal education is an ideology that circulates through global networks but might not function well in divergent social-cultural settings such as African contexts. This future image is, like education, not universal, nor are aspirations and navigational competencies.

The capacity of navigating from the perspective of network theory

Navigation seems to be a promising concept to describe detailed what White (2008) calls *struggling for control*. For network theory, the social itself persists out of nothing else but relations webbed together to social networks. The social *is* a network (Clemens 2015, 2016). Actors, identities, anything to which action can be ascribed – relata as Barad (2018) would put it - can only be identified and described in relation to the other relata around them and their position in this setting. Therefore, any description and analysis of social phenomena must start with relations, and not with stable entities with stable characteristics that act independently. There are neither independent entities, nor actors, nor actions etc.. In the daily life, relata are only interrelated positions in relation to others and inseparable and interdependent interwoven with them. Without realizing we are continuously embedded in multiple networks with our diverse identities. Therefore, relata have a principally endless amount of identities, depending on the variety of networks they can access. In any network, any relatum has a specific, unique way of being embedded, and certainly not all of these ways of being embedded are advantageous or even acceptable.

Accordingly, it is only through working on relations that actors can try to influence and might improve their position in a social network, what means: to navigate. Influencing relations means that the actors try to strengthen *their* interpretation of these relations. As the others do the same, it is an endless stream of bargaining and struggle for sovereignty of interpretation about the character of the relations. The medium for these control attempts are *stories* that circulate in networks. Through them interpretations of relations can be influenced. Stories comprise the ideas about the nature of different relations, their character and status. For White, networks are organized by meaning. Networks form around attributions of meaning about events and interpretations of relations, and both events and relations are aggregated and proceeded further in stories. Stories are important to explain to actors what is going on and why, and like Appadurai also mentioned, those narratives can aggregate experience and transport it in various contexts. Moving between networks is called *switching*. Actors stroll through many different network during the day, dealing with different kinds of relations and forms of meaning, often without recognizing the coupling and de-coupling or realizing that meaning forms of different domains can and do contradict each other. While doing this, actors are always and without escape involved in these highly accident-sensitive and complicated *dances in identity and control* or *struggling for control* (White 2008): the high art of navigating in the social. Consequently, both control and switching can be seen as operationalizations of the concept of navigation (Clemens 2019). This shows that access to networks is crucial, and especially the access to diverse networks and therefore diverse stories helps actors moving in the social and strengthen the probability that navigational capacities emerge. Only in switching between different networks, actors come to know and experience very different ties, use diverse stories for diverse occasions and situations, learn to cope with varying cultural stiles and imagine different kinds of futures. Their embeddedness changes from constellation to constellation, forcing them to adapt anew permanently, and adapting future images and aspirations, too. Therefore, restrictions in the possibility to develop ties at all and limits to access networks is in itself a disadvantage. The differences in developments of the navigational competency between groups and individuals are rooted here.

Conclusion

In general, dominant stories circulating in networks have to be checked for their connectivity to the actual socio-cultural context sooner or later. As stories are aggregated meaning which provide actors with meaning structures for their actions, this 'reality check' or cultural verification is very important. As systems theorist Niklas Luhmann (1998) claims, this reality check of meaning circulating in societies can be supplementary. This means that various ideas circulate in the first place, but eventually they have to show their connectivity to the actual context and in everyday life. It seems that the concept of universal education as means for a successful and safe future for all and related future imaginations

and aspirations fail this reality check more and more in certain networks such as Indian or African contexts. In consequence, they have to be adapted.

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