HOW TO BECOME POLITICAL? BASIC CONCEPTS FOR EXPLORING EARLY CHILDHOOD UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICS

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Abstract

In the interdisciplinary project *PoJoMeC*, we investigate children's understanding of politics at preschool and primary school age. The interdisciplinary research approach is based on the perspectives of political didactics, literature and media didactics, and journalism. Initially, we will use qualitative approaches to find out how children's political awareness is shown. Our research methods focus on the one hand on the children's explicit knowledge, but on the other hand already on concepts of rule-governed action. The different degrees of abstraction of these concepts are based on a modification of the ecological model of human development according to Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979).
The paper reconstructs the argumentative process of developing an acceptable interdisciplinary concept of politics for our joint research. Considering political didactics, literature and media studies, and philosophy, a research framework is presented that does not start with terms and concepts but considers more fundamental forms of social perception.

Keywords: *Political thinking, political literacy, early education, early education research, global citizenship education.*

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1. The pedagogical question

Climate change, peace, sustainable development, and inclusive participation of different groups in our society are only some of the tasks politics has to deal with today and tomorrow. In this context, "politics" is understood as human action to establish and generally enforce binding regulations and decisions within and between human beings (Patzelt, 2013). Creating an awareness of what this responsibility means and what role each individual should play in it is a central educational goal. Therefore, political or civic education must begin at an early age (Goll, 2021) because political attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes also develop in early childhood and are difficult to change throughout life (Weißeno, 2022).

Media plays a central role in the transmission and further development of a worldview and thus securing democracy (Marci-Boehncke, Rath, Delere, & Höfer, 2022). Language is just as important as images, films, and other forms of communication. The world, and thus potentially every citizen, is internationally connected. Global citizenship education in the digital age depends on knowledge of the initial conditions of political thought (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002).

Formally, these questions seem answerable in terms of developmental psychology (Wegemer & Vandell, 2020). Substantively, understanding what constitutes political consciousness as a condition of political education, especially in early childhood, seems to be a desideratum. Knowledge about what children understand about politics and whether or what political competencies they bring to elementary school and develop by the time they move on to secondary school is still scarce. Empirical research seems particularly difficult in this age group because the topic is considered very abstract. Given the children's rudimentary writing and reading skills, studying larger cohorts is impossible (van Deth, Abendschön, Rathke, & Vollmer, 2007). Due to the young age, political participation seems to be hardly perceived here yet. In contrast, older school-age is already well researched (e.g., Hunter & Rack 2016; Rowe 2005; Flanagan 2014).

From the perspectives of three different domains, political didactics, literature and media didactics, and journalism, we aim to investigate early childhood understandings of "the political" in the interdisciplinary research project *PoJoMeC* (Goll, 2022), funded by the *Federal Agency for Civic*

Education/bpb in Germany. The heterogeneities of the research, the target group, the disciplinary questions, and the wide-ranging object field suggest a multi-method approach. In addition, we already wanted to take precautions not to fall victim to a blinkered attitude to our research. Therefore, our first concern was developing a viable concept of politics for research with pre-school and primary school-age children. This concept must do several things: it must be broad enough to cover different phenomena, abstract enough to keep disciplinary research interconnectable as a common basis, and finally, anthropologically conceptualized to adequately meet our subjects and their social perceptions even before all political partisanship.

2. Basic conceptual assumptions

Philosophically, the question of "the political" can be understood from an anthropological concept that, at least in the western world, goes back to Aristotle's definition of what a human being is. He defines man as a "political animal" (πολιτικὸν ζῷον, *Pol*. 1.1253a), a being that lives in community. By adopting this definition in Thomas Aquinas, this definition was carried over into the Christian West and continues to affect today. The human practice of organizing into communities varies historically and regionally and, concretely, like all human practices, is not determined by "the living," an instinct, or a particular form of perception. Instead, Aristotle traces "the practical life" back to "the rational part of the human being" (λόγον ἔχοντος, *Nic. Eth.* 1098a). Therefore, *zoon politikon* and *zoon logon echon* are the classical definitions of what a human is, understood as a being that organizes itself socially with other human beings, drawing on a more fundamental competence, logos, which means not only reason but also language and mind. Reason opens up to the human being the possibility of independently developing and implementing the regularity that determines their practical life.

We follow this line of tradition, although not in the metaphysical sense as it was thought of in antiquity, but understood in modern terms as the functionality of human beings to recognize, develop and independently form rules. The regularity of the logos is the basis of the rule-governed action of human beings in general. All systematizations of human practices have in common that the fundamental adoption of rules is bound to language. Accordingly, the ability to develop language means nothing else than recognizing, imitating, and shaping rules. Reciprocal, cooperative interactions, empathy capacity, the resulting shared intentionality, and the development of a language are the prerequisites for human communality (Röska-Hardy, 2011; Duncker, 2011; Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007). This connection also represents for us the essential conceptual skill of human beings. Philosophically, moreover, we thus take up the so-called "private language argument" (Wittgenstein, 1958, § 243), according to which no one can learn a language without public use of rules. Nobody, according to Wittgenstein, can follow a rule only once and only alone. Rule acquisition, like language acquisition, is always public and thus social. From this perspective, human beings must be understood as "InterSubjects" (Thyen, 2006) i.e., as beings for whom the rule acquisition of language is paradigmatic of rule-ness and thus always socially bound towards sociality. This view is supported by anthropological research (e.g., Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007) and political didactics (e.g., Goll, 2021). From a social perspective, the first rule of communicative action can be understood as the linguistic "turn-taking" by which human infants share their emotional states with others (Tomasello & Carpenter, 2007, p. 124).

Similarly, this tie-back to a rule (which taps grammar and especially semantics from pragmatics) can also be reconstructed as human beings' ability to access the world via symbols reflexively. Cassirer brought this essential ability, determined by Aristotle as *logon echon*, into the modern form of the human being as "*animal symbolicum*" (Cassirer, 1944, p. 26) – a definition that must be understood "functionally" (ibid., p. 68) rather than pre-modernly substantively. This definition simultaneously provides an important ontogenetic link to a phylogenetic metaprocess that Krotz has called *mediatization* since the beginning of the century. He showed that human beings have always used new medial techniques in their cultural evolution to change their communicative practice. Thus, mediatization theory offers itself as a "conceptual frame" (Krotz, 2007) to reconstruct the political process of societal change (Krotz, 2009). The rules of individual communication were actively changed under the impact of new communication possibilities. Thus, not only has social communication changed, but societal change has always taken place at the same time. This media-sociological perspective is philosophically compatible with the anthropological thesis of the animal symbolicum. Mediatization is a medial practice, the first manifestation of which is natural language. Although this practice is historically modified in each case, it is functionally based on a "mediality" (Rath, 2019), which enables humans a symbolic appropriation of the world characterized by rule acquisition and rule competence. Language acquisition is the beginning of individual mediatization as rule acquisition and thus the basis of political consciousness.

3. “The political”

From the perspective of this philosophical-conceptual background, it is necessary to show what we mean by “becoming political.” What is “the political” of which we hope to find already a consciousness in children? However, the phrase “the political,” taken for granted in German and Romance languages, is challenging to translate into English (Valentine 2016, pp. 505-506) “The political” cannot be integrated into the common political science triad of politics, policy, and polity (e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008). These dimensions of the concrete political reality of a society can be captured and inquired about in terms of political knowledge. By “the political,” on the other hand, we mean an awareness of the essential rule-based organization of the human community that precedes acquired political knowledge as well as common political literacy (Cassel & Lo, 1997) or its curricular transmission (e.g., Perveen & Awan, 2017). This awareness is not tied to a concrete social or political system. This awareness neither presupposes a knowledge of a concrete polity nor an orientation for which policy which politics (have to) be organized and designed. Nor is the social frame of reference for it necessarily at the level of a concrete polity. With “social frame of reference” we refer to the different social systems that human beings open up for themselves in their development. These frames of reference expand in the context of ontogeny.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) has differentiated five such systems, beginning with the *microsystem* directly surrounding the child, through the *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, *macrosystem*, and *chronosystem*. The macro- and exosystem include, among other things, the state political organization and the related ideological attitudes and beliefs that determine a policy. The mesosystem provides the institutional bridge between the micro- and macrosystems and determines the institutional framework of the microsystem and its actors. The microsystem is the closest social framework directly beyond the individual, such as the family with parents, early educational institutions such as kindergarten and school, and later peers. According to Bronfenbrenner, these concentrically conceived systems provide the material, each of varying complexity, to develop a child's political consciousness. However, in this theory, the politically relevant aspects, the increasing social integration of the child into existing social structures and their regularity, remain strictly separated according to systems. Although these systems are thought to be permeable, they always seem differentiated. Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina, & García Coll (2017), following the revisions Bronfenbrenner himself made to his theory, were able to construct a less delineating model of human development. In their concept of a spirally expanding social space of the child, culture in its various manifestations has a comprehensive function in the expanding structure of social relations. Language and communication are the central practices of culture - the mastery of linguistic rules provides the model for human rule consciousness in the first place.

These rules become sovereignly usable and thus functional as a communication medium only when they have become explicitly conscious. As already mentioned, consciousness does not only mean knowledge but a conscious, explicit, and therefore in principle also linguistically formulable orientation towards rules experienced within the systems. In this context, not only the rules themselves as rules come into play, but always also and inevitably the actors who define, represent, sanction, and, if necessary, relativize or abolish these rules. This also includes different media distribution levels for rules. Beyond the microsystem, journalism plays a central role in raising civic awareness of problems and negotiating and communicating rules.

In our opinion, it should be emphasized again in this context that a child with political awareness can adopt a reflexive position. This means that rules have been recognized for the child's validity. The child experiences its behavior as oriented by these rules, and it can also explicitly align its actions with the rules or consciously break them. Political awareness thus presupposes receptive civic literacy, namely the ability to recognize such political rule communications in everyday life (Detjen, Massing, Richter, & Weißeno, 2012). Thus, these rules of social practice differ from other regularities that children also learn throughout their lives. Such non-communicative social regularities include limiting or behavior-opening rules such as locked or open doors, technical and functional necessities such as rehearsed operations of switches or technical interfaces, or practical irritations such as confrontation with incomprehensible but regularly perceived languages or linguistic rule-breaking.

4. Political consciousness

“The Political” - as already the basic anthropological terms - is to be understood functionally. It is a notion of social regulation that has a normative effect as a model of social order (Heidemeier & Lange, 2010) already in the microsystem. It thus preempts the formation of specific political knowledge (Weißeno, Götzmann, & Weißeno, 2016) or even concrete “political competence” (Weißeno, 2012), which is measurable as an outcome of knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

Similarly, political consciousness is manifested in the concrete active addressing of rule-specific requirements to all social group members. At this point, the reference to journalism also becomes clear. In the specialist definitions of journalism, it is precisely this community-creating function that is emphasized. Journalism "establishes publicity by observing society, making this observation available to a mass audience via periodic media, and thereby constructing a shared reality" (Meier, 2018, p. 13, own translation). As a level of discourse between politics and society, professional journalism in modern democratic societies offers the possibility to negotiate cooperation needs and reach broad social circles quickly (Habermas, 1991).

The disciplinary perspectives of our project thus take a look at different relevant phenomena of "the political." Rule consciousness is primarily ascertainable as practice-based, and that is, concrete lifeworld experience in dialogue. Political knowledge can be recorded using various quantitative methods, but these must consider that most of the target group cannot read or can only read very poorly. Therefore, action-oriented, media-practical settings also capture rule awareness in forms of expression other than language media.

5. Methodological considerations

Dialogically, the rule is in the foreground. As already stated above, the rule is not a solipsistic phenomenon. No one can follow a rule alone and only once - but above all, no one can design, enforce and follow a social rule alone. Therefore, rules are observed behavioral controls whose social dimension constitutes the core of political consciousness. Only when the concrete observation of rule-following has led to a rule-following model can we speak of an explicit consciousness of rule-following. Again, language acquisition can serve as a blueprint of rule consciousness. The ability to use linguistic expressions reactively as appropriate to the situation is not yet a sign of explicit rule consciousness. Therefore, we try to evoke statements about rules, their validity, their legitimation, and their sanction through media and linguistic impulses. Visuals in the setting of simplified concept maps as a conversation starter in early education (Tkotzyk & Marci-Boehncke, 2022) come into play, and the classical method of questioning or encouragement narrate oneself.

The interdisciplinary structure of the project allows us to capture at least some of Bronfenbrenner's systems of social integration as described above. Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels (2013) clarify that quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research may very well focus on multiple systems or levels of Bronfenbrenner's concept. We are curious to see how our results can be linked beyond the social context and what conclusions we can draw from these results to strengthen institutionalized political and democracy education already in early education.

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