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Social Theory: Who Needs It? A Didactic Substantiation of Social Theories in Lessons

Abstract

Only marginal importance is attached to the analysis of social theories in textbooks for social science. Mostly, they are only taught in extracts, and the analysis of a text extract from a theory is seldom discussed in class. In particular, sociological theories are therefore only presented to the pupils in an abridged form. The didactic-methodical potential of social theories in the process of Conceptual Change – from the everyday theory to science-related theories – about aspects of social changes, the social order, or social actions, remains unused. This article deals with scientific, didactic and methodical questions on the use of social theories in social science lessons.

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Keywords

Social Theory, Conceptual Change, scientific propaedeutics, social orientation knowledge, analysis raster for social theories

1. Social theories in social science lessons

Why and how should social theories be treated in social science lessons? These questions are looked into in the article. First of all, it is shown in the first section which significance theories have in sociological research. This is followed by a didactic comment about the pros and cons of sociological theories in social science lessons. Development and analysis instructions for social theories are presented in the fourth section, with which the focus is placed on Concept Maps from a methodical point of view.

2. What are social theories and why do we need them?

Some readers will expect the term “sociological theories” to be used in an article for a periodical with the title “Sociology – Who Needs It?” Instead the term “social theories” is used here. According to Straub, the designation “social theory” tackles “newer trends of

theoretical discourse in social sciences. It aims at a theory of social sciences, i.e. at an integrating social scientific theory formation, which goes beyond the innate theoretical approaches of the subject” (Straub 2009). The segmentation into specialised disciplines is being increasingly abandoned in social scientific research. Experts expect this to result in important scientific synergy and innovation effects. Social processes and structures can only be comprehensively described and researched by bundling the various subject-specific questions and theoretical approaches of the individual social scientific research disciplines. This perspective also corresponds with the approach of social sciences as an integrated subject in schools, in which cross-subject, problem-oriented, key epoch-making problems are developed (Claußen 1997, 63).

The epistemological discourse concerning the question that has been raised at the beginning, “what are social theories and why do we need them,” can only be outlined at this point. It is treated as a subject to the extent that this is necessary for the didactic substantiation of social theories in social science lessons, which is presented in the following chapter. Although the term “theory” is of central importance for the social science subjects, so far there is no standard, epistemological understanding of the term. Balog formulates an extremely broad definition of the term “theory”, and defines as theory all statements that scholars understand and accept as “sociological theory” (cf. Balog 2001, 7-8). However, Balog thus broaches more the issue of the question of the power of definitions and not the theory term itself. With his definition, however, he circumvents the disputed problem, according to which criteria of the scientific nature of a theory are to be specified. On a basal level, generalising statements are understood as theories, according to Joas and Knöbel. Scientific theories would then be distinguished from everyday theories, if they pass a comparison with reality, or at least allow themselves to be examined based on criteria of reality (cf. Joas, Knöbel 2004, 19). The methods to verify whether theories correspond to their underlying reality, even the term “reality” itself, are disputed in sociology. The scientific ideal of “veri-



fiction” as a benchmark for the scientific nature of a theory, which was propagated at the beginning of the 20th century, failed to meet its demand. No one can provide proof that a generalising sentence is correct in all cases. Popper’s falsification principle should meet a far-reaching common sense in science today. A theory is only valid until it is refuted, thus it is falsified (Popper 1994, 8, 14 f). However, the problem is that there are often no clear criteria for when a theory is falsified. Thomas S. Kuhn demonstrates in his study “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” that a change in theory occurs when the old theory proves to no longer be useful to solve a problem (Kuhn 1962, 74 f.). Before there is a paradigm shift, attempts are made to maintain the old theory. The advocates of that theory modify it, refer to changed, basic social conditions and formulate auxiliary hypotheses (Kuhn 1962, 78). The falsification principle therefore has a high demand, which is why Zima, referring to Neurath, proposes speaking of “shaking” a theory instead. The theoretical weaknesses of that theory would have to be disclosed in the critical discourse (Zima 2004, xii).

2.1 The relationship of social theory and empiricism

As far as possible, general statements are made in social theories, concerning social actions, social orders and the social transformation of society (Joas 2004, 37). The claim of being able to formulate those generalising statements leads to the question on the relationship of social theory and empiricism. Balog attributes a research-initiating function to theory. He describes it as a “(...) necessary aid in order to clarify problems and obtain clarity about facts, which then become the object of empirical analyses”¹ (Balog 2001, Preface 2). Social theoreticians do not see theory only as an “aid” to empiricism. They regard theory and empiricism as interdependent, as empirical data only unfolds its explanatory effect, which goes beyond the demonstration of correlations, through the theoretical integration and interpretation. Therefore, Merton writes “It indicates that theoretic pertinence is not inherently present or absent in empirical generalizations but appears when the generalization is conceptualized in abstractions of higher order (...) which are embodied in more general statements of relationship” (Merton 1968, 151). On the other hand, however, theory also needs empiricism. Metaphorically speaking, Merton demands that theory and empiricism enter a marriage (Merton 1968, 171). He explains four central functions of empiricism for the development of theories in his study “Social Theory and Social Structure”:

- the further initiation and development of empirical research

1 Translated by the author.

- the reformulation: New data forces an extension of the theory
- the refocusing of theory: New methods of empirical research press for the new weighting of the theoretical interest
- the clarification of theory: Empirical research presses for a clarification of the terms which are used in theory (Merton 1968, 157-171)

Regarding the question of why we do need social theories, they have, among others, the function of conveying research results. Theories serve to reduce complexity as a multitude of research results are bundled into one theory. They therefore also have an order function. Based upon this, it is imperative to assign an important position in social science lessons to social theories. They open up a direct, exemplary access to the analysis of social issues.

3. Social theories in lessons

3.1 The significance of social theories in lessons

On the whole, very little research has been conducted regarding social science lessons in Germany. No empirical data is available concerning the quantity and quality of social theories as an issue in social science lessons. An access to this subject area can be achieved through school books, which are presumably still one of the main media used in lessons. The analysis of the contents of selected, recent, German textbooks shows the following trends.² All in all, it can be seen that both in the school books for the lower forms of German grammar schools as well as in those for the upper forms it is not demonstrated which specific questions and methods of access political sciences, sociology and economics have, and how those can be synthesized. The potential of an integrated social scientific access with the analysis of key social problems in social science lessons is not shown. Moreover, it is often not made clear in the textbooks, on which scientific reference disciplines and subject-specific questions the teaching subject “Social Science” is based. An analysis of contents, which is differentiated according to school years, produces the following for the textbooks for years five to eight:

- Sociological contents are often addressed as an issue due to social educational motivation or for political awareness.
- Sociological knowledge is not received as such – a criticism which was also expressed by Kornelia Hahn 1997 (Hahn 1997, 81).³

2 A school book research concerning this subject aspect is still to be carried out. The Georg-Eckert Institute for international school book research in Braunschweig has a large stock of international school books for the subject of Social Science in the special library, <http://www.gei.de/index.php?id=institut>.

3 One exception is formed by the textbook „Politik/Wirtschaft 5/6“, that was published by Floren. Basic sociological terms



- A descriptive and empirical presentation dominates.
- Social theories are only addressed as an exception. The textbooks “Detto und andere” (“Detto and others”), which were published in Germany in the middle of the 1970s are a good example for how pupils of the years five to seven can be introduced to sociological or social scientific ways of thinking. The series features a translation from an American textbook that was published by Lippitt, Fox, and Schaible in 1969 under the title “Social Science Laboratory Units. Teacher’s Guide”. Sociological studies and technical terms of social actions, e.g. Sherif’s experiment or the Halo effect, are presented and instructions are given for social scientific research methods in a way that is suitable for children. In my opinion, the analysed books for the years five to eight fail to satisfy this demand by far with regard to the presentation of sociological contents.

The situation for school books in Germany for the upper form is much more heterogeneous. For example, “Dialog Sowi” presents social theories in a didactically sound fashion. It points out the relevance of social theories for research, and clarifies central sociological terms (Schrieverhoff, 50). The textbook “Politik – Wirtschaft – Gesellschaft. Grundlagentexte für den Unterricht” contains didactically processed, scientific, social theories. The readers receive biographical information about the scientists for each theory, and a classification of the text excerpt in the scientific context of the theory. A further development could include supplementary materials (statistics etc.) in order to look further into the critical analysis (Heithner 2008). The textbooks “Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft, Politik” by Franz-Josef Floren present themselves as follows:

- The meaning of sociological concepts and the theoretical context of sociological terms are not presented.
- Sociological theories are mostly lectured, often only presented in core sentences. Longer primary or secondary texts for the independent development of a theory are only printed in rare cases in the textbook.
- The analysis of social theories is not instructed from a methodical point of view.

This analysis is not representative, but it is based on a selection of textbooks with a particularly high circulation. Thus it is only able to show tendencies. A substantial research project for school books would have to be conducted to obtain valid data.⁴

of group sociology and role theory are presented here (Floren 2008, 20-25).

4 Feasible empirical data, from which media teachers take material for the lessons, are not available. The author is currently carrying out an internet-based survey among teachers at grammar schools, with which the data relating to this range of subjects are collected. These could be supplemented still before the article is goes to press.

The list of the analysis of the contents as stated above, however, is not intended to support the often perceived attacks against the work of school book authors. The school book publishing houses and authors design the school books based on the official teaching plans of the individual federal states.⁵ The authors are often given rigid stipulations for the conceptual design from the publishing houses, which are based on intensive market analyses. A reason for the decline in demand for more ambitious textbooks probably lies in the high share of social science lessons, which are given by teachers who are not familiar with the subject. For some school forms, it is almost 80 per cent of all lessons for the younger pupils (MSW, NRW, 85). School books for the lower forms, which presume elaborated expertise from the teacher, such as for example knowledge about social theories, empirical methods or social scientific experiments, have less chances on the market. However, this alone does not explain why social theories are often also represented poorly in the textbooks for the upper forms of the grammar schools.

3.2 Didactic substantiation for the processing of social theories

Is the analysis of social theories in lessons too demanding? The interpretation of the social world using theories is nothing new for pupils. The learners have subjective everyday theories about many social science issues, which are relevant for schools, for example about gender-specific role attributions or about the causes of right-wing extremism. Max writes “we see the world through theoretical glasses” (Max, 7), as concepts emerge from the total of detailed information, which are then bundled into everyday theories. The fact that anti-Semitism exists, although many people have no personal contact to people of the Jewish faith, illustrates however that the constructions are not radically subjective, but rather an interactionistic constructivism has to be assumed.

3.2.1 Conceptual Change of everyday theories through social theories

Everyday theories have an effect on the subjective assessment of a social phenomenon and have an influence on the actions of the pupils. They provide security and stability for the behaviour. However, they are often wrong or at least restrictive. In many cases, the everyday theories deviate substantially from the actual, scientific theories. These misconceptions make the access to and the understanding of scientific explanation

5 In the Federal Republic of Germany the education policies fall under the culture control of the federal states. In several federal states, for example in Hesse, North-Rhine Westphalia, Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein school books first have to undergo approval procedure. Only the works, which are approved by the respective Ministry of Education may be used in the lessons.



models and theories more difficult. Everyday conceptions should be changed into science-related concepts through lessons at school. Lessons aim at a Conceptual Change, defined as "(...) learning that changes an existing conception (i.e., belief, idea, or way of thinking)" (Davis 2001, 3). The theory of the Conceptual Change is based on the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and on Thomas Kuhn's notion of the "scientific revolution" (Davis, 2001, 4). Both demonstrated in their work that everyday concepts and scientific theories prove to be extremely resilient and resistant.

How can everyday concepts be changed through scientific concepts in lessons? The change of concepts according to Piaget is described as follows: People form organised knowledge and behaviour concepts, the foundations of human knowledge. If a Conceptual Change is now to be initiated in a lesson, the learner initially tries to integrate the new information into the existing concept (assimilation). The perception is, if it appears necessary, re-interpreted to the extent that the existing, cognitive concepts (schemata) are sufficient in order to be able to cope with the situation. The stability of existing concepts can be explained with the attempt to transfer the unknown back to that which is known. If at all possible, the unknown is integrated into the existing, cognitive structure, which explains the stability of social prejudices and misconceptions. Accommodation only takes place when the situation cannot be processed by assimilation. Accommodation means the extension or adjustment of the cognitive structures to a perceived situation, which cannot be managed with the existing concept. If learning processes are to be initiated, then a cognitive field of tension has to be built up. However, there is rarely a radical change in concept as individuals strive to achieve equilibrium of assimilation and accommodation processes (Baumgart 2007, 219-224). According to Max, the transformation of intuitive, social scientific concepts into science-related points of view requires an insight into the process of the acquisition of knowledge itself, such as the interpretation of theories and the formation of hypotheses (cf. Max, 6). Due to the fact that pupils analyse and reflect upon social theories, they acquire categories, with which they can also reflect upon their everyday concepts.

It is vital that thinking in theories exists in the cognitive structure of the learner. Scientific knowledge concepts are transported into social theories, which can be contrasted with the everyday concepts of the pupils. The treatment of social theories is possible from year five or six, when the theory is reduced and processed didactically according to the cognitive development status of the pupils. According to Piaget, the pupils are capable of concrete-formal or already formal-operative thinking operations from the age of 11 to 13 (Baumgart 2007, 238). The analysis of social theories can support the cognitive development of the pupils. This, however, does not mean that the lessons should only be

based on the analysis of social theories. For example, using personification and personalisation⁶ to analyse sociological matters is justified due to psychological considerations as a didactic-methodical process that motivates the pupils and fosters learning. However, social theories create an analytical distance and therefore enable the learner to grasp the social responsibility of social actions of individuals, groups and societies when analysing case studies and sociological issues. The often strong empirical-descriptive, phenomenological access to social issues in school books is expanded when analysing social theories by steering the attention more to the analysis of exemplary social processes and structures. Pupils can learn not just to argue from how they are affected personally when analysing and forming a judgement on social issues, but to carry out analyses which are guided by theory.

3.2.2 Analysis of social theories as scientific propaedeutics

The analysis and addressing of social theories as an issue is also significant with regard to the scientific propaedeutics. It gives pupils a first insight into the nature of social sciences:

- Social theories illustrate the (re)constructive character of scientific research.
- Pupils learn that scientific knowledge is "provisional knowledge" that can be falsified.
- Through the analysis of social theories, learners can become familiar with fundamental, sociological technical terms, which are often bound to theory (Treibel 2006, 312). The ability for the systematic and structured thinking in categories can be promoted.
- The pupils can be sensitised handling language in the field of social sciences, which is fundamental to elaborate analysis and judgement competence.
- The analysis and political judgement competence of the learner can be promoted through ideological-critical occupation with social theories.

3.2.3 Social theories are social orientation knowledge

The ability to deal with social theories from an ideological-critical point of view is also important, because social theories on their part influence the social world (Joas, Knöbel 2004, 16). Some examples of those are the Marxist theory, Liberalism, behaviour which deviates from theories, etc., which are discussed far beyond the limits

⁶ A process which has been discussed critically in the history didactics. Personalisation states that a social fact is presented based on the example of a famous person. With the process of personification on the other hand a fictitious person is presented who stands as a representative for a social group. The personification should have the effect to promote the identification. However, there is the danger that the view of the social structure is blocked (Bergmann 1997, 298-300).

of science and have an influence on political actions (cf. Joas, Knöbel 2004, 16). As presumed by Joas and Knöbel, three central questions are dealt with in social theories: “What is social action?”, “What is social order?” and “What determines social transformation?” According to Joas and Knöbel, these three questions lead right to the field of tasks that makes social sciences interesting for a broad public: the task to understand the recent state of modern societies and to detect future trends (cf. Joas, Knöbel 2004, 37). Learners therefore also acquire an understanding of society and social orientation knowledge by explicitly dealing with social theories.

3.3 Social theories and problem orientation in lessons

Social theories offer a high didactic potential. The principles central to social science lessons, exemplarity and problem orientation, can be realised with help of social theories. Principally, scientific social theories, as stated above already, have the demand to be examples. Generalising statements are formulated through deductive or inductive derivations. They have the potential to analyse an exemplary problem, which is in accordance with the didactic principle of problem orientation. The research process, which is presented in the theories, can be analysed and reconstructed in those lessons under a problem question, which is formulated from a didactic point of view. The phases of the problem-oriented lessons for the theory analysis are as follows:

Succession of a problem-oriented theory analysis

Problem presentation: confrontation with the subject. The problem is presented in social theories through empirical data: Statistics, observations, etc. Scientists justify their interest in research.

Problem question (didactic subject): The problem question is formulated based on the confrontation with the subject. This didactically fruitful question is contained in the hypotheses the social theory is based on. Popitz’s theory “processes of formation of power” can for example be implemented into the following didactic question: “Why is power so unequally distributed?” With regard to the theory of the Labelling Approach, work can be carried out in the lessons under the following problem questions: “Does society turn the people into criminals?”

Problem analysis: The problem is analysed based on the evaluation of case studies (observations, interviews, analysis of diaries, etc.) or quantitative data. Case studies are presented in many social theories, for example in “Phenomenon of power” by Heinrich Popitz, who elaborates and illustrates his theory of the formation of power based on the power formation processes on a ship and in a prison camp (Popitz 1992, 185–231).

Interpretation: In this phase, the relationship network of the theory explains and interprets the occur-

rence of the “problem”, and thus also explains the reasons for the social transformation, for social actions or for existing social orders.

Examination of the theory: Examination of the internal logic of the theory, empirical examination of the generalising claim, etc. re-establishes the relation to the empirical findings.

Formation of political judgement by pupils: Based on the afore-mentioned phase, the political dimension is discussed (e.g. how can the author of the theory be classified from a political point of view? Which political consequences can be derived from the knowledge in the theory? For which political purposes can it be instrumentalised? To what extent does the scientific theory change your view of the problem?).

Some might argue that with this method of analysis the pupils merely understand the social theory and there is no “discovery learning”. The reconstructive character can be abandoned, because by analysing social theories the individual development phases are carried out by alternating between the pupils’ own interpretations and the interpretation of the scientist. The learners pursue questions that have also been discussed in the course of the original research. From a subjective perspective, they break new scientific ground, which of course objectively they don’t (Reinhardt, 176). The analysis of theories in social science lessons is, however, also legitimised, because the pupils acquire skills necessary for scientific reflection and social interpretation, and gain orientation knowledge, as long as the analysis of theories goes beyond the limits of the objective analysis.

The succession of the phases presented above concerning the problem-oriented analysis of theories moreover gives the impression of a linear research process. However, in reality a theory develops like a network, as hypotheses are submitted and rejected based on new knowledge. In its entirety, the research process cannot be fully presented due to the necessity of a didactic reduction in the lessons. However, processing the social theories didactically for the purpose of teaching, the change in the hypotheses and the research methods should be presented as an example based on new knowledge.

4. Framework for the development and analysis of social theories

The framework presented in this chapter can be practised with students and pupils. It is similar to the well-known instructions for the analysis of texts. Social theories are, however, an own category of texts, because they transport scientific, generalising concepts. The structure of a social theory is a self-contained term network about a scientific social subject. The propositions of a theory stand in a logical relationship towards each other and have to be verifiable (Merton 1968, 143). As a result, they differ from fictional texts and non-fictional texts like newspaper reports or legal texts.



The analysis of original scientific texts is, according to Petrik, a special challenge for teachers. The gap between the pupils' everyday concepts and scientific concepts has to be closed (cf. Petrik, 5). There are several paths that lead to the adoption of social theories. Reinhardt describes four of those: social theories can be acquired through case studies, simulations, theatre plays or interviews with experts (Reinhardt, 173 f.). The analytical framework depicted below shows another way to close this gap in school. The framework is an ideal

type. Especially for younger pupils a didactic reduction will be necessary. For example, didactically processed material that shows the origin and the reception of the problem at hand can be helpful for those pupils. From year 11 on to university, the students may look into the historical origin of a theory and its reception with means of "researching, genetical learning".

The framework for the development and analysis of social theories is designed based on the most recent findings on Conceptual Change.

Development and analysis of a social theory

Everyday concepts

Detection of the everyday concepts

What do you think of when you hear the following subject (...)? Create a Concept Map (...).

Confrontation

The development and analysis of the scientific theory

Analyse the theory according to the following analysis framework:

Problem presentation: How does the author explain what made him or her deal with the subject? Which reason does he/she state?

Problem question: Which research question(s) does the author look into? Which hypotheses does the author formulate?

Problem analysis: How does the author research the problem? Which empirical material (case studies, interviews, statistics, etc.) does the author use to support his/her position? How has the material been collected and evaluated?

Interpretation: Which theses does the author formulate based on the analysis of the material? What are the central terms? How are they defined? How does he/she present the interdependency of the core statements contained in the central terms?

Task: Individual work: Create a Concept Map with the help of the central terms. Cooperative work phase: discuss your Concept Maps in teamwork. Possible questions are: How do they differ? Which problems occurred during the development of the Concept Maps etc.? How did you solve the problems? Which pieces of information do you need in order to understand the theory?

Examination of the theory

Examine the following aspects:

Can the theory be understood logically?

Did the empirical and factual substantiation of the theory correspond with the status of knowledge of science when the theory had been developed?

Are there newer scientific findings and social developments, through which the theory is supported or refuted?

Have the central terms been clearly defined?

Political judgement

Ideological criticism, effect and reception history of theory

Look into the following questions:

Did the author pursue a political or social aim with the theory?

Which biographical experience and social events influenced the author?

How can the author of the theory be classified from a political point of view?

How was theory received in science and politics?

Which social groups or persons used the theory for their social interests?

Has the reception of the theory changed over the course of history?

Task: Write counter theses to the theses of the author. Research information and arguments for the counter theses.

Comparison of the scientific theory with the everyday theory

Compare your Concept Maps :

Where are the differences?

How can these be explained?

To what extent does the scientific theory change your opinion of the problem?

Elaborated practise and application of the theory

Transformation and application of the newly acquired information (social theory) in other knowledge presentations (role play, Battle of Theory⁷ etc.).

7 With the Battle of Theory several theories are represented and defended regarding one subject (e.g. anomy theory, labeling theory, Rational Choice theory) in one dispute.



Due to the limited scope of pages only some comments fundamental to the understanding of the framework for the development and analysis of social theories can be listed here. Decisive for the learning success and a change in concepts is the processing depth. If successful, the acquired competences are permanently encoded and consolidated in the memory. Lessons that are designed according to psychological and neurodidactic findings on learning and memory do not impart disconnected, detailed knowledge. Instead, the systemic connections of the learning material are demonstrated. This does not mean renunciation of the expertise; you cannot knit without wool, as they say. However, pupils also need the methodical competence to knit and the cognitive ability to develop knitting patterns in order to further develop themselves. The abundance of material in the teaching plans leads to a pressure in schools, which hardly leaves any space for elaborated and de-contextualising practice, which is important from the point of view of the psychology of learning, and which is vital to the processes of Conceptual Change. The poor performance shown by the PISA study is, according to neuro-didactic experts, a result of the abundance of material (Herrmann 2008, 121).⁷ Conceptual Change needs time. The research of learning and memory underpins the urgency of a curriculum discussion in Germany, which is to be held by specialised didactic and social scientists in order to reduce the abundance of material. This discussion has to be conducted, contrary to the trend of the current educational policy towards output control, within a framework which focuses on learning facts again.⁸ Conceptual Change as an aim of school requires the confrontation of existing everyday concepts with science-related concepts. This is carried out in the framework for development and analysis of social theories through the creation and comparison of two Concept Maps. During the development of the Concept Maps, the pupils should reduce the social theory to its conceptual core parts and visualise its inner relationships.

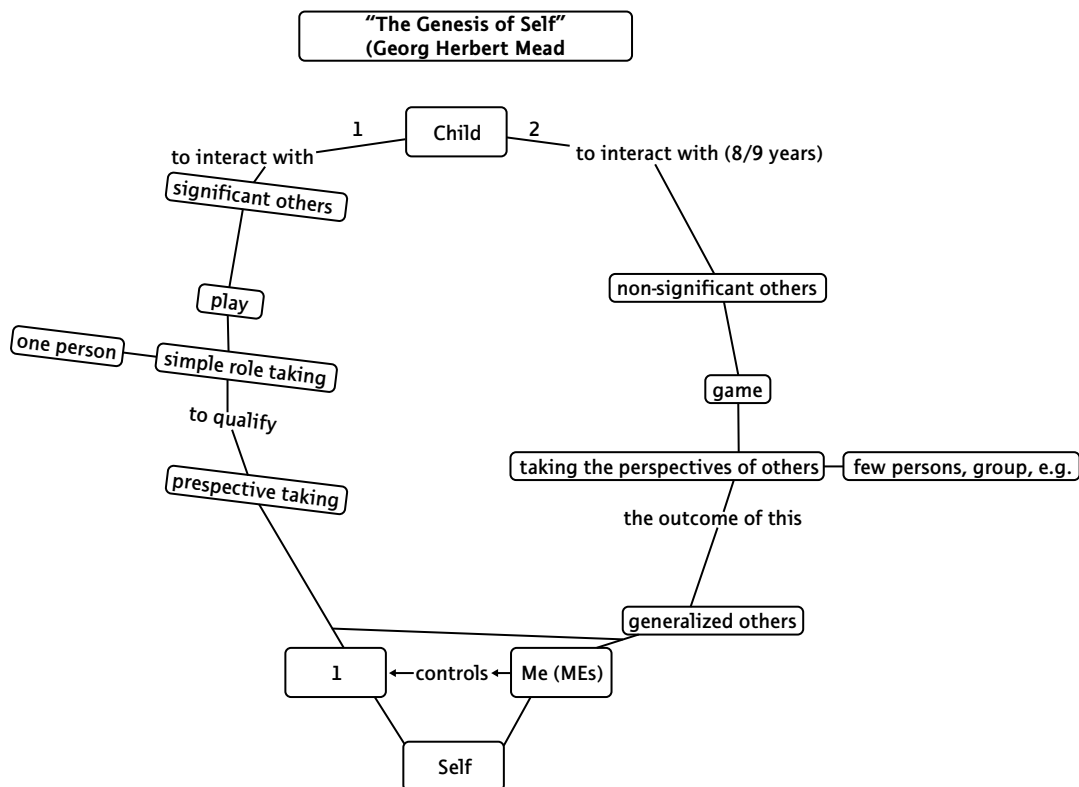
These concluding considerations speak in favour of Concept Maps from the psychological perspective of learning and memory: The Concept Maps can be used within the framework of the learning diagnostics by the pupils and the teacher, and as a means of self-reflection. The encoding of the learning material is increased through the visualisation, because more

neurological, synaptic connections are formed in the memory. So the mnemonic potential and therefore the learning efficiency are increased. Also important is the relief of the brain when social theories are learned through the creation of Concept Maps, which are similar to the cognitive knowledge networks (also called semantic networks) in the human brain. In those networks, knowledge is linked and organised hierarchically in category systems. The organisation of social theories in the form of Concept Maps furthers encoding and consolidating knowledge in the long-term memory, and therefore increases the ability to recall the knowledge. School learning therefore becomes sustainable learning.

7 However, there is a lack of a reference framework with the complaints about the fall in the pupils' performance since the PISA study. There are no studies available which allow empirically serious, comparative statements based on panel studies.

8 As empirical survey tools for examination of learning levels are currently only available for measuring the factual competence and for method competence in individual cases the lessons are focused on these competences. The contents of the lessons are adjusted to the empirical survey tools.

An example of a Concept Map of a student:



Literature

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