

Clemens, Iris

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### **Kontakt / Contact:**

**peDOCS**  
Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung (DIPF)  
Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft  
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung  
Schloßstr. 29, D-60486 Frankfurt am Main  
E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)  
Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

## Education as a moral issue? Reconstruction of the subjective theories of education in India.

Iris Clemens

### The meaning of education in India

While conducting a research project about mating processes in Gujarat, India, we found an increase in the importance of women's education as one criterion for being selected as marriage partner. In India, approximately 95 % (source: <http://server1.msn.co.in/features/dating/index.asp>) of all marriages are still arranged by the families. The Indian family and marriage system with its complex structures and arrangement processes as well as its hierarchical function is well documented in several studies (see as prominent examples at societal level Trautmann 1981, Dumont 1976, Goody 1990), focusing on very different points of view such as the problematic nature of dowry (see for e.g. Sharma 1993), "social networking" through marriage (Merz 1999), emotions (and for e.g. the development of the capacity of falling in love 'calculatively', see Kapur 1973) or the differences in the organization of families and marriage strategies in different geographical parts of India (Dumont 1993).

In only two generations, education has become one of the most important criteria for a suitable match (beside others like caste, religion etc.). Some Indian authors even see education as *the* new caste in India and as even more effective than the old ones (Varma 1999). As B eteille states: "Caste certainly counts in the estimation of social rank, but there are now many areas of life in which education and occupation count as much if not more" (B eteille 2002, p. 6). A study about mating processes in Gujarat (Eckensberger et. al. 2000) showed that potential parents-in-law insist on a well educated daughter-in-law, but on the other hand many of them don't like the potential daughter-in-law to work or even would not allow that. From that perspective, education of women in India can not be explained functionally, for example as preparation for an occupation and career. The differentiation between education and occupation is also expressed in B eteille's statement. Education seems to have an independent value beside occupation.

Therefore the question arises what meanings the term education implies in India. What different kinds of ideas and interpretations, what constructions of meaning Indian subjects have in their minds when they talk about education or an 'educated person' in addition to profession and earning money? The present research question therefore emerged from empirical field work and was not deduced from theory.

### Subjective theories about education

To obtain more information about the conceptions of education we investigated subjective theories (or na ive theories) about education. To explain their life, their environment and their everyday world, humans create their own theories about certain aspects which affect them. Mostly conceptualisations of subjective theories imply that "action does not only depend on objective action conditions and action intentions but they are also influenced by the subjective theories of the actors" (Hof 2000 p. 595, translation I.C.). In his analysis of frames Goffman (1974) shows how the personal conception of a certain situation influences how the person will behave. Concepts of 'ethnotheories' point in a similar direction but specifically highlight the cultural specifications of those theories and therefore use cross-cultural studies as empirical approach (Super & Harkness 1998). These "cultural belief systems" are the focus of interest here and attention is paid to how they are "instantiated in ... cognition and actions" (op. cit., p.4). The idea is that these conceptions or ethnotheories are shared to a considerable extent by persons with the same cultural or 'ethical' background.

Following theoretical conceptions about the construction of meaning in the everyday world (Berger & Luckmann 1970 etc.), we are interested in the subjective perspectives on the world and their explanations. The theoretical background for this is phenomenology and action theories, in which action is strongly connected to processes of sense making (see e.g. Husserl, Schütz, Cicourel, Garfinkel, Weick). This is the reason why Eckensberger (1993) in his action theory approach calls the human being 'homo interpretans'.

Under the perspective of social construction of reality, "the everyday world is not simply taken as actual background for subjectively meaningful ways of life by everyone, rather the everyday world owes its existence and its constitution to everyone's thoughts and actions" (Berger & Luckmann, p. 21-22, translation I. C.). Everyday world is understood as reality that is interpreted and created by the individuals. Knowledge, experiences and perception are organised in systems of meaning.

Inquiring about the subjective theories on education from this perspective means trying to analyse the 'areas' of meaning to which education is connected by the individuals and learning about the parts of self-construction for which education is meaningful.

## Method

To gain a first impression of the topic and to obtain as much indigenous material as possible, short association interviews were carried out by an indigenous scientist in the Telugu language in Hyderabad, capital of the state Andhra Pradesh. Through this approach we gained access to a very broad sample including army officers, vegetable vendors, housemaids, carpenters, plumber etc. Their ages varied between 18 and 83 years. Even at this early stage of research we found a tendency in individuals to use an evolutionary perspective in their argumentation. In this view education not only helps individuals to develop their personality but its a pre-condition for becoming a valuable human being at all. Statements like the following are typical for these constructions:

*"... If you are not educated, society will consider you as an animal"*

*"... I have to remain like this till I die, can't see any betterment"* (absence of education)

(about uneducated persons) *"...lack entertainment, so they are producing more numbers of children"*.

Referring to the cyclical proceeding of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967), the findings of the association interviews in the first step have been integrated in the further conception of the study. We used this information from the empirical field to continue developing the research question. In a second step experts of education were interviewed (university professors, trainers, administrators of educational organisations etc.) for two reasons: On the one hand we tried to get as much information about education in India as possible, on the other hand we used these expert interviews as a pre-test for in-depth interviews in the field. It was not certain in advance whether scientists from abroad would be able to gain access to the field and to obtain meaningful data at all (experiences in Gujarat suggested that it wouldn't work). Being aware of the *evolutional perspectives*, we integrated questions concerning this theme into these interviews.

In a third step, narrative, biographical in-depth interviews with an urban middle class sample of employed and unemployed persons as well as housewives aged between 25 and 50 years were carried out. As a result of the association interviews in the first step, one focus of the biographical interviews was the consistency of evolutionary conceptions about education on the semantic level to validate these finding and to obtain more detailed information.

## General evolutionary conceptions of education as "perfectibility ideals"

A consistent finding of the study across all three empirical steps is that evolutionary conceptions are firmly established in the subjective theories on education in India. In the biographical interviews we found the following evolutionary conceptions relating to four categories:

### *Individual intellectual development*

Most of the constructions of education imply ideas regarding the development of intellectual and other cognitive abilities. From this point of view education improves the processes of thinking towards logical and analytical structures based on rational criteria which finally lead to systematic actions. The intellectual potential might exist, but this potential can only be developed through education. Education not only improves these cognitive functions but 'polishes' the whole person and will elicit her or his best qualities. Uneducated persons in contrast act in a 'stupid', affective manner and don't think and do not care about the consequences of their actions. Educated persons will coordinate their actions, they are able to communicate in a proper way and are able to control themselves.

### *Development of ethical conceptions and ethical behaviour*

Education helps individuals to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong and to act accordingly. It teaches, how one should be and makes individuals better or more valuable persons. Some interviewees even claim that there can be no ethics at all without education and only educated persons can have ethical conceptions.

### *Social development*

Education influences the patterns of acting so as to lead to proper or civilised behaviour. Educated persons will have good manners and will be cultivated, in contrast uneducated persons are not cultivated or 'ill-cultivated'. Educated persons will be able to live together peacefully.

### *General development as development of society*

Educated persons should be models for uneducated ones, who therefore should imitate them for the betterment of society as a whole. Only education can help advance the entire nation, which means 'Education for all' (name of a big development project across India) is a political goal of top priority.

The statements that led to these categories were very general. Different aspects of 'perfectibility' ideals were also constructed.

Consequences of the general "perfectibility" (Luhmann / Luhmann & Schorr) ideals for the conception of the self

To interpret these evolutionary conceptions reconstructed in four categories, we partly follow the application of modern system theories on the historical evolution of educational processes and theories as was done especially by Luhmann and Bourdieu (1987). The construct of perfectibility was mainly adapted from the work of Luhmann & Schorr (1999). The identified general perfectibility ideals follow similar argumentation patterns as European discussions in the philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and they seem to be grounded on a similar conception of man as an unfinished creature that needs to be cultivated to reach the status of a human being in contrast to a mere 'animal being'. Parallels to the Kantian maxim: "Make yourself more perfect than nature created you" (Kant 1785, p. 552, translation I.C.) can be seen. Therefore human beings have been seen as 'perfectible' (Luhmann 2002, p. 21) and because of this as depending on culture, society, education etc. Similarities can be found in the construction of Indian *dharma* of man. *Dharma* in general is the "sustainer of this universe", the *dharma* of man "ordains him to be good and decent, to strive for and realize *narottamatwa* (the stage of the man perfected)" (Bhatt, 2001, p 225).

The question that arose now was whether the subjects apply these general conceptions of development to their concrete individual personality or not. If so, then these conceptions should be used in the construction and description of the individual biography and personality. Or in other words: Are these evolutionary conceptions, these general 'perfectibility' ideals relevant at the individual level at all in an Indian sample?

If they are actually relevant, these conceptions should be transferred into prescriptions and therefore should lead to the duty of achieving the maximum level of one's own education within the limits of so-

cial, familiar etc. conditions. Following this assumptions or this logic, achieving education then would also mean to become a better person. Consequently, this duty should imply a kind of 'self-commitment' for the individuals as defined by Blasi (1986), because then educating oneself is not a matter of personal preferences but a personal duty. For Blasi, self-commitment implies actions, which are morally valuable for the individual independent of interpersonal behaviour or relations. These are for example "actions to which one feels committed so as not to betray one's own ideals, to safeguard one's ability to think and personal dignity, not to lose one's freedom to decide nor fool oneself concerning important issues" (cit. op., p. 62, translation I.C.). Taking into consideration that education is constructed in this manner of self-commitment, the accumulation of education would be a moral issue.

### **Consequences of the construction of education as 'self-commitment' for the individual**

Following the argumentation above we wanted to find out whether notions of education really show structures of a 'self-commitment' on the semantic level. As a consequence, the argumentation patterns should then have the following structures:

#### *Autonomy of efforts to obtain one's education*

If education implies 'self-commitment' for the individuals, they should describe their own efforts to obtain education as voluntary. No pressure from outside (for example family) should be reported, but rather an intrinsic motivation to obtain education to improve one's own personality should be expected.

#### *Need to explain failures or limitations in one's educational career*

If the subjects apply the evolutionary conceptions of education to their own personality they should try to obtain as much education as possible within the limits of their abilities. So if the educational career has stopped, this should not be regarded as a matter-of-course, rather there should be an internal need for explanations.

#### *Personal enhancement of one's own personality through education*

If education implies 'self-commitment' for the individuals because they believe that education will make themselves more valuable persons, they should report some concrete positive impact of education on their own personality.

### **Validation in the field**

The first two assumptions (autonomy of effort and need to explain failure) are supported by the data. Making an effort for one's own education seems to be natural for the subjects, external outside pressure is not reported. All subjects describe their efforts as voluntary. In some cases, when problems in school are reported, subjects describe changes in their behaviour towards attaining better achievement as a process of changing their personality initiated by themselves:

*"... in my school standard I was very dull. So after that – after tenth, when I was struggling to get a seat in my college then I realized what was – like what has happened to me. Then I have changed myself".*

If for any reason the educational career has stopped, the subjects in fact seem to feel a need to explain this. Mostly explanations for the limitations or failure are extrinsic, their causes were seen in the environment and personal circumstances. Examples of a housewife and an engineer:

*"... I'm just B.A., and I'd have just done M.A. or such. But if he [husband] would have supported I would have done (...) but he didn't. Because children were there and all no. He didn't give me chance"*

*"... I thought of continuing my studies (...) but same time I got a job in Railways. So civil engineering – actually in India civil engineering people don't get jobs (...) job opportunity is very less. Getting a job is very important (...) So I thought of opting this, going for a job"*

Regarding the personal enhancement of one's own personality through education, only few deny that education has had an influence on their personality. Most of the subjects argued that education is a powerful means of developing their own personality. Indeed they describe enhancement of their social competencies (e.g. communication skills), integrity (e.g. courage to stand up to social pressure), self control (e.g. not drinking alcohol, controlling emotions and thoughts) and self-esteem (e.g. speaking confidently and being respected). Examples for the positive impact on social competencies, integrity, self control and self-esteem are:

*"... Education only has given me the confidence. If I am not educated definitely I'd have been in a corner and weeping only"*

*"...The empty mind is devil's den, I take education as one of the tool to avoid that even, to keep myself busy"*

*"... Education has helped me to live as a social animal (...) suppose if I am being uneducated, illiterate - I'd have been a coolie or labourer without culture drinking wildly with other people"*

*"... How could you get so much of courage to dissent a person, who is the highest person in the governance (like he did)? That I will call as education"*

*"... because the social set up of India, elder [brother - himself] is there younger brother cannot get married. But my education made me to get a clearance to my younger brother and I was kept avoid myself to getting married (...) and I forced my younger brother to get married. This kind of major decision in the social aspect (...) through education only I could make it out"*

A few subjects have a rather ambivalent perspective regarding the influence of education on their personality. However, they also agree that education has a positive impact on their personality but they report some negative influences too. It has made them more and more demanding and reduced their willingness to adjust, as well as their flexibility in dealing with their life. They feel superior compared to less educated persons. For them education creates problems of inadequate adaptation. There are references to an imbalance between the person and the social environment. Because of their educational level, they argue, they are not willing to compromise or to adjust to certain circumstances. One Ph. D. holder gave an example for this ambivalent perspective and the problem of inadequate adaptation:

*"...After Ph. D. certainly I could not compromise (...) That is one of the best events in my life is obtaining the degree and rather the most curse on my part is that degree only"*

*One housewife speaks about wife-husband relations (both should be equally educated in her opinion), she is better educated than her husband: " ...They get a superior - inferiority complex. She is getting higher (...) I didn't want that but (...) I have to go through with it"*

## Conclusion and consequences

The question of whether general perfectibility ideals of education are transferred to their own personality by the subjects or not can be answered by the data. Most of the subjects in our sample report positive developments of their social competencies, the increasing integrity of their personality, their ability to control themselves and their self-esteem. They express the opinion that education has improved their personality, and only education was able to bring about these changes. This line of argumentation suggests that on the semantic level education in India indeed has the structure of 'self-commitment' (as defined by Blasi) for persons who have access to education. To achieve the maximum level of education within the frame of one's abilities seems to be such a self-commitment, which means that education itself is a moral issue.

One has to remember, however, that the distinction between religion and morality is difficult in India (see Vasudev 1986), but in the present data explicit references to transcendental categories are very rare.

Our findings concerning the descriptions of competencies, integrity and self-esteem unexpectedly contribute to the 'individualism/collectivism debate', which is rather prominent in cross-cultural psychology. Mines (1988) summarises the common, shared assumptions about attributing a collectivistic orientation to India when he starts his article with the statement that "it is commonly accepted that individualism is devalued in India" (cit. op., p. 568). In fact, since the emergence of this dichotomy in the 80ies India was described as a collectivistic culture very often. As a consequence of this way of thinking, Mines for example asks in his article: "Do Hindu individuals develop personal goals separate from the goals of their encompassing groups?" (cit. op., p. 572). Evidence supporting the existence of personal goals independent from those of the encompassing group to the contrary would rather suggest an individualistic orientation of individuals in India.

Recently research on this dichotomy was reviewed and criticised by Oyserman et al. (2002), who distinguish four consequences of these cultural orientations: well-being, self-concept, attribution of causality and relationality. Our present data only refer to the first two consequences. They relate to the individualistic consequences of:

*Self-concept*

- "creating and maintaining a positive sense of self is a basic human endeavor"
- "feeling good about oneself, personal success and having many unique or distinctive personal attitudes and opinions are valued"
- "abstract traits (...) are central to self-definition"

*well-being*

- "open emotional expression and attainment of one's personal goals are important sources of well-being and life satisfaction"

(Oyserman et. al. 2002, p.5)

Our empirical findings show that both aspects can be found in the Indian context: The subjects describe themselves as happy because of their education. Education makes them feel good and honourable. It has helped them to develop their personality and capabilities and to become a unique, valuable person. They are very proud of their achievements, regardless of any further profits from this education (for e.g. to support the family etc. as typically for collectivism). The argument that only educated persons are able to talk about their emotions at all is widespread.

Examples are:

*"... I myself am very happy that I have gained some knowledge and have be(come?) something"*

*"... hundred percent I have been polished by my education"*

*"... everybody can't do that, only a few people can do, isn't it. So I feel very happy, good about what I'm doing"*

*"... I am educated I can move around"*

*"... can express better feelings in what you feel, in a narrative, in a step-by-step manner"*

As a consequence of this study, in the context of the present data from India one can not describe India as a collectivistic society, although it is categorised in that way very often: "Though unac-

ceptable in the Western world where individual autonomy and responsibility are the cornerstone of culture, Oriental people are seen to behave and respond as a collectivity" (Lau 2001; p. 241). With Sinha and Tripathi (1994) one could at least say that there is a coexistence of contradictions: "... the Indian psyche, which is a reflection of Indian society, is highly complex; contrasting values and basic propensities often coexist" (op. cit., p 124).

Findings like ours suggest that distinguishing between entire cultures in dichotomies like individualism and collectivisms is not helpful at all. These dichotomies will lead to simplifications and hide interesting and unexpected aspects of a culture as a result of this stigmatisation.

The general finding of the high relevance of education in the construction of the self has its equivalent in Indian literature: "Guru (teacher) and vidya (education) have been awarded a high place in Indian culture", Sharma (2001, p. 28) stated. "Indian tradition impresses on the education, social conditions, company, food, actions etc., as important factors in the development of self-concept" (cit. op., p. 28-29). One more factor might be of relevance regarding the meaning of education in the Indian context: The fact that the highest caste in India has always been the Brahmins and education has always been their main symbol.

Interesting parallels can also be seen to conceptions which are rooted in religion. Referring to the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most important writings in the Hindu religion and philosophy, wisdom is the appropriate strategy to overcome the natural, non-avoidable suffering in phenomenal reality (Misra et. al. 2000). And the conceptions of education we found have certain attributes similar to the conceptions of wisdom in the Bhagavad Gita. According to Misra et. al. there one can find ideas that wise persons should have characteristics like being "sage", "self realized", "sober", "liberated", "undeluded", "one in complete knowledge", "self controlled" and so on (see Misra et. al., p. 22).

Keeping in mind that in contemporary India these characteristics are linked to education on the semantic level, one might also consider the possibility of a religious basis for these efforts to educate oneself.

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