SUBJECTIVE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA COMPETENCE

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Abstract

For adults, media competence constitutes a fundamental competence within the context of the knowledge society. The article discusses subjective concepts of media competence within the context of media-pedagogical adult education. The formation of theories concerning the term media competence has progressed quite far; there exist a great variety of different concepts. What has been lacking so far is an examination of the phenomenological dimension, in particular — namely that which non-scientists understand by media competence and thus also addressees of media-pedagogical adult education — i.e., a study of subjective concepts of media competence. Subjective concepts are pedagogically relevant because adults differ in their understanding of the terms "media competence" and "media critique" in both their scientific-theoretical and their pedagogical-practical use.

Introduction and Outline

For adults — be they individuals, citizens, or employees — media competence constitutes a fundamental skill within the context of the knowledge society (Stehr, 2001). It is of importance for both the professional life and the everyday organization of life — its life-accompanying promotion across all age groups is thus an important social and pedagogical task. Media-pedagogical adult education aims at promoting media competence among adults.

The article discusses subjective concepts of media competence within the context of media-pedagogical adult education — "within the context", because media competence constitutes an important concept in media-pedagogical adult education. It is a term that surfaces increasingly in programs of adult education[1] and, therefore, the addressees themselves come into contact with the term. In order to plan courses for the promotion of media competence among adults, the addressees' subjective concepts of media competence should be taken into consideration in addition to scientific theories. Subjective concepts are pedagogically relevant because adults differ in their understanding of the terms

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[1] For example it surfaces in the name of adult education institutions like the public „MedienKompetenzZentrum" in Saarbrücken or the catholic "MedienKompetenzZentrum" in Cologne.

"media competence" and "media critique" in both their scientific-theoretical and their pedagogical-practical use.

So far, the addressees' understanding of media competence has not been dealt with in research. Therefore, crucial questions are: in how far has the term media competence been popularized? To what extent can subjective concepts of media competence guide actions? How do such concepts emerge? In the following, the state of the art in both theory development and research on concepts of media competence and on subjective theories is sketched. Having given an outline of the study's design, selected results on subjective concepts of media competence are presented. Finally, the relevance of subjective concepts of media competence for the planning of the media-pedagogical practice in adult education as well as for media-pedagogical research is discussed

Theory and Research Developments

In this section, I will sketch scientific concepts of media competence and the field of research dealing with subjective concepts.

Scientific Concepts of Media Competence

Media competence takes its concrete form along lines of critical-emancipatory reflection in the mature subject capable of social action (Groeben, 2002). There exists a great variety of concepts of media competence which partly overlap in their dimensions while still emphasizing different aspects (for the German-language area above see Baacke, 1998; Groeben, 2002). Still, there is a content-related convergence of these concepts. Despite all dissimilarities and the various differentiations, most of these concepts correspond in that they unite aspects of media analysis, media production, and media selection. By way of illustration, I will, in the following, outline Baacke's concept because it is the most widely known model within the German-language area, relatively open to consensus and interconnections, and because it has already been the subject of an empirical study carried out among adults (Treumann et al., 2002). In the 1970s, Baacke defined media competence (although this term was not yet in use then) in analogy to the linguistic concept of language competence introduced by Noam Chomsky and to the concept of the communicative competence described by Jürgen Habermas. Baacke submitted "a catalogue of teaching objectives of a critical communication course" (Baacke, 1973, p. 360), from which were later on derived ,among other things, the four dimensions of media critique, media science (including the sub-dimensions informative and instrumental-qualificatory media science), media use and media design (Baacke, 1998). Within these four dimensions, media critique seems to be the target category. The strength of Baacke´s concept lies in its

structuredness, comprehensibility, and connectability (on criticism see, e.g., Gapski, 2001; Moser, 2004).

Within the Anglo-American sector, one speaks of media literacy (Hobbs, 1998; Livingstone, 2003). The term "media literacy" refers to knowledge, skills, and competences that one needs to use and to interpret media (Buckingham, 2003, p. 36). The English term "literacy", more than the German term "Kompetenz," suggests that dealing with media is considered a fourth cultural technique. According to a widely accepted definition proposed by the National leadership Conference on Media Literacy, media literacy consists of four components: "to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Livingstone, 2003, p. 6). Referring to this definition of critical literacy, Livingstone describes the dilemma that users of media "lack the skills to test the objectivity or balance of the information available, judging instead its aesthetic qualities and its adaptability to their immediate purposes" (Livingstone, 2003, p. 12). This aspect has so far not been examined in the German-language debate; however, it could be empirically concretized in the present study. Theory development with regard to the term media competence has progressed quite far. Still, the achievement of a social consensus on concrete contents and the operationalization as well as the empirical concretization of media competence remains a challenge (Gapski, 2006; Livingstone & Thumin, 2003; Treumann et al., 2002). What has so far been lacking, in particular, is the analysis of subjective patterns of interpretation — i.e., that which non-scientists and, thus, also addressees of media-pedagogical adult education understand by media competence, i.e., a study on subjective concepts of media competence.

Subjective Concepts
"Media competence has. . .long since become more than an exclusive term within the media-pedagogical specialist debate, rather, it has become a social construct with specific functions in media society that are mediated through mass media" (Gapski, 2006, p. 14). Here, the term media competence has even been transported to the level of the citizen — he or she comes into contact with the term through the media and through media-pedagogical adult education. A study of the concepts of media competence has to focus on the "(re-) construction of subjective theories" (Schründer-Lenzen, 1997, p. 107). This refers to the reconstruction of subjective attributions of meaning to media and media competence on the assumption that these are of relevance to the actions of those interviewed. Since the 1980s, there exists a branch of research on subjective theories that starts from the assumption that the latter do in fact guide actions. Human behavior is here interpreted as action and not as behavior (König, 2002, p. 55). Subjective everyday theories are often based on a popularization of scientific knowledge; they contain knowledge from both primary experiences and collective patterns of interpretation as well as media information (Siebert, 2006, p. 43). Mostly, these theories grow out of the

individual's biography, they are part of a person's life history and depend on social background (e.g., different subjective theories of learning depending on social sphere and background). They are mainly implicit and subconscious (Barz & Tippelt, 2004; Siebert, 2006). In this context, subjective concepts of media competence are regarded as meaning attributed to the media and to the use of media in the terms of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1972), meanings that are open to change through social interaction and, thus, principally, also in pedagogical settings such as media-pedagogical adult education. König raises the interesting question "in how far subjective theories also change through pedagogical procedures" (2002, p. 64). The present study revealed that subjective concepts of media competence may change through media-pedagogical adult education (von Hippel, 2007).

So far, there has never been a study examining subjective concepts of media competence as to their differentiation and their emergence and showing in how far they can be changed through pedagogical settings.

The Study's Structure

In the following, I will sketch the study's central issues, its method and design. The present study is aimed at the description of and differentiation between subjective concepts of media competence. I examined how far the scientific term has reached other levels. Furthermore, it was discussed how subjective concepts of media competence emerge and how they can be changed. The analysis of the subjective concepts aimed at providing a contribution to the development of theories and at giving pedagogical recommendations with regard to addressee orientation.

In the exploratory study, subjective concepts of media competence were examined on the basis of questionnaires and problem-centered interviews lasting about 1.5 hours (Witzel, 2000). The analysis drew on 19 interviews and almost 60 answers given in questionnaires. Those questioned were participants at a media competence center. This institution was chosen because the term "media competence" already figures in the name itself and the provider reaches a great variety of different addressees. Through method-triangulation (Flick, 2004) and the multi-level procedure, questionnaires and interviews could be interlinked. Here, the heterogeneity of the test group with regard to socio-demographic features in the sense of the grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) yielded important insights, because persons working in the field of media, citizens with media-related hobbies and citizens using media everyday were interviewed. The analysis of subjective concepts of media competence focuses on the "descriptive, phenomenological" study of subjective conceptions, not on measured

media competence (Strzelewicz, Raapke, & Schulenberg, 1966, p. 569). The interviews were transcribed word for word into regular written German in order to enable an extensive interpretative evaluation oriented by the grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The interviews were encoded, using the technical support of the program MAXqda2. EDP programs for a qualitative data analysis do not dispense the researcher from the analytic and interpretative work; however, they help deal with the huge amount of data and promote transparence and inter-subjective comprehension (Kuckartz et al., 2004).

Selected Results on Subjective Concepts of Media Competence

In the following, the differentiation of subjective concepts of media competence will be discussed, using media critique as an example and their emergence and possibilities of change are outlined

Description and Differentiation of Subjective Concepts of Media Competence

Media competence is a term with positive associations; however, just like the term education it has different connotations (Strzelewicz, Raapke, & Schulenberg, 1966). By many of those interviewed, media competence is seen in close proximity to a person's other characteristics and skills, such as general education, creativity, responsibility, inquisitiveness, and communicative skills. Just like subjective theories in general, subjective concepts of media competence are "embedded in more comprehensive everyday theories of life and self" (Siebert, 2006, p. 56). The separate dimensions of media competence are differentiated in various ways, thus also the dimension of media critique. For most interview partners this dimension refers to their individual appraisal of the value and use of media for him- or herself. From a media-ethical perspective, they refer not so much to their shared responsibility in their role as citizens, but rather as designers of their own leisure time (Funiok, 2002, p. 145). This is illustrated by the following quotation:

> Perhaps that he knows where he can get what. Which of his needs can be met by which medium. Such a person is media competent if he/she can say: "This or that information I can get here or there" or "this or that experience I can make by using this medium.

Then again, some of the interviewees think of media critique as something like literary or art criticism — e.g., film critique referring to aesthetic and cultural norms. Thus, media critique encompasses both a pedagogical and a journalistic dimension. But the scientific concept of media critique is mentioned, too. In the eyes of the interview partners, media competence seems to have both an

'objective' and a 'subjective' side. The objective side includes the critical handling of media, whereas the subjective side refers to the manner in which media are dealt with by the respective individual. The aspect that concepts of media competence are criticized as being simply normative finds its equivalent in the statements made by the interviewees — the majority of whom refer to the subjective side: "I know what's good for me, how I can get information, etc." The interview partners hardly ever mention the normative side of media critique, but rather the individual or aesthetic side (for instance, film critique). This subjective reduction of media critique to the individual use of media is an interesting result of the Anglo-American debate (Livingstone, 2003), which has now for the first time been empirically substantiated within the German-language debate by the present study.

Emergence of and Changes in Subjective Concepts of Media Competence

Similar to the relation between subjective theories of learning and learning activities, described by Siebert not as a linear causal dependence, but as a circular one (2006, p. 46), the interaction between subjective concepts of media competence and motives for the use of media is circular as well (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reference points and action relevance of
subjective concepts of media competence
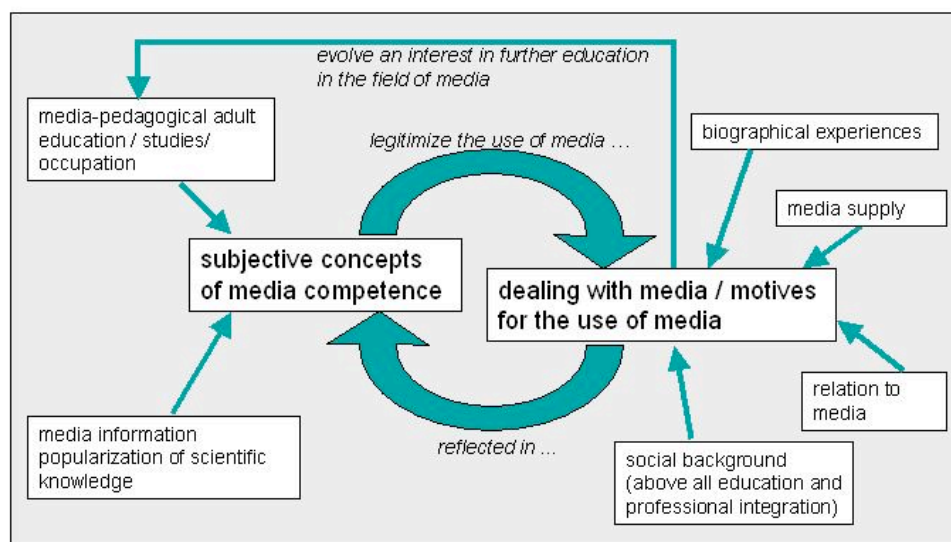
For instance, subjective concepts of media competence may well legitimize the use of media if the interviewees assume that media competence is acquired as it were "en passant" and that this justifies the intensive use of media. The manner in which people deal with media — what they are looking for in the media, why they deal with them — is reflected in their subjective concepts of media competence. From dealing with media — which are used depending on the needs — there may also evolve an interest in further education in the field of media. Motives for the use of media are not transformed one by one into inclinations and concepts of media competence; however, what emerges are patterns of meaning and moderating factors: persons who have come into contact with media-pedagogical adult education may change their subjective concept of media competence. Thus, the development of subjective concepts of media competence depends on the motives for the use of media as the most important factor. Mediated through the motives for the use of media, the relation to media (media development, media design as a hobby, everyday use of media), media supply, social background — above all education and professional integration — as well as biographical experiences exert an influence on the subjective concepts.

The following three examples are meant to illustrate the connection between the motif for the use of media and the subjective concept of media competence, between professional integration and subjective concepts of media competence, as well as the moderating influence of media-pedagogical adult education.

Motif for the use of media and subjective concepts of media competence. The typical pattern according to which motives for the use of media are reflected in subjective concepts of media competence is illustrated in the following on the basis of one exemplary case. An interviewee who several years ago overcame a severe illness is now looking for encouraging examples in the media:

> Thus, I like to read biographies. . . .Currently the book by Dr. Robert Schuller Tears are turned into gems. . .That's his experience of life that he is describing in the book. How mishaps or circumstances or strokes of fate can still be turned into something positive. . . .And as I said, videos, I like films, that content-wise, that are not didactic, but which tell a story which allows one to draw courage and hope.

The following example reveals the interviewee's action-guiding topic in his concept of media competence which is to assert himself and to master difficulties. At the same time, the aspect of presentation surfaces, the interviewee designs media in his free time. Thus, his concept of media competence contains both the reference to media and an action-guiding topic:

. . .that examples are given of people who earlier on — I`ll take a case of someone who used to be shy — that is, a "before-after story" —–used to be shy, then attends a course on media competence and right away acts altogether differently.

His interest in further education points in a similar direction:

Ok, I mean, courses that help people so that they can also present themselves in a better way. Even if they know they are not a superstar now, but that they notice: this helps me in small things, too.

This interview partner clearly shows the typically circular interaction of the subjective concept of media competence with the motif for using media. He uses media for the support of his personal identity and for the processing of his action-guiding topics. This is again reflected in his concept of media competence and his interest in adult education in the field of media.

Professional integration and subjective concepts of media competence. Professional integration, too, has an impact on the definitions of subjective concepts of media competence. Those interviewed reacted to the term media competence according to their respective 'roles', be they as media creators, hobby filmmakers, pedagogues, or citizens. From the perspective of the media creators, media competence describes, for instance, the media-competent personality; examples given in the questionnaires are for instance television presenters, but also the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder. According to them, the media-competent person has a good general education, a good pronunciation, is "neutral, objective, critical." One of the women interviewed, who is studying in the field of media, describes such a person as follows:

The definition I've come up with says that someone is media-competent if he/she knows how to present him- or herself in the media. Who is competent with regard to the media. . . .What one should know so that one appears as a competent person in the media.

The fact that media creators relate media competence to their own role holds great potential for the promotion of media competence through the suppliers' side — something that has repeatedly been demanded by media pedagogics. Not only users should acquire knowledge and skills for dealing with media, but also the offers made by the media should promote a competent handling of media. Media competence should not be considered a compound of an individual's characteristics, but rather "an emergent property of the relation between people and technologies; the failure to comprehend, for example, may be as much a result

of poor interface design as of poor education" (Livingstone & Thumin, 2003, p. 8).

Moderating influences of media-pedagogical adult education. That media-pedagogical adult education may change subjective concepts of media competence is shown by the following example: among some of the entertainment-oriented interview partners, the interest in media critique was only awakened through adult education. Here, I find empirical evidence for the fact that concepts of media competence emerge in social interaction and are modifiable; this implies a strong potential for media-pedagogical adult education. The following interview partner has changed her concept of media competence due to external impulses, i.e., from media-pedagogical adult education, and now shows an interest in media psychology:

> And how, would you say, that your own media competence developed? Through the courses; one's own attentiveness, to look at media in a different way than before. Not only to watch and to listen, but also, may be, to think about how it developed, how it was done, a little bit the psychological effect. . . .For that you have to be given an impetus.

By creating a consciousness for a possible critical use of media and by initiating a broadening of the concept of media competence, it is possible to awaken an interest in this aspect. The reflection on media competence (concepts) — be it the result of a course, of program booklets, or of interviews — can be interpreted as a pedagogical intervention which could be employed purposefully in didactical designs for the promotion of media competence among adults.

Outlook

In the following, I will give an outline of the relevance of subjective concepts of media competence for research and for the development of theories as well as for the pedagogical practice.

Relevance for Research and for the Development of Theories

Due to the diversity of subjective concepts of media competence, an operationalization and measuring of media competence through personal information appears to be difficult. For further research it would be interesting to examine in how far subjective concepts of media competence and 'measured' media competence are related. The inclusion of Web 2.0 and possible effects on subjective concepts of media competence would also provide an interesting issue to be explored. The present contribution managed to exploratively outline for the first time subjective concepts of media competence in their differentiation, yet

further studies would be valuable here. The development of the concept of media competence through media creators seems to suggest that the "classical" concepts of media competence could be refined and complemented in relation to media creators. All in all, scientific concepts of media competence could be differentiated more clearly for different social roles.

Pedagogical Relevance of Subjective Concepts
As has been shown above, adults differ in their understanding of media competence and media critique. From the perspective of addressee orientation, it is important to take the subjective concepts into account, because the term "media competence" (same as "media critique") alone, and its connotations could make courses for addressees appear to be (ir)relevant. The consideration of subjective concepts of media competence and motives for the use of media as part of the addressees' life world — and thus of reality as they interpret it — would improve the link between supply and demand and thus complement the addressee orientation in media-pedagogical adult education. The fact that subjective concepts of media competence are modifiable in social interaction — e.g., such as media-pedagogical adult education — points to a strong potential in adult education. Therefore, to awaken an interest in other dimensions of media competence could constitute a task of media-pedagogical adult education. The targeted reflection on subjective concepts of media competence — as it was initiated by the present study through questions formulated in questionnaires and interviews — could also be employed in didactical designs of media-pedagogical adult education as a pedagogical intervention. To develop and to examine these didactical designs constitutes an important research desideratum.

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