

Closing comment on PeerThink Conference by HEIKE KLEFFNER

(journalist, involved in the project “Mobile Counselling against right-wing Extremism”)

I have to say that I am impressed by the results of the peer think project – that I understand as work-in-progress – considering the short amount of time it has been in existence, that it only started in the winter of 2007 and considering the many obstacles it has faced: the fact that the participating organizations, NGOs and people speak various languages, have very varying experiences, have different objectives in their everyday work, but also probably in the project etc.

I came here, probably similarly to many others in the room, to get a better understanding of how intersectionality could influence my work and my view of the world in general: Since the basic idea of intersectionality indeed does provide a useful viewpoint: with an understanding of violence that includes all forms of discrimination due to social categories and violence prevention mirroring thus analysis and approach.

Or one could say: violence is not an individual act alone, but also based on structures of dominance. So the challenge of social or pedagogical work would be to identify the intersections between the individual and his or her actions and the determining social structures for her or his life.

What I specifically liked was when Mart Busche said in her introductory text that the Peer Think Projects relates to intersectionality in order to be able to on the one hand grasp the complex life of our clients and on the other hand the complexity of real social work and educational work

Both Elli Scambor and Mart Busche in their inputs emphasized the following thesis: reduce dominance by deconstructing social categories

I would like to add that this from my viewpoint is very much linked to finding ways of self-empowerment for the adolescents or youngsters we work with: not only in terms of individual self-empowerment, but also self-empowerment of the adolescents as actors in society.

This implies a political understanding that defines pedagogical work both as working one-to-one, but also affecting and being affected by political and social processes. And Angela McRobbie gave a very pointed analysis of these interrelations in her description of the effects of neoliberal politics on society, social work and young women’s lives, status and options. She ended her presentation with a plea for „therapeutic interventions“ and an emphatic one-one approach“ or, as she put it, reinventing the values of the 1960ies for today.

I would like to add here: to do this means to shake off the political, pedagogical and scientific depression of ten years of Bush, Blair, Sarkozy or „grand coalitions“ and not just reduce our hopes to therapeutical interventions, but to dare to dream up moments of empowerment and fundamental changes – on the basis of the complexities of an intersectional analysis.

Which brings us back to the starting point of the project: to deal with the complexity of the clients lives and their realities. Wassilis Kassis has reminded us in strong words, that we should take a close and hard look at who we work with, at their needs, their conditions, social categories and forms of violence they are subjected to as well as maybe practicing themselves –before we come up with grandiose plans, projects or programs. And that we should check

whether our perceptions are mere projections or are actually valid observations that can determine the objectives or aims of projects and programs.

I would like to remind us all – when we take this seriously – that this leads us straight back to the beginnings of intersectional analysis and theory by Kimberlé Crenshaw: she was looking – ultimately – at empowering black women by taking their obstacles and their objectives as seriously as white women's issues and demands have been taken seriously by the mainstream feminist movement.

Now if we take this as a starting point or basis of any form of practice and scientific approach: it would require to be careful not to reduce the intersectional approach again to just „race, class and gender“ – a warning that has come up in various workshops over the last two daysand really include other social categories if and when they are relevant to those we work with.

And rereading Kimberle Crenshaw also helps to lift the depressions of life in the age of neoliberalism a bit:

Intersectional analysis can both help us to understand differences, but can also bring us together: as practitioners and scientists; and as people from different social categories: hopefully not only in effective violence prevention projects or programs but also in social movements.

Heike Kleffner, Berlin, 6th of February 2009