

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BASES FOR STUDYING SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN POST- SOVIET COUNTRIES

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Macro transformations taking place in the post-soviet space including the Armenian society inevitably are reflected on the level of micro transformations, such as transformations of identities, hierarchy of values, social attitudes and needs, as well as changes in interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. In this respect, it has become very important to identify the indicators of social-psychological transformations, analyze positive and negative outcomes and multi-dimensional consequences of these transformations.

There is also a great need to find out a theoretical and methodological basis of studying social-psychological transformations and application of different theoretical concepts to the multi-analyses of transformations in the post-soviet space.

In my opinion, in general, the most relevant theoretical and methodological basis could be a dialectical sociological approach and its different variations, such as, for example, the recently developed theory of **social domains**.

Contemporary sociology based on heritage of such classics as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber widely analyzes the dialectical link between macro and micro levels and discusses the possibilities of integration of macro and micro realms of society.

The dialectical approach of such famous sociologists as Peter Berger, Antony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Jurgen Habermas, Norbert Elisas is an attempt to theoretically and methodologically integrate the investigation of micro and macro levels of society.

Although all the theorists take very different approaches, the cornerstone of their theories is the relationship between agency and structure.

One of the great examples of linking macro and micro or agency and structure is the sociological approach of Peter Berger. Berger's main argument is that on the one hand, human subjectivity is externalized and objectified, and, on the other, objectified social reality shapes subjectivity¹.

The famous French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the well known contemporary British sociologist Antony Giddens, the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas also attempt to resolve the tension between structure and agency by incorporating such terms in the sociological theory as, for example "field" which Bourdieu refers to as the "structural concept" and "habitus" which he refers to as "agency" or "lifeworld" which in Habermas' terminology is a symbolic structure of taken-for-granted meanings that are produced through communicative acts and "system" which is an objective phenomenon and produced through rational actions.

¹ Scott J. Sociological Theory: Contemporary Debates (Edward Elgar Publishing Company). 1995.

There is no doubt that all the above-mentioned theories could be applicable to the analyses of deep structural and individual transformations taking place in the contemporary Armenian society. At the same time, I think that "post-soviet" case and "post-soviet" transformational processes could not be always understood and analyzed from the classical dialectical approach. I think that transformational processes of post-soviet reality could be better described from the standpoints of the recently developed Derek Layder's theory of social domains, which is more evolved and is a complex variation of the dialectical approach.

On the one hand, the theory of social domains borrows heavily from other approaches and attempts to build on them. On the other hand, the theory takes its shape from an attempt to provide an alternative to approaches that argue for an abandonment of all forms of objectivism and the use of macro-structural concepts as a means of understanding social activity and face-to-face encounters².

The theory of social domains goes further by deconstructing the two domains of action and systems into four and views social activity itself as an outcome of the complex interplay of them all. Although each domain is deeply interwoven and interdependent on each other, each has its own distinct characteristics and a certain measure of independence from the others³.

According to the theory of social domains, the relationships between lifeworld and system should be described from the standpoint of "fundamental ontological differences" and "crossing dualism"⁴.

Because Layder distinguishes four main domains of social reality this approach could be a more appropriate methodological base to understand the complexity and diversity of processes going on in post-soviet countries.

Derek Layder argues that social reality is made up of four social domains, which relate to the subjective and the objective, micro and macro realms of the social.

According to Layder, the subjective dimensions of social life consist of two domains:

1. The individual-subjective or "psychobiography". Psychobiography is the term that Layder uses to refer to largely unique, asocial components of an individual's dispositions, behaviour and self-identity. This domain is relatively independent of macro-social sphere. The main argument here is that psychobiography is a highly significant mediating factor that influences the manner in which discourses are handled by individuals.

2. The intersubjective which Layder terms a "situated activity". This domain refers to face-to-face interactions. Following Goffman, Layder sees situated activity in terms of situations of co-presence where two or more individuals are able to monitor and reflectively respond to the unfolding action.

3. The objective dimension consists of "social settings"- the social contexts or locations in which the situated activity occurs. Some settings exhibit highly formalized rules, obligations and expectations. Basically, within settings we encounter conditions of action-discourses, resource patterns, social positions/roles and more or less institutionalized practices that are inherited from the past.

² Layder D. Understanding Social Theory (SAGE Publication). 2006.

³ Layder D. Understanding Social Theory (SAGE Publication). 2006.

⁴ Layder D. Modern Social Theory: Key Debates and New Directions (UCL Press). 1997.

4. Contextual resources. This macro domain includes large scale patterns of power, dominations and other forms of inequalities, distribution of resources relating to social class, gender, ethnicity. Contextual resources also include widespread cultural understandings, cultural values and beliefs, legitimate discourses and social practices⁵.

We could state with confidence that over the past 15 years in Armenia, transformations of all 4 domains have taken place, though to various extents. Obviously, macro transformations determine the construction of new types of psychobiography or identities, as well as revise the long "Soviet identity" discourse. For example, over the past few years, completely new types of identities have been constructed in our society, such as, "an oligarch", "a representative of the civil society", "someone living below the poverty level" or "a representative of a vulnerable group", etc. At the same time, there are obvious transformations of social settings, such as political regimes, the socio-economic situation, transformations of labor market and, practically, transformations in all social institutions.

It is also important to stress that in Armenia we have quite radical transformations on the level of social settings and contextual resources (or fields, systems, structure - we can use any of these terms), but they do not necessarily affect transformations on subjective and intersubjective levels. This could be considered as peculiarities and paradoxes of the processes of post-soviet transformations. That is why theories like the theory of social domain that consider objective and subjective levels of society as quite independent from each other could help us to understand the processes taking place in post-soviet countries.

Also, I would like to consider two examples that are – the gender system of present-day Armenia and the so called process of "europeization" and show how we can analyze these processes using the framework of the theory of social domains.

The gender system in Armenia has passed through many different stages and has been under the influence of many civilizations and cultures. There are many obvious macro factors influencing gender discourse in modern-day Armenia, such as the breakdown of the socialist discourse of gender equality, the development of a new gender policy, the adoption of international laws and declarations (social settings), but the transformation in men and women gender roles, attitudes and socially accepted gender patterns of behaviour (psychobiographies) are not so visible.

Although there are some positive changes, a great number of people still express very conservative and stereotypical behaviour in terms of gender roles and statuses in everyday interactions.

On July 14, 2004, Armenia was included into the European Union's "New Neighbors," and the administration of the country announced its intent to pursue integration into a forward-looking chief European structure – the European Council. But despite such obvious political willingness among political parties and civil society to propel Armenia into the West, there are still questions that in my opinion need to be asked: **whether the people of Armenia accept the main concepts, standards and values of European culture on a social and psychological level or not?** In other words, it is important to understand whether the real and deeply rooted transformations in **psychobiographies and situated activities** have taken place along with the more structural transformations of social settings and contex-

⁵ **Layder D.** Understanding Social Theory (SAGE Publication). 2006.

tual resources. Or is there at least some cultural potential for these transformations?

These questions are crucial for our future discussion of the attitudes of the Armenians toward European values, as while for many Eastern European countries the connection to European civilization and culture is obvious, for Armenia, as well as for other countries in the South Caucasus, the issue of self-identification and determination still remains uncertain.

In general, the issue of the Armenians' self-identification is quite complicated and controversial. Geographically located on the border of Europe and Asia, during various periods of its history, Armenia has been under the influence of the Babylonian, Hellenistic, Byzantine Empire, as well as the Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Russian civilizations. These influences created a duality of the Western and the Eastern not only in poetry, art, music, architecture, but also in everyday life of the Armenian people. And these trends make it difficult to understand the Armenian mentality and, more importantly, complicate cultural self-identification for the Armenians.

For example, the **level of tolerance** toward different demographic, social, ethnic, religious groups, which is widely considered an important aspect of democracy and civil society, is still very controversial.

According to the recently conducted survey among Armenian youth, 45% think that ethnic minorities living in Armenia could not have the same rights and opportunities the Armenians do. 40% of young Armenian people agree that there are "good" and "bad" nations. More than 80% think that Armenian should only be a representative of the Armenian Apostolic Church and more than 50% agree that the representatives of other religions or denominations (even if they are Armenians) cannot afford the same rights and opportunities. Only 5% of young people express positive attitude toward homosexuals and more than 50% agree that homosexuals cannot enjoy the same rights as other people.

The level of interactions or situated activities also remains practically unchangeable. As it has been mentioned earlier, the situated activity includes different types of face-to-face interaction: in public places, between dispersed acquaintances, as well as on-going interactions among family members or friends.

It has also turned out that young people are ready to cooperate and be a colleague of members of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities or people from different vulnerable groups of society (level of transient and intermittent interactions). At the same time, there are apparent discriminatory and non-tolerant attitudes when it comes to more "intimate" spheres, such as family members, relatives, and even neighbours (regularized interactions).

In addition to what has been already said, the vast majority of the respondents (70.5%) think that the Armenian culture and mentality are unique and cannot be compared to any other cultures, 7.4% agree that the Armenian culture is a part of the Middle Eastern culture, and only 6.9% consider the Armenian culture to be a part of the European culture.

I am not sure that we can live one hundred percent by European standards. We are neither Europe, nor Asia; we are at the crossroads (focus groups discussion participant, woman, 23).

I think our culture now is at a critical point. We have to make our choice and understand what we want. Moreover, it is all about changing our mentality and our behaviour (focus groups discussion participant, woman, 29).

Thus, as we can see from this brief presentation, on the current stage of the development of our society, we still undergo structural and institutional changes, using the terminology of the social domain theory, changes of social settings and contextual resources, but for the real societal transformations we inevitably need deeper and qualitative socio-psychological changes on the levels of identity, mentality and behaviour. In order to analyze the socio-psychological transformations taking place in Armenia it is important to take into account that changes in different domains do not necessarily occur simultaneously. Moreover, these changes could go in different directions as, for example, in case of tolerance. As different comparable surveys show, despite political and structural changes after the country's independence the Armenian people became much more ethnocentric, nationalistic, rejecting the idea of ethnic, religious pluralism, or more conservative in respect of gender attitudes, etc.

In my opinion, the transition from macro changes to deeper micro changes could happen only if the groups, associations, organizations with similar system of values, interests, and life styles were formed and had enough power to influence the structural and institutional basis of society. Only then can we state with confidence that the particular society experiences a new socio-historical period of its development.

ԳՈՂՅԱՐ ՇԱՀՆԱԶԱՐՅԱՆ - *Սոցիալ-հոգեբանական փոխակերպումների ուսումնասիրության տեսական և մեթոդաբանական հիմքերը հետխորհրդային պետություններում* - Հոդվածում ներկայացված են հասարակության անցումայնության ուսումնասիրության տեսական մոտեցումներ, ինչպես նաև հասարակության և, մասնավորապես, հայ հասարակության անցումայնությամբ պայմանավորված սոցիալ-հոգեբանական տեղաշարժերի կիրառական սոցիոլոգիական հետազոտության արդյունքներ: Հետխորհրդային տարածքի վրա սոցիալ-հոգեբանական փոխակերպումների ալիքների և միտումների վերլուծությունն իրականացվում է ժամանակակից գիտական մոտեցումների համատեքստում:

ГОВАР ШАХНАЗАРЯН – *Теоретические и методологические основы изучения социально-психологических трансформаций в постсоветских странах.* – В статье изложены теоретические подходы к изучению переходности обществ, а также результаты прикладных социологических исследований социально-психологических изменений, обусловленных переходностью армянского общества. Помимо того, проводится сравнительный анализ тенденций и волн социально-психологических трансформаций на постсоветском пространстве в контексте современных научных подходов к их изучению.