

The significance of everyday life, values and meaning for a more social and ecological society: a life world perspective

Everyday life as key concept to understand society and its transformation

In this paper I argue that *everyday life* and *meaning* represent two crucial aspects to understand the challenges current society is facing towards its transition to a more sustainable future, beyond unrestrained growth.

A theoretical framework that takes *everyday life* and *meaning* into focus is provided by life world theory introduced by Alfred Schütz into social sciences. Schütz' life world theory starts with everyday life as fundamental concept to understand society and social processes. Life world theory provides a valuable alternative perspective to sociological approaches that focus on broad institutional structures, social networks or micro-sociological phenomena though all these can be linked to everyday life.

The nature of everyday life

A core statement or axiom of life world theory is that everyday life including experience, thinking, acting and interacting, is fundamentally made possible by things taken for granted, i.e. assumptions and knowledge which are not subjected to reflection but are taken as given (Schütz and Luckmann, 2003, p. 27 ff.).

Without things taken for granted we would not be able to have meaningful ordered experience and lead a productive, pragmatic everyday life, but be caught up in chaotic sensations, unproductive circles of individual reflection or endless group discourse.

The things taken for granted are the categories, Schütz calls them types, we use to structure and organize our experience, cognition and communication (Schütz and Luckmann, 2003, p. 313). These categories constitute the distinct objects, which we experience, think and communicate about.

How we structure our experience, thoughts and communication influences and is deeply interwoven with how we organize our everyday life. What we experience, think of and communicate about as distinct we act on as distinct entities in everyday life.

The challenge to change society is the challenge to change everyday life

From a life world perspective changing society requires to change everyday life. Therefore, to bring society on a more sustainable path also a change of everyday life is required.

Change of everyday life requires to question the categories on which our experience, cognition and communication are based and making them subject to reflection, i.e. to transcend them. This means to question the objects and their boundaries we conceive of as distinct in everyday life, which in turn can facilitate a change in everyday life.

However, transcendence is inherently difficult mainly for two reasons. First, reflection of our experience, cognition and communication stops us from pragmatic problem solving to established problems in everyday life, with respect to our biological, psychological and social needs. Questioning

our experience, thoughts and communication hinders us from solving pragmatic issues because we spent time reflecting and because what we consider a pragmatic problem might change which in turn requires to work out new solutions to changed problems. Second, some concepts and categories might be difficult to reflection at all as they seem as objective unchangeable reality (the global market and competition for a broker) (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and as consequence they are real (this is an equivalent of the Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas, 1928)).

Because the categories taken for granted are deeply interwoven with how we organize everyday life, questioning categories necessarily goes along with and therefore facilitates change of everyday life and how we organize it (also what we consider as issues).

Reflecting the value category: values on markets and values as meaning

To bring everyday life onto a more sustainable path we need to question the categories we use to order and organize our everyday life, which underlie unsustainable growth. This opens the opportunity to build new concepts/categories, which cut across the older ones enabling in turn to change everyday life.

A key category in society and our all our everyday lives are values and values are tightly linked to the growth issue. Therefore, a critical examination of this category is promising.

Today values largely become constituted on markets where supply and demand meet to create value, which is a monetary and quantifiable value. The market creates value by linking the different life worlds created through the division of labor and separated places of production and consumption.

But values can be created in a different way by linking within a single life world a productive activity and its purpose (e.g. the consumptive activity). This creates a kind of "value" that cannot be created on anonymous markets: meaning (of what we do and our life); meaning is created by directly linking an activity of everyday life to its purpose; or when our actions are embedded into a meaningful context, e.g. when we work for a company or other institution with which goals we identify with. Everyday activities that can only distantly linked to a purpose or for which a purpose is missing are meaningless.

The deficiency of the market system with respect to social and environmental issues is often sought to be alleviated by internalizing non-marketable values by valuation methods that attribute a price to a non-marketable good, such as the environment (e.g. The Economics of Ecosystems And Biodiversity). However, meaning cannot be monetized, i.e. economic values and meaning are incommensurable.

Markets can to a certain extent also create meaning if they are not too anonymous by linking different life worlds and everyday lives and we can experience the purpose giving us meaning. Yet, this is only possible on markets allowing us to experience some aspects of everyday life of the other market actors, implying a stronger emphasis of local markets and self-supply.

Values and growth are tightly related: economic growth is the growth measured in monetary units and this is linked to a certain extent to

physical growth. Growth can be thought of differently: growth of meaning of life, i.e. more strongly linking ones activities to an experiential purpose, while also recognizing the limits to growth of meaning and maintaining a certain economic value and welfare to strike a balance between economic growth and meaning.

It is a challenge to appreciate meaning as value in everyday life where money and markets are everywhere. Therefore, it is difficult to change everyday life into a direction building on more meaning and less monetary values.

Literature

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