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## Situational Uncertainty: Understanding Anxiety Disorders in Terms of Derailed Systems of Relevance

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This paper intends to develop a theoretical argument which is part of the framework used in the research project *Phobility Aktiv*. In this project technical solutions are developed which shall help persons with anxiety disorders to participate in the traffic system by using smartphone app technology and wearables. It is argued that anxieties can be analysed as a specific kind of disorder of individuals' systems of relevance (Schütz, 1970) to which I refer by Eric Voegelin's term 'derailment.'

According to Alfred Schütz, systems of relevances are grounded in a primordial anticipation of fear of death (fundamental anxiety) in which many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, chances and risks originate. Relevances have the function to overcome fundamental anxiety by attempts of mastery of the world, that is, by drafting projects of action and realizing them.

Three types of relevances can be distinguished: (1) topical relevance determines which elements within a field of consciousness are problematic (and deserve attention, the thematic kernel) and which are unproblematic and familiar; (2) interpretive relevance determines the meaning of what is within the thematic kernel; (3) motivational relevances reflect possible consequences of action. They determine how to act, but also the degree of planning intermediary steps to carry out a plan of action.

Under conditions of pathological anxiety, trust in the ability to overcome fundamental anxiety gets lost; insecurity and uncertainty prevail with the effect that systems of relevances derail. Signs of alarm located at the margins of awareness are put centre-stage (topical relevance); harmless situations are defined as being dangerous (interpretive relevances); intermediary-steps which are not even thought of under normal conditions, must be anticipated. The content of these systems of relevances is organized by the two problems of participation in traffic situations: maintaining territories of the self and constituting normal appearances of situations.

Key words : Anxiety disorder, system of relevance, derailment, Alfred Schütz, Eric Voegelin

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## Introduction

Anxiety disorders, including panic disorder, agoraphobia, social phobia, various specific phobias and generalized anxiety, are among the most widespread psychical illnesses in contemporary Western societies and severely restrict participation in social life (Angelini et al., 2016). In recent years, two related research projects (*PHOBILITY* and *PHOBILITY AKTIV*) investigated the problems of participating in traffic situations under the conditions of pathological anxieties and their relationships with the dynamics of illness by using qualitative research methods.<sup>1)</sup> Although modern traffic systems tend to be highly inclusive and address a broad spectrum of mobility constraints of different road user groups, problems of individuals suffering from anxieties are rather neglected. One result of the first project was, that respondents could imagine to use some kind of assistive technology which would increase their abilities to participate in the traffic system. The latter project's aim was, therefore, to develop such technical solutions by using smartphone app technology and wearables.

This paper intends to develop a theoretical argument which refined the approach used in *Phobility* and is part of the framework of the second project, *Phobility Aktiv*. It is argued that from the perspective of the theory of social action, anxieties can be analysed as a specific kind of disorder of individuals' systems of relevance (Schütz, 1970). If relevances 'function', they frame interpretations and organize action in line with situational affordances allowing for an undisturbed flow of activities. Under conditions of pathology, however, standards for imagining and implementing plans of action get lost. Thought processes which are translated into activity, releasing and gearing plans of action into the external world would not stop and escalate into a different kind of thought process which cannot be controlled by the individual any more. Using a concept of Karl Jaspers (1913, 1949) which was further elaborated by Eric Voegelin, I refer to this loss of standards by the term 'derailment.'

## Fundamental and Pathological Anxiety

My starting point is a convergence between the phenomenology of panic disorders and the concept of relevance as elaborated by Schütz in *On Multiple Realities* (Schütz, 1945). Together with the idea of *multiple realities*, the theory of relevance (Schütz, 1970) is part of Schütz' later work. Panic disorders are often described as an uncontrollable fear to die which, in the worst case, escalates in hyperventilation and loss of consciousness. One of our interview partners gave a comprehensive description about the experience of panic in every-day life situations and the intensity of the feelings involved:

"Well it was a fear to die, I permanently feared to die [...] I thought it could happen in the tram, in the tube, in the elevator, anywhere. [...] If I get stuck in the elevator today, this would be unproblematic. Certainly, someone will come. Phantasy blows the minds of these phobic patients" (Phobility, Amadea).

Schütz, however, does not interpret the fear to die in terms of disorder. Rather, it is the experience of

“*fundamental anxiety*” which gives way to order and orientation, based on the fact that man must open himself or herself to master the world, to overcome obstacles, to draft and to realize projects of action:

“But in a word we want to state that the whole system of relevances which governs us with the natural attitude is founded upon the basic experience of each of us: I know that I shall die and I fear to die. This basic experience we suggest calling the *fundamental anxiety*. It is the primordial anticipation from which all the others originate. From the fundamental anxiety spring the many interrelated systems of hopes and fears, of wants and satisfactions, of chances and risks which incite man with the natural attitude to attempt the mastery of the world, to overcome obstacles, to draft projects, and to realize them” (Schütz 1945, p. 550).

Primordial anticipation, that is, the apriori time-structure of consciousness which is related to fundamental anxiety and through which relevances organize the anticipation of future states of the world is the foundation of the phenomenon of action. In *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* Schütz distinguishes between three types of relevances, topical, interpretive and motivational relevances. Topical relevances determine which elements within a field of consciousness are problematic, deserve attention and constitute a thematic kernel, opposed to and embedded in appresented phenomenal structures which are familiar and unproblematic. Interpretive relevances determine the meaning of what is placed within the thematic kernel. Motivational relevances, finally, reflect possible consequences of action at some point in the future. They determine how we should act, and which intermediary steps are necessary to carry out a plan of action.

The difference between Schütz’s understanding of fundamental anxiety and pathological anxiety is that fundamental anxiety is a constitutive characteristic of the relationship between man and the world surrounding him/her while pathological anxiety denotes *withdrawal* from the world and substituting reality as experienced in everyday life by nightmarish phantasies. It can be characterized by feelings of inability, incompetence and helplessness. Withdrawal as a consequence of being exposed to an overwhelming situation is the dynamic aspect of deviance as developed by Parsons (1951, see Gerhardt 1990, p. 344 ff.). But where Parsons brings Freudian psychoanalytical thinking into the picture to understand motivational processes of action under conditions of deviance, we use the motivational theory of relevance as developed by Schütz. Under conditions of pathological anxiety, trust in the ability to overcome fundamental anxiety gets lost. As a consequence, *uncertainty* prevails. These feelings of uncertainty, I want to argue, are related with a kind of *derailment* of systems of relevance.

### Derailment of Systems of Relevance

The concept of derailment is taken from Eric Voegelin who borrowed the term from Karl Jaspers and elaborated it in the course of the 1940s to understand pathologies of philosophical thought as they are represented by the philosophical movements of Positivism and Marxism. This work culminated in *The New Science of Politics* (Voegelin, 1952) and the so-called Gnosis thesis.

In Voegelin's philosophical thought, derailment denotes a state of intellectual disorder in which differentiated layers of consciousness conflate and, as a consequence, differentiated orders of reality break down. In the *New Science*, Voegelin refers to Plato's concept of *doxa* which characterizes "theoretical retrogression" from an achieved level of differentiation:

"To recede from the maximum of differentiation is theoretical retrogression; it will result in the various types of derailment which Plato has characterized as *doxa*" (Voegelin, 1952, pp. 79–80).

An important type of derailment can be characterized by the confusion of transcendental ideas with the empirical level. As a consequence, a pathological state emerges in which philosophers think that transcendental reality is part of empirical reality and that it can be realized in history. In *The History of Political Ideas*, Voegelin discusses the example of Friedrich Nietzsche who confused the transcendental and world-immanent uses of the concept of force:

"[...]: force as the raw material of human life, and force as the means of overcoming mere nature by disciplining it spiritually and transforming it into eternal aliveness. [...] Nietzsche himself has not always kept the spheres of meaning clearly separate. On the contrary, we find in his work numerous 'derailments,' in the sense that the spiritual discipline [i.e. transcendental reality] is, by a short circuit, translated into empirical ideals [empirical reality], as for instance Nietzsche's most famous 'derailment' from the 'victory over force' to the 'blond beast'" (Voegelin, 1999, p. 259).

A similar but more mundane differentiation of layers of consciousness is elaborated in Schütz's theory of relevance. Schütz assumes that an activity which we perceive as a monothetic unit is in fact constituted by various polythetic acts. Each act is constituted by a thematic kernel and a surrounding horizon. Among the different themes of each (polythetic) act, however, there is one dominant theme which integrates the various acts into a unified activity. This activity and its thematic kernel constitute what Schütz denotes as *paramount reality*. Other activities which might belong to different provinces of meaning and to different realities, are subsumed:

"In truth we are always living and acting simultaneously in several of these provinces, and to select one can merely mean that we are making it so to speak our 'home base,' our 'system of reference,' our paramount reality in relation to which all others receive merely the accent of derived reality – namely, they become horizontal, ancillary, subordinate in relation to what is the prevailing theme" (Schütz, 1970, p. 11).

Living in different provinces of reality at the same time, different aspects and layers of personality are involved in ongoing activity. The structuration of a field of action by theme and horizon, then, is a function of these layers. Routine activities of everyday life like participating in traffic situations,

for example, are structured by superficial layers which system of relevance has been systematized by Goffman (1971) by the two competences of constituting the *normal appearance of situations* to use them as harmless background for one's activities and to occupy *territories of the self*, necessary for these activities. Deeper layers of personality, however, might also be involved. Schütz gives the example of a crisis of life and illustrates how deeper layers of personality and the thematic structure by which they are organized shade into a superficial layer:

“But we may perform these activities in the midst of and in spite of the greatest crises of our lives. Our fear or happiness with respect to a particular event, involving deep levels of our personality, may appear merely horizontal while we are attending to such routine work. But this is mere appearance. The fear of happiness which is thematic for the deeper level of our personality has never been ‘released from our grip,’ we never really turned away from it, we have not and could not interrupt it in order to pay attention to it again tomorrow” (Schütz, 1970, pp. 11–12).

The crisis of the deeper personality layer, however, can be shifted from the thematic focus to the non-thematic horizon and at the same time routine activities are drawn into the thematic foreground:

“What actually happens in such a case is that to different levels of our personality (a superficial and a deeper one) are simultaneously involved, the theme of the activities of one of them being reciprocally the horizon of the other. Because of this, the ‘actualized’ theme received a specific tinge from the other, the temporarily covert one, which remains so to speak the hidden ground determining the occurrences in the clearly discernible voices founded upon it” (Schütz, 1970, p. 12).

### Derailment and Psychic Illness

In order to describe the complementary relationship between theme and horizon with reference to the respective personality layers more precisely, Schütz uses the metaphor of the *counterpoint* which he takes from occidental music theory. The counterpoint organizes monophonic melodic lines within a polyphonic structure of super- and subordinated lines (Kurth, 1991). According to this idea, the superordinate and the subordinate theme can be exchanged for each other. Transposed to the realm of action, a deeper layer of meaning can remain dominant and determine the whole structure of (social) action, even if it is subordinate. If a deeper layer of the personality is hit by a severe crisis and is dominated by anxiety, these feelings can also be expressed in superficial personality layers where they disrupt its system of relevance.

An interview partner in our first project, for example, got panic attacks in situations in which he felt that not everything is under control. In an interview he related this experience with a personal crisis of losing control over the situation when as a young man he cared for his mother. She died in a moment in which he was not present to help her. Feelings of losing control which emerged in the course of

this life crisis became generalized and took grip of other realms of action like using means of public transportation:

“Well, it starts when the doors close and when you become aware that you are trapped. And maybe there is a tunnel which reduces opportunities for distraction. You know that you are inside, and you do not have the ability to get in touch with somebody in case something happens” (Phobility, Synoman).

In line with the theory of relevance, three aspects of such derailment shall be suggested: (1) With reference to topical relevance, elements located at the margins of awareness are put centre-stage. Under conditions of topical derailment everything becomes important and individuals feel strained by the overwhelming situational demands. (2) Derailed interpretive relevances define even the most harmless situations as being dangerous. Death and danger lurk behind every corner and is indicated by the most insignificant pieces of information. (3) If motivational relevances derail, all possible consequences of action must be considered while the number of intermediary steps of which individuals are not aware under healthy conditions must be anticipated.

The three disturbances of topical, interpretive and motivational relevances may disrupt the process in which adequate plans of action are formed. Individuals lose their ability to act in three ways, respectively: (1) They have difficulties in planning a task according to the appropriate structure of topic and horizon. Therefore, they cannot focus on the important elements of reality for action planning. (2) There is a lack of the ability to use the appropriate methods of information gathering and interpretation to correctly assess situations. (3) It is not possible to stop the process of planning pragmatically at a point of enough detail.

As this paper focuses on theoretical conceptualization, I will just give some glimpses of empirical findings of the derailment of systems of relevance under conditions of anxiety disorders. The derailment of topical relevance is illustrated by an interview partner whose major concern in traffic participation is fear of getting involved into conversation. Instead of treating this possibility as rather unlikely, he said: “I prepare myself previously and invent conversations which will never happen, just to be prepared for them” (Phobility Aktiv, i7). Another interview partner cannot avoid misinterpreting the behaviour of other individuals in public space: “For example two persons talk to one another and laugh. [...] When they look around and the gaze falls upon me, I misinterpret this fact immediately as directed against me” (Phobility Aktiv, i1). An example for the uncontrollable need of anticipating any aspect of a trip is given by a third interview partner who stated: “Just to calm down myself I wrote everything up that might help me. That it stops turning around in the mind: ok I have this, and I may not forget this and this as well [...]” (Phobility Aktiv, i2).

### Conclusions

To conclude: In this paper I tried to understand uncertainty with regard to the ability to cope

with action situations by using Alfred Schütz' theory of relevance. This uncertainty concerns one's own behaviour, the behaviour of other people—this could be labelled *uncertainty of expectation*—and the behaviour of things or natural events—or *uncertainty of anticipation* respectively. Anxiety, which develops from a neurotic conflict, a depression or a trauma, derails into the form of situational uncertainty in everyday actions, i.e. into the loss of ordered thematic, interpretative and motivational relevances.

In the mode of the self-evident in the natural attitude and under the conditions of health, explicit planning is usually not required to participate in traffic situations, unless new and unknown routes must be taken. Under conditions created by anxieties and phobias, however, it represents an existential challenge which, in the worst case, cannot be mastered by one's own abilities and competences. Smart-phone apps could either address the aspects of derailed relevances or they could disrupt the process of derailment by introducing another province of meaning like a game or music if the individual is able to withdraw his awareness from the traffic situation in which he is involved. Insights into how systems of relevance derail can also be combined with the fact that therapeutic paradigms like cognitive behavioural therapy is a successful treatment of anxiety disorders. The mechanisms of learning on which it is based can be refined to treat the specific disorder of an individual's system of relevance.

#### Notes

- 1) The projects *Phobility* (January 2015–December 2015) and *Phobility Aktiv* (April 2018–June 2020) were funded by the Austrian Research Agency (FFG) in the program Mobility of the Future.

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