

"Competence" is currently a frequently-used term especially in scientific contexts. In educational policy - at both the national and supranational levels - a "competency-oriented turn" has taken place on such a scale that it is hardly conceivable how it was possible to manage without this phrase before. Its rise in popularity goes along with a massive replacement of customary concepts: where so far "qualification", "education" and "educational objectives" were discussed, "competency" now seems to be the more accurate, adequate or simply more modern expression. The same holds true, e.g. for knowledge acquisition ("acquisition of competencies"), learning ("competency development") and for training and continuing education ("transfer of competence").

Insubstantiality, the lack of content and a compliant surrender to the zeitgeist are still relatively moderate objections that intellectual circles raise to this semantic shift. Romantic naïveté regarding the power of this new "discourse formation" is an already stronger criticism of this phenomenon. This criticism is topped by the allegation of a strategic calculation by new control and monitoring elites, with which critics want to warn against this transformation of the education field. The emotional reactions which the use of this term provokes in academic circles beyond empirical educational research clearly indicate that the buzzword "competence" has in the meantime become an emotive word.

Evidently, however, there is nowadays a concern to raise the issue of what is denoted by this term. By clarifying the different meanings of the term, the conceptual blank can be identified and then be filled by means of a genuine sociological understanding of competence.

With the help of the example of the so-called "organisational competence" — a workmanship required in diverse occupational contexts and thus relevant as generic competency in Higher Education — it will be shown

- a) how this competence can be deduced from a review of the specific action to which it refers and
- b) how this competence is stratified from an internal perspective, i.e. as seen by the actor.

To put it shortly, a (phenomenologically based) sociological analysis of competence is to be carried out from the (self-) observation of action, leading to a notion of (action-) competency.