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Qualitative Methods in the Study of Biographies, Interactions and Everyday Life Contexts: The Development of a Research Style

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Abstract: The development of a methodical research style is described. The way to handle data won from 1) interviews with psychological counselors/therapists concerning their professional biography, 2) conversation analysis of therapeutic sessions and 3) evaluation of "self-confrontation interviews" stimulated through video usage (to capture the "inner aspects of given actions" on the part of the counselor/therapist) is also discussed. Furthermore, a concept for research is presented in which qualitative interviews and field research, Grounded Theory method and self-reflection of researcher subjectivity as instruments for insight and discovery are implemented in various thematic fields. The development of these methods is brought into connection with premises related to epistemological and methodological convictions and preferences.

Keywords: qualitative interview, biographical interview, self-confrontation-interview, content analysis, conversation analysis, Grounded Theory, self-reflection, subjectivity, research style

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1. Some Premises

Throughout the past twenty years the following considerations and factors have played an important role in the development of a personal qualitative research style and certain methodical preferences (beginning with BREUER 1979 to *ibid.* 1991b to *ibid.* 1996, 1999a, 1999b; see also <http://wwwpsy.uni-muenster.de/inst3/AEBreuer/veroeffentlichungen.htm>). [1]

I began to experience an increasingly growing distrust of standardized and routinized methodical procedures which, in my eyes, do not promote an "understanding" ("Verstehen") of objects under scientific scrutiny within the field of Human Psychology. As time passed, my subjective impression to have "actually missed" my target, i.e. to not have "come closer" to the research object, became stronger and stronger. [2]

My efforts towards finding a method, which would generate results/findings that could be applied to the subjective worlds of experience (the perception of problems, ways of conceptualizing, vocabulary of the objects of study) were a result of this impression. Experiences with data collection through interviews designed much like "everyday conversations" as well as ideas won from the Grounded Theory approach (GLASER & STRAUSS 1967/1998; STRAUSS 1987/1991) played a central role in my search. [3]

HOLZKAMP's (1972) doubt as to the "relevancy of psychological research for practice" which he formulated in connection to the critic of mainstream psychology, seemed very plausible to me. I found myself looking for a methodological alternative. I wanted to make the competencies, problem solving, strategies for dealing with situations, etc. that occur and develop in everyday practice (in problem contexts embedded in life histories, in professional contexts—"in the practice") fruitful for psychological research and psychological theory production. In this process, the idea of a "creative practitioner" as a noteworthy actor in the production of (psychological) scientific technologies came to mind (BREUER 1991a, pp.166-174). But at the same time I generalized this idea by also applying it to the relevancy of the "subjects point of view" (the psychological object of discovery). I had great respect for the "expertise of those affected" in their respective contexts of action or rather everyday living worlds. In doing this, I saw a chance to develop psychological concepts that would be more "connectable" to the ways of seeing things and acting upon things in the everyday context and in professional practice. [4]

I tend to disapprove of that hybris of psychologists, who, on the one hand, as scientists, allege to have certain competencies (in thinking, analyzing, etc.), which, on the other hand, they in the worst case do not even acknowledge in their research participants and in any case do not make them a relevant part of the research situation (instead considering them to be "not interesting", "irrelevant"). My scepticism of research situations which through their artificiality (de-contextualization, non-transparency) ignore or rather distrust (in any case do not focus on them or "exhaust" the potential of) judgements, competencies, interpretations, etc. which exist on the part of the research participants, grew. In contrast to this was my wish and endeavor to create a research situation with an ideally dialogical element. A situation, where all those involved in the research process could potentially gain something in terms of self-discovery or enlightenment. To achieve this, the situation had to be seen and designed as an opportunity to self-reflect (de-centralize), where in the ideal case a cooperative interest to uncover (and perhaps change, optimize) a problem area could develop. [5]

In addition, an "epistemological scepticism" towards the attainability of "objectivity" and "truth" in scientific statements continually grew; a "new modesty" which can be seen in the "pragmatical" ideas concerning the "constructive" character of every (even scientific) perception/insight/presentation. It takes into consideration the influence which different (possibly diverging, contradictory) points of views/perspectives have on epistemological interest and productivity (compare BERGOLD & BREUER 1992). [6]

Furthermore, one of the functions of the standard scientific (quantitative) method also became clearer to me: the "fear resistance" in concern to the research subject. The implementation of these types of methods allowed the researcher to keep the structurally similar object and all possible uncertainties which are part of a research situation at a safe distance. The growing conviction that every insight is deeply embedded in a "system of discovery" (which is the stance within constructionist, relativist philosophies on a general-epistemological level) went well with DEVEREUX's (1967/1973) idea to make use of the researcher's own counter-transference as a tool to gain insight. It opened up the perspective for creating a potentially concrete research method. [7]

And finally, the attempt to hang onto the belief that psychological research (i.e. my own work) should not be done without an element of "intellectual and personal adventure" and not as a kind of "bureaucratic" activity revolving around the implementation and

application of conventional guidelines and preconceived thought processes and standardized methods. [8]

All of these considerations played an integral part in the conceptualization of the following two research emphases. [9]

2. The Reconstruction of Professional Experience and Expertise: The Example of Practicing Counselors/Therapists

In BREUER (1979) and *ibid.* (1991b), the development of professional competencies in the everyday work of psychological counselors or therapists was studied by using conversational interviews, which delved into the individual professional biographies, as an empirical basis. This development was described in the studies as a process of "fit" which takes place between three main (groups of) components: 1) personal characteristics/conditions, 2) features of the framework/context (characteristics of the institution in which the work is being done as well as the general surrounding setting) and 3) scientific-psychological concepts or scientifically based technologies (e.g. specific concepts for treating certain disturbances which were trained at the university). Psychological theories and technologies proved to have a different relevancy and importance, in comparison to what had been taught at university: "Adjusting" the (far removed from the context) scientific-psychological concepts to the potentials and demands arising from general institutional conditions as well as to ones own potentialities and limits (in the personal-idiosyncratic ways of thinking and acting) was described as being one of the central tasks involved in developing professional competency. In the course of ones employment/career, the three components are adjusted to fit together in a "personalized" way, bringing them into a pragmatically determined (and "viable") relationship to one another. [10]

This description is based on presentations of the development of competency in the scope of leading interviews concerning the professional biography (the interview style is "focussed", has a main thread, but is nonetheless relatively "free" and stays close to everyday conversational style). For the analysis of these texts an a priori general theoretical background was present based on the psychological theory of action (for a summary see BREUER 1991b, pp.1-16). But this conceptual framework was at the same time open for inductively accentuated contentual differentiations. In BREUER (1979) this type of evaluation was developed spontaneously and less methodically reflected—one could say: on the one hand it was inspired by the framework of action theory and on the other hand naive-hermeneutically oriented. Through this reformulation and the effort to systematize practitioner's/expert's "treasures of experience", a realistic picture (which goes beyond the usual clinical-psychological textbook descriptions and manuals and remains close to everyday practice) of the work done in psychological counseling/therapy, along with the respective constitutional circumstances and phases of development, emerged. [11]

In BREUER (1991b, pp.17-65) this method was systemized, expanded on and supplemented with additional methods of evaluation: In one step of evaluation, differences in the professional age (number of years in professional practice) of the interview partners were examined more systematically in terms of their meaning and consequences. Content analytic systems were also tested in order to obtain more exact (even quantitative) information on the thematization of certain features of work and developmental phenomena which is dependent on the professional age of a person. Furthermore, an evaluation method was developed that to a certain extent

allows an examination of a-priori-hypotheses regarding the professional development of competencies (hypotheses of change) on the basis of the interview material. [12]

Besides this methodological work on finding ways to describe the professional development of competency on a macro-level (in respect to the entire global course of a professional biography), a research project (described more from a micro-perspective in BREUER (1991b)) studied the concrete actions that make up the interaction between psychologists and clients in counseling and therapy. This was done by recording sessions and subsequently using so-called self-confrontation interviews. This method is based on comments which the psychologists make when shown sequences from their video-taped sessions. They are asked to comment on the situations in respect to their (recalled) "inner parts of action", i.e. what they were thinking by doing this or that. [13]

The video tapes (and subsequent transcription) of the interaction during a counseling/therapy session were evaluated with different analysis procedures; procedures that represent specifications of general psycho- and sociolinguistic concepts, e.g. conversational theory, speech act theory and related concepts. Various variants ranging from (also quantitatively usable) content analytical categorizations to methods of sequential interaction analysis and methods of reconstruction of problem interpretations of conversation participants were tested and brought into connection to one another (BREUER 1991b, pp.67-151). [14]

A system of analysis was developed for evaluating the data emerging from the video-stimulated self confrontation interviews. This system—seen from an action theoretical perspective—reconstructs and systematizes actional steps taken on the part of the counselor/therapist within the interactive situation. These are steps in the "perception" of a situation, their "interpretation or evaluation" on the basis of an "aim or goal", and a respective "plan of action" as well as the action related "realization" of this "aim or goal" (a so-called "system of extension"). In using this method of reconstruction, the data from the (documentation/transcription/analysis of) therapy sessions ("action 1") as well as the related statements made within the self-confrontation interviews ("action 2") are systematically brought together. The self-confrontation interview is considered to be a communicative event that underlies certain rules of production and reception (e.g. in respect to relevance of statements or presuppositions of aspects of occurrences and actions). These characteristics must be taken into consideration when determining the method and evaluation which one will use for gaining an appropriate understanding of the data. The usage of the method proves to be both time consuming and complex, but it allows for the description of a number of interesting action and interaction characteristics. The transference of this "extension" method to the two-sided analysis of recordings of interaction in non-therapeutic situations and the respective self-confrontation interviews is presented in BREUER (1995). [15]

One can summarily say that in these studies a number of qualitative method variations were developed, tested, compared and brought into relationship with one another in the aim to evaluate different types of data in a more reflected and integrated way—using the example of content research in the area of psychological counseling and therapy practice. [16]

3. The Qualitative-methodical Study of Life Histories and Everyday Life Problems in Various Contexts

Since the end of the 1980's, we have been carrying out a large number of studies with various subject matters, where psychologically interesting situations in the "everyday happenings or life histories of persons" were our main focus. A method was developed along the way that—spoken in basic terms—was based on constitutive aspects of the "qualitative interview or participatory field observation", "Grounded Theory method" and "self-reflection on the part of the researcher". The methodical principles, variations, adaptations, etc. which emerged were to a great extent the work of discussions which had accompanied the research processes of our empirical projects ("research colloquium"). "We" in this case are F. BREUER and a number of co-workers, doctoral candidates and master program students that had been working in the Psychological Institute III at the University of Muenster or had been doing qualification work. In BREUER (1996) the basic methodological principles, the concrete methodical work and several exemplary studies are presented (on the organizational development of a special school; problems of identity by German immigrants in California; the relevancy of socialization within the familial Christmas ritual; attempts to cope with the past within the life stories of children coming from alcoholic families; the importance of gender status in psychotherapeutic work). Empirical results of studies coming out of this (and a Berliner) context are collected together in BREUER (1999a). The studies concentrate on (groups of) persons in various life situations. They have one problem in common: an uncertain, fragile and questionable social "normality", status and identity (the development of autonomy by physically impaired persons; problems in identity by the hearing impaired; strategies in coping with the living situation in a nursing home; the end of a career as a top sportsperson; dealing with homelessness; ecstasy consumption in the techno scene; the relationship between a life crisis and belief crisis; problems in identity within the second generation of Jewish Holocaust survivors; coping with the return from exile amongst young Chileans). Beyond the special ways of coping or dealing with situations, these "problem groups" are also looked at under the general aspect of social status vs. personal identity. [17]

How the method of qualitative interviewing, field research as well as the grounded theory approach was adapted for each study is at this point less interesting, since this topic is dealt with in length in the literature to methods or also in the "Forum: Qualitative Social Research". Of more interest is the third named aspect: the "method of self-reflectivity" which will be briefly dealt with at this point (for a more comprehensive look see BREUER 1999b). [18]

A basic premises can be illustrated through a metaphor taken from the field of Astronomy and Physics: that of "cabinet perception". The (scientific) observer does not remain in a "given/fixed position" or "absolute position". Instead, he/she moves him/herself or rather is "moved". The way the object or rather subject of study appears "to us" is influenced by our own movement and the movement of the subject. In broader terms: through the characteristics of the system which the observer is a part of. That is why it is possible to "read" perceptions/insights from either the object's or subject's point of view, to interpret them as characteristics of the object as well as the subject. [19]

The second basic presumption is that every social scientific research activity or situation has an "intervention component". This influences the research object as well as research subject: The presence of the researcher in the research field makes a

principle difference; his/her specific characteristics and activities are a constitutive prerequisite for the creation of "data". In addition to this, every contact with the object triggers something in the researcher—(cognitive, emotional, etc.) "reactions in one's own body" (compare BREUER 2000). [20]

In connection to this: Contact in research is marked by "interactivity": through the encounter between epistemological "subject" and "object" as concrete persons with specific characteristics in social situations (which are "natural", produced, artificial), where socio-cultural conventions, guidelines, patterns and systems are called upon in the orientation and interpretation of actions. [21]

These convictions have a certain consequence: It is necessary to include—in a self-reflective way—the researcher and the interactive characteristic when producing a "picture of the object" or rather a theory. Although this assertion is widely accepted in current epistemological debates, it has little consequence in the scientific-psychological production of knowledge. The question of how to transform this assertion into concrete research operations has not been adequately dealt with. One methodological tradition—an exception (besides some "systemic" approaches)—is based on the exceptional book written by DEVEREUX (1967/1973). It is a book that mainstream psychology has persistently not given enough attention to. The ideas that are presented there are as a rule considered to be fundamental offences to scientific epistemological norms. [22]

In our studies we try to take the methodological principle of a researchers influence and the relevancy of interaction seriously. One (for the future) important point in respect to the approach is to develop concrete proposals for a knowledge-productive way of application of that principle. In connection to this, guidelines and heuristic suggestions must be developed that do not have the character of being applicable at all times and in all situations. The empirical studies that came out of our research group made great efforts to take these aspects into consideration—still, not all were completely successful in this (compare MRUCK 1999, pp.203-230). [23]

Some subjective aspects, which can be relevant for the psychological research process and which can function as a source of discovery through the process of self-reflective thematization and explanation (and are not—as often seen from a standard methodological point of view—necessarily hinderances in the process of knowledge production), can be differentiated as follows: those aspects that are characteristic for specific phases of the discovery process and those that are more general and not specifically attributable to certain phases of research. [24]

These brief illustrations will help to describe some aspects which are "phase specific": certain characteristics of the subject (i.e. the researcher) have something to do with individual decision making processes in terms of e.g. selection of a research topic, theoretical conceptualization, selection of attributes of the subject/object upon which one will focus (What entices me, what repels me? And so on.); other characteristics influence the selection of method (Does one tolerate uncertainty, wish for closeness to the object and openness in the interaction or have a need for conformity? And so on.); while others influence the position and actions one will take in the field i.e. the modi for interaction with the other participants (roles that are taken, ways into and in the field, forms of contact and negotiation, calibrating authority, limits in endurance, "appeal" that the components of the field have for each participant, involvement, etc.); and again others the documentation of data: What is registered or rather fixated on? (official and inofficial phenomena, object and subject related phenomena, phenomena in agreement and not in agreement, which points of view are taken into consideration?

And so on.); what decisions are made in terms of conceptualization in both the evaluation and interpretation of data? (relevant and irrelevant, interesting, obscure, incomprehensible, spectacular, and so on.); how are the results and the study itself presented? (Addressed to which public? Construction of plausibility, coherence, authority in the text; one voice or many voices? How are taboo topics/areas, confidentiality/familiarity, comprehensibility for diverse groups of recipients dealt with?; What is the interest in each research participant's reaction to the final product? And so on.) [25]

The possibilities and decisions that the researcher sees or makes in the various phases again are also influenced by general attributes—e.g. the personal socialization process, gender, ethnic background, age, appearance, characteristics of social status in the scientific field and the field under research; emotional, intellectual, interactive-communicative attributes, competencies, preferences and dislikes—and the more personal potential and competencies in dealing "freely", reflectively and selectively with these characteristics or attributes within the research process. [26]

At this point I can only hint at the importance that such characteristics have in both the research process and decisions made on the part of the researcher. That they play a role will hardly be argued by any experienced researcher. The decisions made in regard to which steps are taken are not solely determined by methodological algorithms or "by the textbook". The "radical" expectation that I have expanded on here, is to make these components "official-canonical" and not something that happens "behind the scenes" or in "after hours" anecdotes. We want to see them discussed and taken as a relevant part of the discovery process. The potential of these characteristics for the scientific process can furthermore be intensified by systematically implementing the process of self-reflection. [27]

There is still much work to be done in terms of making this assertion more concrete, e.g. by bringing forth "positive models". For now, an issue in the "Forum: Qualitative Social Research" is in planning; an issue which will deal solely with this intention and the problems that come with it. [28]

4. Epilogue

My intention was to give a brief description of the stages of my interests and emphases in methods from the perspective of "qualitative psychology". In the works mentioned under point 1 and point 2, there are differences in the basic methodological orientation. For the studies which dealt with psychological counseling and therapy, my intention was to somehow combine "quantitative" and "qualitative" methods: to weigh their pros and cons, the respective indicators for certain research questions, etc. In the more recent studies, I tended towards Grounded Theory and a self-reflectivity postulate, and was in consequence less interested in standardized methodology. My efforts were more focused on developing this research style as an "independent alternative". The idea that "action and activity" make up a central psychological part of research remained constant in this development process. Along with this, the conviction that qualitative social research must necessarily be one of multi- or interdisciplinarity held true for me (I personally prefer the ethnological, sociological, language and historical scientific perspectives; also compare BREUER 1999b, pp.231-256). The premises which I presented above under point 1 are realized within the briefly described "stations" (point 2, point 3) to different degrees and in distinct ways; a certain time

line/historical thread exists—but at this point, this brief explication does not allow me to go into more detail. [29]

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