Dialogue-Hermeneutic Method and the "Research Program Subjective Theories"

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Abstract: This contribution gives a survey on the dialogue-hermeneutic method in the form of an annotated list of references, with the aim of combining a systematic structuring with an historical account. This involves the embedding of the methodological basic structure in the framework of the Research Program Subjective Theories, the description of the two basic methodological steps, the naming of the most important research areas and the consequences as well as suggestions for further research development from the viewpoint of a philosophy of science.

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1. Advance Organizer

Basically, there already exist a sufficient number of introductions to and reviews of the dialogue-hermeneutic method—articles in encyclopedias or handbooks (cf. SCHEELE 1991; 1992a; CHRISTMANN & SCHEELE 1995; BIRKHAN 1999) as well as introductory and advanced reviews (cf. GROEBEN, WAHL, SCHLEE & SCHEELE 1988; SCHEELE 1992b). Therefore, we do not want to attempt to give another more or less concise introduction into the subject. Instead, we would like to provide an annotated list of references for interested readers. Due to the fact that the literature on the Research Program Subjective Theories (RPST) has increased considerably during the last two decades (consult the bibliography "Subjective Theories" of the Zentralstelle für Psychologische Information und Dokumentation, ZPID, 1993), this list of references constitutes only a small selection from the existing literature. We have made our choice with the goal of presenting a picture as clear as possible of the structure of the dialogue-hermeneutic method as well as the broad range of applications on various subject matters within the RPST. The order of the following commentaries is meant to combine the systematics of a survey with the reconstruction of the historical development of the RPST. [1]

2. Starting Point: Assumptions Concerning the Model of the Human Being[1]

The dialogue-hermeneutic method has been developed within the RPST, which programmatically contrasts with the behavioristic research program. The historical starting point has been marked by the "Psychologie des reflexiven Subjekts" (psychology of the reflexive subject) (GROEBEN & SCHEELE 1977), which criticizes the behavioristic model of the human being as a non-autonomous subject controlled by his or her environment. KELLY's idea of "man the scientist" was selected and elaborated as a counter-model. The result is the epistemological model of the human being, which conceptualizes the human being as a reflective and (potentially) rational subject, capable of language and communication (cf. GROEBEN et al. 1988). This model also implies a connection with action theoretical traditions, as far as human being's capability of acting is seen as constitutive (GROEBEN 1986). Besides, humanistic ideas are connected with the epistemological model of human being, since it deliberately and decidedly is geared towards the (positive) developmental potentials of human being (GROEBEN 1988b). Therefore, it is a "prospective-elaborative model of human being", because the elaboration of future developmental possibilities of human beings is understood as a counterpart to today's information-processing approach (being a cognitive-scientific extension of behaviorism) (cf. ERB 1997; GROEBEN & ERB 1997). [2]

3. Object-Theoretical Consequence: The Research Program Subjective Theories

The central premise of the epistemological model of human being involves the structural parallelism between research subject and research object[2]. Accordingly, parallel, or at least analogous, structures and processes concerning thought—meaning the process as well as the product of thought—are assumed. This means that everyday understanding (by the psychological research object) fulfills the functions of (subjective) explanation, prediction and application of knowledge (in terms of philosophy of science: technology), just as they had been elaborated for scientific theories (cf. GROEBEN & WESTMEYER 1975; GROEBEN 1986; BREUER 1991). Therefore, complex cognition aggregates (of the research object) can be conceptualized as intuitive, implicit or 'subjective' theories (GROEBEN & SCHEELE 1977). This conceptualization gave its name to the research program dealing with this very construct. By subjective theories we understand complex cognition aggregates of the research object, in which their cognitions relating to the self and the world become manifest and which show an at least implicit argumentational structure. The research on implicit personality theories or attribution theory are examples of classic precursors of this construct explication. In studying the content and the structure of cognitions, however,

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1   By using this term, we would like to avoid the male-bias inherent in the usage of the common term "model of man".

2   In this context, "research subject" refers to the researcher, whereas the participant of the study is called "research object" (in contrast with the common usage of the term "subject" in scientific publications).

researchers working within these precursor paradigms framed the respondents' responses in their own language, i.e. in the language of the researchers (so called "zweigliedrige Forschungsmethoden" (two-place research methods) according to GIGERENZER 1981). The analysis and interpretation of the data are the result of a consensus between the research subjects, and because this is a matter of consensus within the same class of subjects, within the RPST it is called 'monologue hermeneutics' in contrast to the dialogue-consensus procedures. From the point of view of the RPST, a broad conceptualization of 'subjective theories' underlies this monologue-hermeneutic procedure: On the one hand parallel cognitive structures are assumed between research object and research subject; on the other hand, however, methodological universality is implied for these structures so that they can be described and explained sufficiently by means of a consensus between research subjects (GROEBEN 1986). From the perspective of the RPST however, this does not adequately take into account the individuality of human reflexivity. Therefore, within the RPST, special priority is given to promote a narrow concept of subjective theories, a concept which does justice to the individuality (or even uniqueness, in an extreme case) of the respective systems of thinking. [3]

4. Methodological Consequence: The Dialogue-Hermeneutic Method

The basic premise of the narrow concept of subjective theories provides that the research subject can and should communicate with the research objects, following the goal of understanding their individual cognitions relating to the self and the world. Thus, the point is to understand complex cognition aggregates of the research object. Of course, only the research object can decide on the adequacy of what the research subject has understood ("dreigliedrige Forschungsmethoden" (three-place research methods) according to GIGERENZER 1981, concerning content of thought, research object and research subject). This is the dialogue-consensus, in the process of which the research object agrees (or does not agree) to what the research subject has understood—a process which continues until the research object finally can agree. Since every act of understanding unavoidably involves interpretation and, as a result, reconstruction, the dialogue-consensus serves to guarantee the adequacy of the reconstruction of the researcher's understanding (cf. GROEBEN 1986; GROEBEN et al. 1988). This guarantee of the adequacy of reconstruction (of understanding) is called 'communicative validation', as suggested by LECHLER (1982). [4]

In order not to put too great a strain on the research object as far as his or her motivational or cognitive abilities are concerned, the communicative validation is accomplished in two steps (cf. SCHEELE 1988; GROEBEN 1992): The first step is to determine the content of the relevant cognitions. This is usually done by conducting a semi-standardized interview, but other methods within the so-called qualitative paradigm may also be used (group interview, role-playing, etc.). The second step involves reconstructing the structure of the subjective theory. For this purpose, the so-called Heidelberger Struktur-Lege-Technik (SLT) (structure-formation-technique (SFT): SCHEELE & GROEBEN 1984) was developed,

followed by a range of other methods (consult a review by DANN 1992). The most important ones are: WAL (Weingartener Appraisal Legetechnik: Weingartener appraisal formation technique: WAHL, SCHLEE, KRAUTH & MURECK 1983), ILKHA (Interview- und Legetechnik zur Rekonstruktion kognitiver Handlungsstrukturen: interview and formation technique for the reconstruction of cognitive structures of action: KRAUSE & DANN 1986), the consensual ZMA (Ziel-Mittel-Argumentation: means-end-argumentation: SCHEELE & GROEBEN 1988), and the flexible combination procedure using everyday-language (SCHEELE, GROEBEN & CHRISTMANN 1992). This latter technique comprises various systems of rules which are arranged as modules; these modules cover the areas of definition (in the wider sense), explanation, evaluation, and the description of actions. The technique thus allows for selecting and combining rules from these various modules in the reconstruction of any one structure. Thus, the basic principle of the structure-formation-techniques consists in passing on a system of rules which allow for visualizing the structure of each particular subjective theory (cf. BALLSTAEDT & MANDL 1985; SCHEELE 1992b). In order to make the dialogue-consensus between research subject and research object possible, it is crucial, according to the dialogue consensus criterion of truth (following HABERMAS 1973; 1981; consult SCHEELE 1988 for further details), to approximate an ideal speech situation as closely as possible. Not least, the ideal speech situation consists in trying to avoid demanding too much or too little from the research object during the inquiry or reconstruction situation as far as motivational strength or cognitive abilities are concerned. Therefore in almost every empirical study of subjective theories, various adaptations of techniques are to be found (cf. BURGERT 1992; GROEBEN 1992). [5]

For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that of course the communicative validation, i.e. the accomplishment of the adequacy of understanding (of the research object by the research subject), does not test whether the particular cognition aggregates are adequate to reality and therefore (where subjective theories concerning self-perception are concerned) do in fact translate into action. This question is tested by the so-called explanatory validation. Here, it is the falsificationist criterion of truth via external observation from the third person perspective which is of central importance (cf. GROEBEN 1986; WAHL 1988). Within the two-phase structure of RPST the communicative validation is seen as pre-, but sub-ordinated, the explanatory validation as post-, but super-ordinated (GROEBEN 1986). As a consequence, the narrow conceptualization of subjective theories involves two other defining attributes which go beyond the characteristics within the broad concept: First of all that the cognitive contents as well as structures are assessed within a dialogue-consensus (between research subject and research object), and secondly that, for example, it is explicitly examined whether action corresponds to cognition (and, by this, whether the subjective explanation etc. can be accepted as an intersubjective-scientific explanation as well) (GROEBEN 1988a). [6]

5. Object-Theoretical Domains

The dialogue-hermeneutic method has been, in principle, developed in order to reconstruct everyday reflections, and therefore from the perspective of general psychology. The chronological first study of subjective theories, namely on irony (GROEBEN & SCHEELE 1984/86), corresponds to this orientation. Comparable research questions have been dealt with during the following period as well (with topics ranging from confidence: BRÜCKERHOFF 1982 to the courage of one's convictions: KAPP & SCHEELE 1996; SCHEELE 1999). Because at least the early structure formation techniques were highly complex and difficult to handle, studies conducted within the RPST tended to concentrate on educational psychology, especially on the assessment and modification of subjective (job-related) theories of teachers (consult e.g. the classics WAHL et al. 1983; DANN, HUMPERT, KRAUSE & TENNSTÄDT 1982; SCHLEE & WAHL 1987). Because of the especially large "potential of research questions", the pedagogical-psychological area has been and still remains the area in which, aside from the (mostly descriptive) reconstruction of subjective theories, the more complex question of how subjective theories affect action has also been approached. Classic examples of such attempts at explanatory validation are the studies of MUTZECK (1988), WAHL (1991) and DANN et al. (1999), which demonstrate the methodological progress in the broad field between correlation, prediction and modification studies (cf. SCHLEE 1988; WAHL 1988). [7]

With time—and in connection with the simplification or flexibilization of structure-formation-techniques—the RPST and the dialogue-hermeneutic methods have been used successfully in other areas of psychology as well. Main areas certainly are psychology of sports (cf. HANKE 1991; LIPPENS 1992; 1993) and clinical psychology (e.g. BARTHELS 1991; WAGNER 1995) as well as psychosomatics (OBLIERS 1992). Most recently, there has also been an interdisciplinary impetus and the RPST has been expanding so as to include applications in other disciplines. Thus the RPST has for instance been taken note of and used in economics (WEBER 1991) and especially in the didactics of foreign languages (cf. De FLORIO-HANSEN 1998; GROTJAHN 1991; KALLENBACH 1996). [8]

6. Meta-Theoretical Consequences

This interdisciplinary range of the RPST may also be taken to indicate that the dialogue-hermeneutic method implies a number of alternative positions with respect to the underlying concept of science—alternative positions, that is, as they have been advanced within the so-called qualitative paradigm and its various elaborations. This includes, for example, rejecting, or better overcoming, the postulate of value neutrality, which, in the first place, is connected with the prospective-elaborative model of human being (cf. GROEBEN 1986; 1997; ERB 1997). The methodological consequence is that the change of subject (for the "better") caused by the process of research within the RPST is not seen as a mistake that is brought about by the method, but as an explicit ideal goal which is to be aimed at and defended (GROEBEN 1988b). The dialogue-hermeneutic research process, however, is not to be treated as a form of therapy or as a

substitute for therapy. It may, occasionally (especially in therapeutic contexts: cf. WAGNER 1995), fulfill a prototherapeutic function, but methodologically it should decidedly be separated from the process of therapy—this, for sure, is one of the tasks for the further elaboration of the RPST. A further change of the concept of science concerns the fact that, according to the starting point of the structural parallelism between research subject and research object, an exchange of subjective and "objective" theories is intended (cf. GROEBEN & SCHEELE 1977, chapter 3), which implies a feedback of the concept between science and the psychological object with regard to the ideal goal of rationality (o.c.; GROEBEN 1988b). Such aspects of feedback will be especially apparent in the research process of modification studies—which should, as a consequence, be further elaborated in this direction. As far as the classic scientific concept of rationality of the research-structure (including psychology) implies the nomothetic perspective as a constitutive element, the connection or integration of the idiographic and the nomothetic perspective has to be considered. Concerning this issue, very promising approaches (consult OLDENBÜRGER 1992; 2000 for a summary of individual subjective theories on superindividual modal structures etc.) already have been elaborated within the RPST (OBLIERS & VOGEL 1992; STÖSSEL & SCHEELE 1992; SCHREIER 1997). These attempts at integration are to be completed within the further development of the RPST. A comparably important desideratum for the further development of the RPST is to bring the RPST together with action theoretical approaches. This concerns both the advancement of theories and the conducting of empirical studies, for instance with respect to the process by which subjective theories do or do not translate into action; such a theory would definitely profit from drawing upon the psychology of volition ("Rubicon-model"). [9]

Acknowledgments

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