

Qualitative-Psychological Research Using the Voice-Approach

Mechthild Kiegelmann

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Abstract: The method of voice centered listening is a qualitative-psychological approach that is well suited to analyze psychological strategies of dealing with taboo-topics and psychological conflicts. This expanded version is based on approaches of analyzing moral development, expanded to trace different of ways handling taboo subjects. The goal of this method is to interpret the interplay of dissonant (or harmonious) and inconsistent "voices" dealing with these taboo subjects.

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1. Introduction

The voice-method is rooted in moral development analysis. It is therefore well suited for research on psychological processes of decision-making. Decision-making, or specifically, the decision to speak about a psychologically difficult topic is how I have used the voice-method in research on a psychology of silence breaking. This voice-approach is especially useful for an investigation of how people deal with socially taboo topics, because latent meaning as well as explicitly stated content is analyzed (for example pauses, self descriptions, hesitation, developments and changes in the process of argumentation). Central to this method is an emphasis on respectful research relationships, and researchers are required to build trust within the research relationships. Different and sometimes contradictory levels of expressions are traced. For more information see my study on sibling incest (KIEGELMANN 1997) and on forms of dealing with NS-history at the workplace in Germany (KIEGELMANN 1999a) or BEAUBOEUFs (1997) research on teachers' commitment against racism in the

USA. Later in this paper I will elaborate on this method by illustrating an example from my research ([see the 5th example](#)). [1]

2. The Original Method of Voice Centered Listening

The original method which I incorporated into my study of silence breaking is rooted in the work of Carol GILLIGAN. This method, called "voice-centered listening," was developed by members of the "Harvard Project of Girls' Development and Women's Psychology" (BROWN et al. 1988). Carol GILLIGAN's own intellectual development came from her work with Lawrence KOHLBERG and her research within the circles studying moral development in the 1970's. Out of this research environment she developed her ground breaking theory of moral psychology based on empirical findings in which she discovered a care orientation (in addition to a justice orientation) which humans use to resolve moral conflicts. The concept of "voice" was first established in GILLIGAN's naming the moral orientations as "voice of justice" and "voice of care" (GILLIGAN 1977 and GILLIGAN 1982). This concept of "voice" then was further developed by GILLIGAN and her colleagues: In 1988 they published a methods-guide for the analysis of a "care" and "justice" orientation as a form of interpretation of moral development (BROWN et al. 1988). Newer publications from this research group concentrate on questions about the development of adolescent girls who are facing the social pressure of idealized femininity (BROWN & GILLIGAN 1992, TAYLOR, GILLIGAN, & SULLIVAN 1995 and BROWN 1998). In my own research I am applying the voice approach to analyze how women and men deal with a social pressure of silencing. [2]

3. Practical Application of the Original Method

To apply this method, semi-structured interviews focusing on conflictual topics are conducted and transcribed. Silences, breaks in sentences, and unfinished words are recorded in the transcripts. The analysis of the interview texts gathered in this process is based on four consecutive readings. During the first reading the content is analyzed. In addition, the researcher's inner reaction is recorded. In the second reading, the interviewee's expression of "self" is determined. In the following readings, specific words, phrases, and repeating themes in the transcribed interview are separately filtered out and interpreted. Each reading identifies an emerging focal point of the interviewee. For example, a third reading can be for a voice of "care" and a fourth reading for voice of "justice". In newer publications these readings are called "searching for contrapuntal voices" (TAYLOR, GILLIGAN, & SULLIVAN 1995, p.31). [3]

4. Development of the Voice Approach for Research on Silence Breaking

In my application and elaboration of the voice-centered method, I connect the concept of "voice" to research themes pertaining to silence breaking. In addition to readings for content and response, self, and contrapuntal voices, I explicitly search for information on social conditions: I add a separate reading for social context after the reading for self. In this step, I mark and analyze how the interviewee relates to her or his social conditions and how the person is placed within a system and of social power structures (ROMMELSPACHER 1997). This process is done on two levels. First, the social critique expressed by the interviewees is noted (see BROWN 1998, p.34) and second, I include a critical reflection of social conditions in the analysis. The latter are not always explicitly spoken about during an interview. [4]

I have extended the voice approach by including this additional aspect of reading for social conditions. In my search for "contrapuntal voices" I do not limit the number of voices to be found. Nor do I, prior to the analysis of individual interviews, determine the voices to be read for, as is useful within the context of larger research endeavors, such as the body on research on care and justice orientations (started with Gilligan 1982) or the studies on girls' resistance to ideals of femininity (Brown & Gilligan 1992, Brown 1998). With the freedom to first discover an unlimited number of contrapuntal voices, I pay attention to multiple aspects within the experiences of the interviewees, including their coping strategies with taboo subjects, their identity concepts, or their affects. I am using the procedure in order to find new psychological processes within the interview transcripts. Instead of reading for a limited number of contrapuntal voices in separate readings, I search for a multitude of voices in one single reading. Including this "reading for multiple voices" into the voice-centered method results in higher number of voices than most of my colleagues collect, who also work with this approach. [5]

Staying with the multiple number of voices within the utterances of one person allows me to conceptualize a parallel existence of expressions of multi-dimensional identity that BILDEN and KEUPP have described (BILDEN 1997, KEUPP & HÖFER 1997, see also KIEGELMANN 1999b). When discovering the contrapuntal voices, I build on Grounded Theory (STRAUSS 1987), starting with self explanations, subjective theories, and personal meaning that guide the actions of the interviewees. I also pay attention to the meaning of body experiences and emotions. The analysis of the social conditions is highlighted. At first, I work very closely with the transcripts and generate detailed voice lists. Only in later steps do I condense this high number of voices into meta-categories and analyze how these are related to each other. [6]

5. Example

In order to illustrate the voice-approach, I will now present an example taken from my study on brother-sister incest (see KIEGELMANN 1997). As I explained above, when I apply the voice method, I read through a transcript several times, i.e. reading for content and readers' response, for self, for social context, for a multitude of voices. Below, I elaborate on these steps. The final section illustrates how I approach the clustering of the multiple voices I identified. The main question in my study was about the processes of silence breaking in experiences of sexual violence perpetrated by siblings. In this research project, I interviewed, among others, "Elena", a 23-year-old student in the U.S., from a bi-cultural family (Puerto Rican-U.S. American). As a child she was sexually abused by her older brother and in an interview she talked with me about her experiences:

"Back then he was my big brother and I would do anything to, to protect him and make sure nothing happened to him, and whatever else, you know, and do whatever he told me to do. And [1] now, that, [1] I know better [laughs] you know, like I take care of myself first, and you know, like he comes later and [inhale] I care about him as a person 'cause he's a, ... he's a really, ... H-he is a genuinely a good person you know, and I think that he has a lot of problems, and I think [1] a lot of the problems are from my parents, but [1] I also think like, a lot of the things he did were because he was troubled. But at the same time I don't excuse that. You know, like 'cause I grew up with the same parents and I've molested nobody [on laugh:] You know. And I didn't hurt anybody in the process." (2nd interview with Elena, p. 16; Numbers in [brackets] are indicating pauses in seconds) [7]

5.1 First reading: content and researcher's response

In this reading I first summarize the main content of what is spoken about in the interview. Also, as the researcher, I pay attention to my own reactions to the material. In the above section, Elena talks about her relationship with her brother, indicating both her closeness to him as well as her difference. She describes a development between "back then" and "now". [8]

When I first read this paragraph, my attention shifted immediately to her statement "I take care of myself first". I recognized in myself a desire to encourage this strategy and noticed that I did not want her to excuse her brother. Thus, I realized that I needed to be careful not to let this reaction interfere with the analysis of Elena's interview. In addition, I became aware of the possibility that already during the interview my questions might have discouraged her from expressing her full range of experiences with her brother. [9]

5.2 Second reading: self

In the second reading, I list all of Elena's references to herself. This is representative in pronouns and names used for the interviewee. In the above mentioned paragraph the following references have been taken out and listed as Elena's self statements:

I would do anything; do whatever he told me to do; I know better; I take care of myself first; I care about him;

I think that he has; I think; but [1] I also think;

I don't excuse that; I grew up; I've molested nobody; I didn't hurt anybody. [10]

In my interpretation of the first five self-statements, Elena expresses herself without hesitation. In the following three statements, I find a shift in the certainty of her statements. In the progression of her uses of "I", I noticed a change of content. At first she talks about how close she was to her brother. Then she changes the topic and explains why she thinks he has a lot of problems. The third theme swings back to herself again, where she does not excuse her brother and did not, contrary to him, resort to abuse. This change in theme parallels Elena's change in certainty about herself. She uses "I think" three times, which I interpret in this context as a diminishing her certainty about herself and the content of what she is saying, i.e. her mentioning the problems of her brother. The last four "I"-statements switch back to her original clarity about herself. When she talks about the possible reasons for her brother's behavior, the way she talks, I interpret that she is not convinced about his excuses. There is an obvious shift in her self-references. [11]

5.3 Third reading: social conditions

In my third reading (which is additional to the original method), I look at the interviewee's social context within all the data I collected. Social context can be family situations and references to larger social structures such as race or class. As with all the steps of this method, the third reading builds on the previous readings and the sequence is important. In the transcript I look for Elena's answers to questions about her social context and I also gather any other information which is given to me. For example, when Elena talks about her experiences in grammar school. Her teachers sent her to a Spanish speaking class, because of her surname, even though she could not speak Spanish. Because of experiences like this, she thinks that her brother was also in pain ("*a lot of the things he did were because he was troubled*"). [12]

The causes for her brother's behavior, according to Elena, came from her parents ("*a lot of the problems are from my parents*"). Besides lack of money, Elena named conflicts between her parents which led them to be extra strict with their children. For example, Elena could not go out of the house ("*we weren't allowed out because we lived in a bad neighborhood*", 1st interview with Elena, p.12). Two of her older siblings left home because of family problems and Elena had not had any contact with them since. This evidence of family pressure on both children is in contrast to the finding of my second reading, because her social context gives evidence that reinforces her reasons for her brother's behavior. [13]

5.4 Fourth reading: a multitude of voices

In the fourth reading, I pay attention to the interviewee's numerous and distinct ways of talking about the taboo subject, in this case, incest. Each of these distinct ways of talking about the abuse I name as a "voice." How I call the voice is based on a descriptive phrase used by the interviewee. [14]

What is interesting to me in Elena's example is the contrast between her good personal relationship with her brother and her desire to distance herself from him. Her good relationship to her brother is expressed through phrases like *I care about him as a person 'cause he's a, ... he's a really, ... H-he is a genuinely a good person*. I call this 'I'm best friends with my brother-Voice.' [15]

But on the other hand she calls the abuse by its name in saying for example *"But at the same time I don't excuse that. You know, like 'cause I grew up with the same parents and I've molested nobody."* I code this as 'my brother abused me-Voice.' Both of these voices about her relationship with her brother come through at several places throughout the interviews. Both seem true for Elena. [16]

In the example, I hear a tension and oscillation between these two voices. Elena starts with "back then" in order to show a contrast to an opinion she no longer holds. Then, she continues in a distancing past tense, but using a friendly tone to describe her close relationship with her brother (*"my big brother, I would do anything to protect him"*). In the first part of this section of the transcript, the voice which is friendly towards her brother is dominant ('I'm best friends with my brother-Voice'). Following this, Elena then uses "now" and the 'my brother abused me-Voice', which distances herself from him. Here, she is placing her own needs into the foreground (*"I take care of myself first"*). Soon after, she again gives space to the voice in which she describes her closeness to her brother. This time using present tense: *"H-he is a genuinely a good person."* I interpret the phrases prior to this statement as a "warming up" in which the voice only slowly overcomes the distancing toward her brother (*"'cause he's a, ... he's a really, ..."*). She continues by viewing her brother within the larger family context using her 'I'm best friends with my brother-Voice' (even though this sounds weakened by her "I think" insertions). Finally, she emphasizes her own non-abusive behavior in spite of the shared family environment. This again is a reference to the 'my brother abused me-Voice.' [17]

Two more voices that appear over and over and in the context of Elena's relationships with her brother, are: 'I take care of others-Voice' and 'I would do whatever I was told-Voice'. I see these two voices as an expression of self-denial and submission. Elena states that as a child she used to take care of her older brother and that she did whatever he wanted. This can be found in statements like *"and I would do anything to, to protect him and make sure nothing happened to him, and whatever else, you know, and do whatever he told me to do"*. In addition, I noticed that these voices were expressed in her behavior toward others in situations she described for me during the interviews, and also with other women during group interviews I conducted for this study. [18]

5.5 Voice clusters

In this step I create meta-categories for the voices I found which could be related to each other. The voices are from all of the participants in the study. In this way, I can see if individual voices from one participants correspond to others' handling of the same subject. For example, I identified 16 voices in Elena's transcripts. I condensed her voices together with the voices from the other five participants of my study. This procedure resulted in meta-categories, two of which are "silencing" and "naming." These meta-codes I interpret as defining the process of silence breaking within expressing experiences of brother-sister sexual violence. In this, Elena's 'my brother abused me-Voice' was one of the bases for the category "naming" which names the violence explicitly. The other three voice-examples of Elena 'I'm best friends with my brother-Voice', 'I take care of others-Voice,' and 'I would do whatever I was told-Voice' belong to the category "silencing." [19]

6. Summary and Perspective

The main interest of my research is to discover a nuanced character of psychological phenomena. These nuances can be highlighted through a voice analysis. Especially in research on taboo subjects, like incest, a method that examines a structure of layers, i.e. multiple voices, can better capture ambivalent and contradictory layers of the human psyche. [20]

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Author

Mechthild KIEGELMANN

Contact:

Mechthild Kiegelmann

Eberhard-Karls-Universitaet Tuebingen

Muenzgasse 22-30

D - 72070 Tuebingen

E-mail:

mechthild_kiegelmann@post.harvard.edu

URL: <http://qualitative-psychologie.de>

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