

## Methodological Reflection upon Institutional Research —Reflecting Phenomena, a Means of Knowledge Acquirement<sup>1</sup>

*Petra Muckel*

**Key words:**

institution, files,  
control, boundary,  
the researcher's  
perspective,  
methodological  
reflection

**Abstract:** During my dissertation project on phenomenon in bureaucracy, I collected differing experiences at various institutions. By reflecting these experiences methodologically, I would like to show how effective reflecting phenomena is as a means of knowledge acquirement. Institutions within their dynamic boundaries will be conceptually developed by using a short analysis of social history (FOUCAULT, GOFFMAN) particularly on institutional origination. This was set in relation to files that play an important role in daily institutional routine. At the same time the control function of the file, as institution within the institution, is made plainly recognisable.

### Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. "My Approach"](#)
- [3. Seeing Without Being Seen"—Files as Access to Biography](#)
- [4. Reflecting the Phenomenon: "Boundary Shifts in Institutions"](#)
- [5. Summary](#)
- [References](#)
- [Author](#)
- [Citation](#)

### 1. Introduction

Ascertaining information on inmates, produced by institutions, and documenting the said information is considered in general to be a matter of course. Rarely does this seem to present a problem and the implications of using such information go largely unquestioned. Along the lines of my dissertation (MUCKEL 1997a), I asked myself what actually happens when personal records are put on file, when they are placed at the disposal of other persons, are used, read, lost, forgotten, protected or destroyed. For this reason I worked as an assistant at several different institutions and conducted interviews there concerning "everyday file transactions". Using a selection of correctional institutions as example, I would like to show that a significant relationship exists between the experiences and observances, especially those that I made during my contact with these Institutions, and the meaning or consequences that such a file can have for the person who has been "put on file". [1]

---

1 I warmly like to thank Verna HOWELL for (discussing) the translation of this text.

## 2. "My Approach"

The research project was developed in the tradition of Grounded Theory (STRAUSS, CORBIN), as translated by the Muenster School (BREUER). As I understand it, methods serve to deduce phenomena in their variety (polymorphism) and while giving them equal attention, to reconstruct their different perspectives. This distinguishes my understanding from a scientific understanding whereby classical falsification processes or generalisation processes, as a means for gaining knowledge, are preferred. By utilising microscopic analysis of selected, often narrative data passages instead, I attempt to describe the structural aspects of phenomena and consequently to open the research field by asking questions and at the same time proposing terms. The *self-reflective processes and those reflective processes deriving from experiences in the field* that are set off by my research are especially meaningful in my esteem. I consider it productive to think, for example, about the reason why it continues to be difficult to have access to files even then when I have already signed a document swearing to professional secrecy or why I feel uneasy, when an employee of an institution emphasises how important it is to protect the private sphere and at the same time knows and uses innumerable data about inmates. The reflection and analysis of my experiences and observances during research *guided/guide me* in my search for appropriate categories to help explain phenomenal structures. [2]

Secondly, I stumble frequently over "language usage" during research: reflections and analytical processes are characterised, among other things, through *finding fitting and descriptive terms*. This leads me to those texts that have a more poetic or literary character. It was there that the sensitivity for varying dimensions of word meaning was often helpful to me and to the understanding and recognition of data and its connections. In addition to scientific rules and test processes (processing) as valuable instruments for knowledge gain, science should become permeable for such fictional texts because their concision of speech and metaphoric renders them also valuable in this respect. [3]

## 3. Seeing Without Being Seen"—Files as Access to Biography

Normally one's own biography is primarily of private nature. If singular biographical histories are passed on, then usually to carefully chosen potential target persons. Some, eventually many experiences and characteristics are not even passed on. The inmate, however loses control over his biography at this point (see GOFFMAN 1973, p.33). [4]

Control over the information lies here in the hands of those persons who control the files inside the institution. Therefore information collection and documentation can be damaging to the inmate's biography. GOFFMAN's analysis on total institutionalisation uncovered differing strategies and mechanism by which the inmate's personal identity and his "self" was "systematically, though seldom purposely humiliated" (GOFFMAN 1973, p.25). The collecting of personal, biographical facts in written form (file/dossier), interprets GOFFMAN as being

analogue to those traditions where personal belongings and clothing had to be handed over and candidates were often victims to exposure such as was the case by admittance to total Institutions such as psychiatric wards, correctional institutions, and convents. [5]

The extensive amount of information collected on the inmate, as is the case by detention in correctional institutions, expresses an apparent need for comprehensive control and higher panoptical structure. The perfect file should then have a similar function to that of the panoptical construction style of the correctional institution itself (FOUCAULT 1977, p.321). [6]

Although the introduction of the panoptical construction style in correctional institutions and extensive documentation or file systems are in fact a historical coincidence, exactly this coincidence compels one to have a closer look at the panoptical structure of the file. By putting this structure in question, one therefore also questions the control mechanism seeing without being seen. Analysing the file in this respect can bring additional clarity. "Das Panopticon ist eine Maschine zur Scheidung des Paares Sehen/Gesehenwerden: Im Außenring wird man vollständig gesehen, ohne jemals zu sehen; im Zentralturm sieht man alles, ohne je gesehen zu werden" (FOUCAULT 1977, p.259). The asymmetry of seeing in the panoptical correctional institution corresponds to the asymmetry of knowing in the case of files. Employees may have access to files without having direct personal contact with inmates. The inmate has no possibility of censoring information; deciding what information should be made available. Furthermore, this occurs completely without his or her knowledge or permission. The file, in accordance to its asymmetrical transparency becomes a form of public property to which the inmate is subjected (see FOUCAULT 1977, p.319). [7]

Its power lies in the collecting of knowledge and information about a person in the form of a panoptically organised file. The file itself as concrete, materialised collection of knowledge is not the actual control mechanism. I personally find that the way in which the panoptical structure works is far more subtle. Inmate's ideas about the information others have about them remain diffuse because they are kept in the dark as to how they are "seen" in the file and as to how they are observed. This breeds insecurity and, or distrust. The panopticon functions as a control instrument at its best when the inmates have internalised and accepted being observed and under surveillance. The more acceptance it finds and the better internalised it is, the better it functions. Surveillance is always for the most part the fear of being watched and the anticipation of control, existing in the minds of those under surveillance (FOUCAULT 1977, p.258). [8]

FOUCAULT (1976) was convinced that "according to economic control, it is more effective to place a person under surveillance than to punish him" (p.32, see also FOUCAULT 1977, p.241). [9]

In my opinion, files are a variation on this disciplinary control. They do not punish, they do not injure the body of the inmate. They merely collect a multitude of predominantly, discriminative information. And this information makes a far more

effective, a more subtle behavioural control possible than traditional methods of punishment could possibly do. [10]

#### **4. Reflecting the Phenomenon: "Boundary Shifts in Institutions"**

Collecting and disposing of information of high personal content is not considered by the institution to be a violation against the private sphere of the inmate because the institution is merely fulfilling its duty. The inner-institutional world is not considered part of the outer-institutional world. That is why it is taken for granted that there be no need for sensitive dealings with personal data inside its institutional walls. The Correctional institution officer emphasises that problematic information about inmates or information which could lead to social stigmatisation is not transmitted "to the general public". She does however not question the fact that she herself has access to such information.

"(Correctional institution officer): It could also be very, very, very special information pertaining the inmate, himself. Let's assume the inmate has HIV if an inmate runs around giving out that sort of information what can be worse than that? After all the inmate is a person, too and has a right that certain things are not made open to the general public. If he wants to talk about it, that's his business. But we cant go spreading things around as if we were at the fair grounds" (Interview with Correctional institution officer at a correctional institution in the summer of 1995, p.7f.). [11]

It would seem that within correctional institutions, a problem consciousness for the fact that private information about imprisoned persons is legally circulated while possible consequences of such handling go unseen. The institution infringes upon the rights of the inmate by deeming itself synonymous to the inmate's enlarged sphere: Where skin and private housing marked the boundary to the outside world, exist now file and institution walls. If private information is allowed to circulate, then the outside world meaning outside the institution becomes the "fair ground"; private information circulating outside the institution is then as if "peddled" from door to door. The institution emphasises that business dealings with personal information within the institution, are not made. The argument is that the information is known but not (mis) used. [12]

The institution does not define itself as being "public space". The "general public" lies outside the institution. This may explain how the institution makes possible and legitimises the abolishment of natural personal boundaries perhaps by negating or denying the violation of the boundary itself. But maybe crime committing and the resulting law-full conviction imply a partial incurrence of penalty in form from loss of the right to privacy because otherwise a correctional institution could not fulfil its function as a penal system. The fact that the institution and its employees are supplied with personal and intimate data is interestingly enough not considered to be nor described as being a violation of the inmate's private sphere. Knowledge, kept safe in files to which the general public have no access, and the commitment to professional secrecy on the one hand and the lawful possession of this knowledge on the other hand, compensate the social and psychological, problematical penetration of the inmate's private

sphere to the extent that the implicated violations to the personal sphere are near to completely negated. [13]

The dynamic of the boundary shift is reflected (see MUCKEL 1996; 1997b) at still another position in my research process. It is apparent at that point where information is handed out to the researchers with the simultaneously imposed condition that it not be used. For example: I received information about the institution during my research that was labelled, "You didn't hear this part!" or, "You never knew anything about this!" To have information and not be able to use it can lead to conflict and long term to emotional strain because of two factors. Firstly: scientific research normally includes the publication of the obtained results and it implies transparency. Secondly: Certain information I received only under the premise of secrecy (see also HEEG 1996, p.57). In regard to research practice, I would like to interpret such experiences as new attempts of the institution or individual members to shift the boundary between inside and outside so that the researcher temporarily becomes a member of the institution but his or her research is exempt from it and therefore made part of that which is deemed to stay outside. From a research theoretical point of view, such "switch phenomenon" are by the way, a hint to the fact that field research always includes parts of laboratory research (which are critically seen and mirror the wish that they were already mastered): When the tape recorder for the recording of an interview is running, when the researcher is taken on a tour of the institution, when she is allowed to take part in everyday, institutional occurrences, then she gains insight into those areas of the institution that were chosen for her and presented to her by the institution itself, for her intended research. In my opinion, this is no argument against the research concept of "field research", it shows merely the necessity for sensitivity and reflection in relation to boundary processes in research. [14]

The differentiation between inner and outer institutional worlds is in my opinion fundamental for understanding institutions. Spatial separations and through them the facilitated control over entry and exit in these areas is from a historical viewpoint one of the dominating themes of emerging institutions (see FOUCAULT 1977, p.182f). [15]

An institution sets its limits, those limits that foremost help to make boundary control possible. From this point of view, it would seem that institutional research represents an attempt to pass over this same boundary. This activates institutional control strategies. Seemingly, the analysis of these control strategies is helpful in understanding institutions. My research, in some of the institutions, was made dependent upon my being willing to work over my dissertation exposition. Repeatedly I was required to explain concretely the matter of concern, if possible to standardise it. In one case, it was suggested that I use standardised questionnaires instead of narrative ones. I interpreted this as an attempt to keep the research under control and to prevent unnecessary roving and "roaming about" (FOUCAULT 1977, p.183) during research. Therefore my research was to be controlled just as other occurrences in everyday institutional life are controlled. [16]

Passing institutional boundaries during my research on bureaucracy had an additional impact because I was interested in files and under no circumstances was I to have access to them. I regarded files as being another institution inside the institution: When the boundary that every institution formulates for itself is carefully protected, then this is true all the more so for the boundaries that an institution draws around its files. In this discussion, files in general seem to be for the outer institutional world a momentarily hidden and secretive reality. In my opinion, this seclusion achieves not only the right and necessary protection of the person and information about him but develops also a power or control potential. The obligation to the secretive handling of information contained in the file and with the file itself inside the institution, makes it possible to control, among other things, the extent of knowledge of singular persons and also partially determines the control distribution in the relationships a) between inmates and employees, b) between employees and c) between the inner and outer institutional world (WEBER 1972, p.129). [17]

As a result of WEBER's observations, on the organisation of bureaucratic control, he was able to discover the concrete function of keeping knowledge secret for the preservation and the intensification of control. Because institutional control is based on knowledge, the aimed distribution and refusal of information are levers of control practice. That the information in the files is unavailable at first, seems to be neither chance nor in the interest of the person whose personal record is on file, as would data protection have one to believe. WEBER goes a step further and equates secrecy to a principal or means of achievement to which every power, sooner or later, must seize in order to insure its survival. "Jede auf Kontinuirlichkeit eingerichtete Herrschaft ist an irgendeinem entscheidenden Punkt Geheimherrschaft" (WEBER 1972, p.548). Files can be precisely controlled through the degree of secrecy that the institution exerts over them. Further, this degree of secrecy is a meaningful indicator for the actual strength of control, those who wield this power and the extent of their fears. "Jede Steigerung der Pflicht des 'Amtsgeheimnisses' ist ein Symptom" (WEBER 1972, p.548), and indicates either controllers, wanting to increase their power or that this control appears to be threatened (see op. cit.). [18]

In GOFFMAN's analysis (1973) on the total institution, he observed an intensification of secrecy in practice. He discovered in so called "heiße Aktenschränke" ("hot file cabinets") (GOFFMAN 1973, p.156; see footnote 39, p.156) the specially secured safekeeping of separately kept, specific files, in particular those files on a) patients that work as office messengers b) prominent patients, patients who are high professionals or patients who hold elite positions and c) patients where it is feared that they could take legal steps against the institution. These so called hot file cabinets appear in my concept as the third level of control, as institution inside the institution inside the institution. [19]

Even the historian whom I interviewed, supports her statement using the picture of a boundary, but what she describes is an aspect that conjures up the picture of an opening in the sense of opening the farthestmost limits of knowledge and achievements and therefore enabling new realisations.

"Historian: okay, we have this to our disposal, and I have access to it, I can concentrate myself on it without having to answer to another instance, no *hurdles*. That is the positive feeling that I immediately associate with bureaucracy, that in the end even bureaucracy means that this possibility is wide open" (Interview with a historian 29.06.1995, p. 1; emphasised: P.M.). [20]

When files exist, there are no barriers, no hurdles for the historian. He or she can begin to research. Files function as an open door to the past. That is why they are so highly valued. The aspects of openness and accessibility become meaningful in relation to files in still another way. The existence of files is used as evidence that everything is in order. "Principally we have nothing to hide." (Interview with a criminal officer from 12.04.1995; p.15). Having nothing to hide means generally the same as "It's legal and in order". This "legitimacy" can be supported if necessary with the help of files. Therefore the institution perceives the file not as something to be hidden but precisely the opposite, as proof that there is nothing to be hidden. [21]

Files possess then both dimensions: They imply restrictions on and control over knowledge on the one hand and they open the possibility of knowledge discovery and inspection of documented reality on the other hand. Files are kept secret from the outside world and at the same time are opened to powerful inner-institutional professionals. [22]

## 5. Summary

Looking from the standpoint of the subtle panoptical file structure and the social historical meaning of the boundary function that developed analogue the development of institutions, allowing varying control possibilities (FOUCAULT, GOFFMAN), I tried to develop and verify the thesis, that the file is an institution inside the institution. I traced my reflections pertaining problems of institutional access and file inspection among other things, back to the moment of secrecy (WEBER) in service of security or intensification of institutional power. [23]

## References

Foucault, Michel (1976). *Mikrophysik der Macht*. Über Strafjustiz, Psychiatrie und Medizin. Berlin: Merve.

Foucault, Michel (1977). *Überwachen und Strafen*. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses. Frankf./M.: Suhrkamp. (Orig. 1975: *Surveiller et punir*. La naissance de la prison. Paris: Editions Gallimard)

Goffman, Erving (1973). *Asyle*. Über die soziale Situation psychiatrischer Patienten und anderer Insassen. Frankf./M.: Suhrkamp. (Orig. 1961: *Asylums*. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates)

Heeg, Paul (1996). Informative Forschungsinteraktionen. In Franz Breuer (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychologie*. Grundlagen, Methoden und Anwendungen eines Forschungsstils (pp.41-60). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Muckel, Petra (1996). Selbstreflexivität und Subjektivität im Forschungsprozeß. In Franz Breuer (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychologie*. Grundlagen, Methoden und Anwendungen eines Forschungsstils (pp.61-78). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

Muckel, Petra (1997a). *Der Alltag mit Akten—psychologische Rekonstruktionen bürokratischer Phänomene. Eine empirische Untersuchung in verschiedenen Institutionen auf der Grundlage der Grounded Theory*. Aachen: Shaker (zugl. Oldenburg, Univ., Diss.).

Muckel, Petra (1997b). *Das Problem der Beliebigkeit von Kategorien in der qualitativ-empirischen Sozialforschung und seine Spiegelungen im Versuchsaufbau* (unveröffentl. Vortragsmanuskript).

Weber, Max (1972). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie. Studienausgabe. 5th revised edition, besorgt von Johannes Winckelmann. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck)

## Author

Dr. *Petra MUCKEL*, Dipl.-Psych., born 1966, studied psychology, philosophy and German studies in Münster; from 1992 to 1997 scientific assistant at the Carl von Ossietzky University (major interests: lecturer of qualitative method and qualitative psychodiagnostic) is since 1998 scientific associate in Oldenburg. Publications on psychological methods—such as observation methods, analysis of subjectivity in research—and about Dreams, Body in its psychological aspects and Memory. Actual major research themes are, among others, "Kelly-Grids and Grounded Theory", "Psychodiagnostic and Case-study" and "Perception and context".

Contact:

Petra Muckel

University of Oldenburg  
Department of Psychology, Postbox 2503  
D - 26 129 Oldenburg

E-mail: [petra.muckel@uni-oldenburg.de](mailto:petra.muckel@uni-oldenburg.de)

## Citation

Muckel, Petra (2000). Methodological Reflection upon Institutional Research—Reflecting phenomena, a means of knowledge acquirement [23 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), Art. 22, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002221>.

Revised 7/2008