

## Challenging Times—Methods and Methodological Approaches to Qualitative Research on Time

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**Abstract:** In this introduction we present the *FQS* special issue on research on the topic of time. The fundamental idea is that time is a basic element of social action that therefore is relevant to a diverse range of research fields. The studies and approaches in this special issue allow a discussion about the challenges time-sensitive qualitative research faces. Looking at the contributions selected for this edition, we have identified four central aspects: Firstly, it becomes clear that time-analytical questions are not limited to a particular line of research, but rather can be applied to diverse *thematic areas*. Secondly, the *methods* chosen enable access to different time perceptions. This also applies, thirdly, to the selected *theories*. Fourthly, with the special issue we invite readers to reflect on the temporality of *material objects*. With these essays it is our intention to encourage time-analytical studies dealing with these four and other related aspects.

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### 1. Introduction

Time is a concept which is of interest to a range of different disciplines. In the social sciences, time is primarily seen as a social phenomenon or as an element of social order (BURZAN & SCHÖNECK, 2014; ELIAS, 1984; SCHILLING, 2005). This corresponds with "an understanding of time as a multitude of coexisting temporalities" (HANNKEN-ILLJES, 2007, §3). On this basis, the notion of time as a singular continuity was called into question in the *FQS* special issue entitled "Time and Discourse" (HANNKEN-ILLJES, KOZIN & SCHEFFER, 2007). [1]

The perspectives on time are very heterogeneous. On a macro level, changes in social time-relations (ROSA, 2005), time as an instrument of control and power (DELEUZE, 1993 [1988]; FOUCAULT, 1977 [1975], 1978, 2003 [1966]) and the interdependence of temporal and economic structures (BOURDIEU, 2000 [1977]) were discussed. A number of studies examined time and timing within organizations (DAWSON, 2014). For example, GLASER und STRAUSS (1965) pursued a specific question when they focused on the end of lifetime as dealt with in hospitals. On a micro level, time practices, subjective time perception and time

projections stand in the foreground (CARMO, CANTANTE & DE ALMEIDA ALVES, 2014; see also SCHILLING & KOZIN, 2009). [2]

Subjective time perspectives and the resulting manner of using time were also examined for their correlation with certain resources (DRESSEL & LANGREITER, 2008; KÖLBL & STRAUB, 2001; MÜNCH, 2014; ZIMBARDO & BOYD, 2011 [2008]). Numerous publications in the area of biographical research (JUHASZ, 2009; LUTZ, SCHIEBEL & TUIDER, 2018; ROBERTS, 2011; ROSENTHAL & BOGNER, 2017) are focused on the social meaning and subjective sense of biographical life practices, which differ, for example, with regard to social class, gender or intergenerational family patterns. These publications define biographies as "communicative structuring (...), which use and produce social and individual time" (FISCHER, 2018, p.461, our translation). They also focus on social changes, which can be observed in certain shifts of time practices, in particular with regard to family life and gender-related time inequalities (HEITKÖTTER, JURCZYK, LANGE & MEIER-GRÄWE, 2009; WINGARD, 2007). [3]

Furthermore, time is the focus of a wide range of social research done in institutions, for example, regarding the structural extension of the time spent in the educational system (KING, 2017); opening and closing lessons and the related necessity of controlling time structures in school (RABENSTEIN, 2018) or in regard to the increased regimentation of university curricula (LIAO et al., 2013) and accelerated time structures (O'NEILL, 2014; ROSA, 2005; VOSTAL, 2016). Boredom during lessons (BREIDENSTEIN, 2006) as well as time investment for studies (PIPKIN, 1982) are also topics of discussion. Phenomena such as acceleration and deceleration in academia were discussed already in the *FQS* special issue entitled "The Slow University" (O'NEILL, MARTELL, MENDICK & MÜLLER, 2014). [4]

The time-related field of topics and research questions is as diverse as the range of qualitative methods and methodologies used to investigate them. The idea of grouping diverse approaches and studies according to methodological questions grew as part of a network of scientists that is supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft [German Research Foundation] (DFG), which we are members of.<sup>1</sup> The network "Being Young—Growing Older: Temporalities in Transition" aims to further develop a discourse on the changes in individual time constructions and institutional time structures as children, adolescents and young adults grow older. "Being Young—Growing Older" provides a framework in which scientists from various disciplines with diverse research topics address the fundamental question on appropriate methods and methodologies in time-sensitive qualitative social research. [5]

With the *FQS* special issue we have found an appropriate forum to enrich the discussion. It was our intention to allow researchers from diverse methodological backgrounds and traditions to contribute without constraints on the thematic

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1 Besides us, the members of the network (DFG-Number [327762390](#), funded since 2016) are Fanny HÖSEL, Sina-Mareen KÖHLER, Sebastian SCHINKEL, Julia SCHREIBER, Regina SOREMSKland Maren ZSCHACH (see SCHINKEL et al., 2020).

content of their respective research projects. The response to our call for papers that was published in 2018 was large. The topic of time was not the central focus of all submissions. That was interesting for us because it indicated that questions relating to time can (and must) be formulated in diverse contexts. However, a key requirement for selection was that the proposed paper's central focus was on time. The contributions selected also offer a large variance of discussions on and approaches to the concept of time. We hope that this special issue shows that our efforts have been fruitful. [6]

In the following, we introduce four aspects that are relevant to time-sensitive research (Section 2). Then the journal contributions are presented according to the four aspects (Section 3). We end with a short outlook (Section 4). [7]

## 2. Four Time-Relevant Aspects of Qualitative Social Research

The selection of articles presented in this special issue allows a view of the variety of methods, methodologies and also theoretical approaches that are possible when investigating the topic of time. At least four aspects can be distilled from the contributions and be grouped as fundamental insights.

1. It is clear that time-analytical questions are not limited to a particular line of research, but rather are of relevance to diverse *thematic areas*. This is hardly surprising since a central methodological rationale for qualitative research lies in the interpretative paradigm. Anselm STRAUSS, one of the founders of grounded theory methodology, demonstrates the relevance of time concepts and processuality. In "Continual Permutations of Action" (2010 ([1993]) he formulated the following fundamental assumption:

*"Actions are characterized by temporality, for they constitute courses of action of varying duration. Various actors' interpretations of the temporal aspects of an action may differ, according to the actors' respective perspectives; these interpretations may also change as the action proceeds" (p.32).*

Processuality and temporality are also central in other reference theories of qualitative methodologies. For example, besides interactionism, phenomenology needs to be thought about. In this regard we reflect the temporal structuring of lifeworld (SCHÜTZ & LUCKMANN, 2003 [1975]). No matter what questions are explored, whether they concern group-specific processes, coping strategies of individuals in times of crisis or challenging phases of life, social practices or institutions: time is an integral and central component of social action, respectively subjective sense constructions (SCHILLING, 2005).

2. Time is not only a factor in different research areas, but it is also embedded in the methods we use to explore and understand them. Data collection takes place in time and depending on the methodological approach time can be grasped differently. For example, while in biographical interviews the person interviewed relates their biography in a sequential time context, observations allow us to record time practices (e.g., time management). The quality-assuring benefits of

the time-sensitive methodologies are discussed at length in the articles, being part of this special issue.

3. Each theoretical reference allows a specific perspective on time. Furthermore, *theories* are time-sensitive in different ways. Depending on the theoretical perspective of the researcher, the understanding of the effect of time ordering changes or the focus switches to a subjective time-orientation. An explicit focus on the time implications of the theories implemented and a comparison and contrasting of different time perspectives can strengthen the analyses.

4. It is to be considered that not only human action, but also *material objects* are time-bound. Observing the connection between the time of things and the time of the actors seems to be especially fruitful when describing the interdependence between the material and the subjective. [8]

### 3. Presentation of the Contributions

Each contribution offers impetus to several of the four aspects. Despite this, we wanted to reflect which aspect is especially emphasized in each article and thus to reveal the particular merit of each contribution for this special issue. [9]

*Thematic areas:* The grouping of the contributions demonstrates that time-theoretical perspectives can be fruitful in *diverse thematic areas*. In some research projects questions relating to time were central. In others time-related questions offer a gain in understanding the main question posed. An example of the former is the contribution of Jörg SCHWARZ, Hannah HASSINGER and Sabine SCHMIDT-LAUFF (2020). The authors' research interest was focused on learning processes in adult education. According to their starting assumption, these processes are always connected to different perceptions of time. With this in mind, the authors examine the relationship between the institutionalized time structures, collective time practices and the time experiences of the participants in the context of paid educational leave (§3). Using observational methods in courses and narrative interviews with participants, the researchers explore the relationship between the actual course time imposed by the educational organisation and the learning time as collectively practiced and individually experienced. During the analysis it became apparent that the concurrence of different times is a challenge that adult education faces. [10]

In contrast to the above mentioned contribution that focuses on time (as a central research interest), the contribution that follows shows that it can also be fruitful to take on a sociological time perspective in studies where time does not stand in the foreground. Nicole BURZAN (2020) reports on a study on status reproduction in a family. The data consisted of interviews with the family in which three generations took part. On the basis of these interviews, relationships between time and aspects of status reproduction were identified systematically. For instance, creating the continuity of the family business was tied to the father's strategies to prepare his children for the later succession. Family interviews offer the opportunity to look at how familial time relations are negotiated and

respectively created by the family members regarding, for example, the "interpretative sovereignty over narrated time" (§8), or rather who the others concede to. [11]

*Methods:* In her contribution, BURZAN addresses a second essential aspect, which is of particular interest to us. This is namely the question on how time can be grasped and with which *methods*, or as Vibeke Kristine SCHELLER (2020) stated, "... portraying time as social structure / temporal process" (§43). Her research approach is organizational ethnography or, to be more precise *tempography*, with which temporality within organizations can be investigated. The author's argumentation is based on a study she conducted in a day clinic for cardiac patients in which she examined the organizational processes time-theoretically and multi-methodically. She shows that different qualitative methods focus on different types of time: While biographical interviews with patients generated a stronger linear narrative, her observations of situations of managerial decision-making give insight into the profession-specific timing in the clinic in which past, present and future are intertwined. While objects, such as patient reports, provided the basis for the schedule that as "frozen in time" (§38) illustrated a further aspect of tempography. Furthermore, she discussed the relevance of different theoretical concepts for understanding time and temporality in ethnographies. [12]

*Theories:* Time is always an integral part of *theories*—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. A central focal point of the contribution of Maja SUDERLAND (2020) explores to what extent theories can be helpful in qualitative empirical research on time, relating this question to the work of Pierre BOURDIEU. She does this by systematically examining the aspects of social time in his theory. In particular the concept of habitus is time-theoretically highly relevant as forgotten history as well as present future. Further key terms such as capital, *kairos*, *hysteresis* and investment sense are painstakingly scrutinized for their time-theoretical implications. The researcher, drawing on her own interview-based study on education-related upward mobility demonstrates how revealing time perspectives can be useful for qualitative research. [13]

*Materiality:* *Material objects* are also relevant to time-sensitive research. In his contribution, Miklas SCHULZ (2020) focuses on the audiobook, with the assumption that it has a time structure with its own quality. He explores the interplay between the medium's own time structure, the appropriation practices of the consumers and the modality of perception as the listener's own subjective time experience. Time is consistently thought of here as a relational construction, it is about the time of things—here the audiobook. Using this object, SCHULZ looks at how people produce temporalities within a media dispositif (§13). In the next contribution, Isabelle BOSBACH (2020) turns to a technology that promises a new way of dealing with time, even the ability of *pausing time*: social freezing. The author focuses on the expert discourse. The experts define the expiration of a woman's *biological clock* as a problem to which the solution lies in egg cell freezing to ensure future fertility. They promote the idea that organic material is taken out of its physical time (dimension) and conserved as an option for the

future. This contribution with its focus on cutting edge technology can be added to a range of studies which explore how new technologies challenge time practices, and to what extent expert discourses promise a new handling of time. [14]

#### **4. Conclusions and Outlook**

All texts have the understanding in common that time is a social construction and is thus plural. This also means that research projects should not only consider the theoretical and methodological implications, but also the researchers' own basic perceptions of time. Here is an example from real-life practice: In a longitudinal study on the lives of young people after leaving school (KÖNIG, 2019) an apprentice was asked about his future plans. In the first interview he said that he had originally wanted to finish school and get a general education certificate, but he dropped out because of an unresolvable conflict with a teacher. He then started an apprenticeship in a painting business, since no other alternatives were available. He felt badly treated by his forman, so he changed to a different company. At the time of the second interview he was just finishing his apprenticeship there, which he had done half-heartedly and did not value highly. He did not identify with the profession and did not under any circumstances want to work in this field. When the interviewer asked (clumsily) if he was considering starting an apprenticeship in another trade, he reacted brusksly, saying that was impossible because, "by the time I have gone back to school, learned a commercial trade for three years, I will be at retirement age" (p.309, our translation). Here it was clear that the interviewer and the interviewee followed very different schedules and had different perceptions of time. For her, the future stood wide open for the 20 year old man, for him the time for trying out things had already come to an end. It becomes obvious that time horizons are dependent on social positions. Interviewers should bear this in mind in order to be sensitive to different time-related normative concepts. Only then can there be a guarantee that the interview is not influenced too strongly by the interviewer's own time norms. [15]

With this special issue we want to give insight into how important a time-analytical perspective can be in diverse levels of qualitative research. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the further development of time-sensitive qualitative social research and reveal the diversity of established and proven methods and approaches. [16]

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