

Conference Report:

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Mapping Situational Analysis—An International Conference.

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Abstract: In this conference report we provide insights into some of the key topics presented at the first international conference on situational analysis in Germany, held in November 2024 in Magdeburg. Central issues discussed include collaborations and feminist perspectives in practice for power-sensitive knowledge production, nonhumans and how they can be included in situational analysis through all types of mappings as well as methodical and methodological questions regarding mapping processes, interdisciplinary mapping, and the conceptualization of space in and through situational analysis. Adele CLARKE and her work were honored and celebrated at the conference.

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1. Introduction

Situational analysis (SitA), as developed by Adele CLARKE (2005) and further elaborated by Adele CLARKE, Carrie FRIESE and Rachel WASHBURN (2015, 2018), is a research program used to emphasize the focus on the fluidity, complexity, and flexibility of postmodern societies (see also CLARKE, WASHBURN & FRIESE, 2022). With its analytical concentration on situations, SitA allows researchers to analyze visible and implicated actors and actants, discourses and unheard voices as well as individual practices and collective action through mapping strategies (CLARKE & KELLER, 2014). At its core, the situation of inquiry is positioned as a "contextual whole" (DEWEY, 1951 [1938], p.66) to underline that the conditions of the situation are *in* the situation.

Furthermore, the research focus on the meso level enables researchers to zoom into the relationalities between and among all elements that constitute a situation. [1]

CLARKE, in her approach, integrated key theoretical frameworks, including social worlds and arenas theory (e.g., OFFENBERGER et al., 2023; STRAUSS, 1978, 1982), the consideration of human and nonhuman elements (e.g., LATOUR, 2005), and discourses (e.g., FOUCAULT, 1973 [1970]), each understood as co-constitutive of the situation. These frameworks are used as sensitizing concepts for the analysis of situations. SitA is heavily rooted in US pragmatism and interactionism (BLUMER, 1969; MEAD, 1938; STRAUSS, 1993), and feminist theories (HARAWAY, 1991; LATHER, 2001; STAR, 1991) in combination with the work of post-structuralists (FOUCAULT (e.g., 1973 [1970], 1975 [1973], 1977 [1975], 1980); DELEUZE and GUATTARI (1987 [1980])). Methodologically, SitA is operationalized through four mapping strategies (CLARKE et al., 2022) that foreground relationalities, power dynamics, injustices, and silences. [2]

The applications of SitA are diverse, as are the research communities engaging with it. Building on the insights gained through the publication of the anthology "Situationsanalyse als Forschungsprogramm" [Situational Analysis as a Research Program] (GAUDITZ et al., 2023a), the [Arbeitsgemeinschaft Situationsanalyse](#) [Situational Analysis Working Group] and the [Zentrum für Sozialweltforschung und Methodenentwicklung](#) at Magdeburg University invited participants to the first international conference on SitA in Germany, held from November 13-15, 2024. The organizers of the conference sought to bring together researchers from various disciplines who employed SitA, thereby fostering the exchange of ideas, approaches, and insights and encouraging networking as well as joint learning. Lastly, the organizers aimed to further establish SitA in academic knowledge production. [3]

The conference was well attended: 98 researchers from a wide range of disciplines and different qualification levels participated. Participants came from Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, and the US. The conference program had been purposefully designed to create time and space for networking, and hence facilitated opportunities for establishing new international connections. Over the course of the three-day conference, new networks of early-stage researchers as well as thematically focused working groups were formed that have since been developed independently. [4]

There was an astonishingly wide range of applications and innovative contributions presented at the conference. It was an inspiring opportunity to map the field of situational analysts and to learn about the diversity of researchers and their myriad approaches to working with SitA. The participants used the conference as a platform to discuss recurring and emerging issues; for example, the relationship between coding and mapping or possibilities of mapping processes, respectively. With a wide variety of formats—ranging from panel presentations or joint analysis sessions to more experimental formats such as pop-up sessions—the conference organizers encouraged a bottom-up approach

and created a constructive environment for researchers at all career stages to foster exchange on equal footing. [5]

In the following section, we will provide insights into the key themes discussed at the conference (Section 2). In closing, we dare a brief outlook at possible future endeavors with SitA, based on the various contributions and discussions that, taken together, allow it to be positioned as a *traveling concept* (OFFENBERGER, 2023) (Section 3). The organizers dedicated the conference to Adele CLARKE, honoring her lifelong commitment to critical, justice-oriented, and feminist qualitative inquiry. CLARKE, who sadly passed away in January 2024, has left a profound legacy in the field. [6]

2. Some Glimpses Into Postmodern Qualitative Social Research With Situational Analysis

One of the highlights of this three-day conference was the keynote speech by Rachel WASHBURN, who explored the issue of mapping visual material. In her talk, she argued that we live in increasingly visualized realities. Hence, analyzing visual material within situated inquiry through mapping and memoing, too, have become increasingly crucial. According to WASHBURN, researchers could utilize mapping and memoing to direct the analyses of visual data in new directions, drawing researchers' attention to non-obvious elements referred to or depicted that were not captured by words. Thus, mapping visual material played an essential role in the ongoing developments within SitA. By elaborating on new grounds for SitA, WASHBURN demonstrated the various opportunities in SitA. The participants reinforced this momentum with many subsequent contributions. [7]

The second keynote was provided by Maria KONTRADJUK. In her talk, she focused on the potentials of social worlds/arenas theory (STRAUSS, 1978, 1982) for the analysis of societal transformation processes in the postmodern era in general. She then demonstrated how SitA could be used to help researchers navigate through the messiness of simultaneous negotiation processes on legitimization, segmentation, and intersection that she considered characteristic of current transformation processes. [8]

With their keynotes, both speakers constructively shaped the discussions throughout the conference. Although we cannot specifically address every contribution by name below, the succeeding thematic foci reflect the remarkable quality of all the presentations delivered at the conference. Beyond the variety of illustrative and, in part, thought-provoking contributions to SitA, several recurring topics and methodological questions were raised again in presentations, workshop sessions, or during discussions. These include:

- Collaborations in inquiry;
- Nonhuman actors;
- Visualizing processes through mapping;
- Methodological questions related to multiperspectivity, interdisciplinarity, and reflexivity;
- The relationship between SitA and subjectivation. [9]

2.1 Collaborations and feminist perspectives in research practice

A major topic that was repeatedly discussed by the participants was identified as closely linked with the methodological orientation of SitA. In this fundamentally power-sensitive research approach, the diverse possibilities of application were always intertwined with the analysis of power relations (e.g., CLARKE, 2005, p.11). This was particularly relevant when research was conducted in collaboration with collectives that tend to be marginalized, minoritized, or otherwise vulnerable individuals or groups (TIETJE, 2023a, §§8-13). Throughout the conference, questions concerning how to navigate latent and visible power relations during fieldwork and analysis were addressed in various ways. In some cases, the focus was on practical questions regarding how such a power-sensitive approach could actually be implemented. In other cases, such as in the presentations by Olaf TIETJE and Miriam Friz TRZECIAK, power-sensitive issues were linked to decolonial perspectives (SMITH, 1999). In several presentations, speakers highlighted collaborations as a particularly effective strategy for decolonizing knowledge production. [10]

For CLARKE, collaborations were one of the key strategies for conducting critical sciences (CLARKE & VON UNGER, 2023, pp.28-33). She was always particularly keen to build alliances. In academia, this often meant working together to develop joint perspectives and thus create connections (CLARKE & HARAWAY, 2018). To this end, presenters combined different strategies for analyzing the situation with reflexivity. They tried to create, jointly with actors in the field, added value beyond simply gathering scientific knowledge. Alongside questions regarding how to visualize their interconnectedness with the field and make research meaningful for the involved actors and social worlds, speakers also discussed how activists' perspectives can be part of academic research, including through the diversification of research teams. [11]

Feminist perspectives, as CLARKE methodologically laid them out in SitA (CLARKE & VON UNGER, 2023, p.24; GAEDICKE, 2025, p.47; GAUDITZ et al., 2023b, p.5; OFFENBERGER, 2019, §7), refer to a specific research attitude (RIVERA CUSICANQUI, 2015, p.28). It allows for subjects of research to take center stage, remains open to their concerns, and seeks strategies for considering social justice as a component of academic inquiry in collaborative moments, between academics but also between those commonly referred to as "researchers" on the one hand and "interlocutors," "participants," or "subjects" on the other hand. Looking ahead, this points to alternate perspectives on academic knowledge production that move beyond the observation and description of

(global) power relations and contribute to changing them for the better for as many individuals and social groups are affected by the negative consequences of power(lessness), which "always caused resistances" (FOUCAULT, 1977 [1975], p.368¹; TIETJE 2023b). [12]

2.2 Nonhumans

Taking nonhuman elements into account is essential in SitA (CLARKE 2005, p.63; CLARKE et al. 2018, p.185). Consequently, it was a pivotal topic at the conference. Throughout sessions and presentations, an overarching question was: How could nonhumans receive equal attention during analysis? How can they be represented on the maps (MATHAR, 2008, §1)? Regarding the latter, one presenter criticized the seemingly unsystematic use of nonhuman elements in SitA (HAUBOLD, 2023, p.189). Another speaker proposed to consider the "nature of the relationship" (CLARKE 2005, p.102) and therefore relational mapping as an analytical focus to systematically grasp the embeddedness of nonhuman elements in SitA projects (SCHWERTEL, 2023). In addition, the advantages of the theory of assemblages (DELEUZE & GUATTARI, 1987 [1980]; LATOUR 2005) were presented to de- and reconstruct elements in the situation. [13]

As CLARKE et al. noted, "nonhuman elements can become the center point of a net of relations" (2018, p.185). At the conference, attendants presented methodical strategies to do so in analysis with mapping and memoing. For example, it was demonstrated how mapping as a cartographer (CLARKE 2012 [2005], p.81) enabled researchers to make nonhumans visible. In one study, the researchers traced and mapped the path of data through the situation. Another dealt with the transformation of elements—especially nonhumans—throughout the development of the situation. The participants emphasized the relevance of the nonhuman elements for SitA and led to the idea of a collaborative analysis group dedicated to the exploration of nonhumans using SitA. [14]

2.3 Visualizing processes through mapping

The visualization of processes through mapping remains a methodological question in SitA. Given that all knowledge is considered partial, temporal, and situated, processuality is deeply embedded in the conceptual framework (CLARKE et al., 2018; HARAWAY, 1991). Through social worlds/arenas analyses, for example, researchers demonstrated how they reconstruct how discursive arenas of interest change over time, how social worlds grow, become more powerful, and merge, how new (sub)worlds develop, or how social worlds disappear over time (CLARKE et al., 2018). As such, social worlds/arenas maps, but also situational or relational maps, in combination with extensive memoing are tools used by researchers to consider the processual nature of all elements in the situation of inquiry (SCHWERTEL, 2023). At the same time, however, it remains challenging to visualize the very processual nature of maps, e.g., for the visualization of findings. [15]

1 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

Innovative mapping strategies were presented to depict the processual nature of social interactions and transitions, and to show how maps could be used to visualize the changing configurations of social worlds (WAZINSKI, WANKA, KYLÉN, SLAUG, & SCHMIDT, 2023). By turning to flip maps that allow for the creation of "dense, multilayered, and moving series of maps" (KNOPP, 2021, §1), researchers can visualize sequences that configure life course transitions through zooming in and zooming out of situations. Drawing on his research on media development, Christian RHEIN argued that processes could be understood as a series of interconnected situations. Several stages of a development would function as micro-situations within a larger situation, with elements continuously entering and exiting the scene. This iterative mapping approach could help illustrate the fluidity and processual nature of development, rather than seeing it as a static or linear progression. [16]

Based on the concept of implicated actors and actants (CLARKE & MONTINI, 1993; CLARKE et al., 2018), it was demonstrated how processes of ignoring, hiding, and silencing, understood as power relations in social worlds and arenas, could be made visible. The focus was on the idea of a new cartographic representation of a "continuum of implicatedness" (GLÜCK, 2023, p.34) which was used to illustrate the varying visibility and agency of actors, actants, or even entire social worlds. The application was explained using an example from the field of science and technology research on the topic of knowledge actors of energy technologies. [17]

2.4 Further methodical and methodological questions

Relational maps were suggested as ways to examine how relationships between the researcher and different actors change over time. Positionality is shaped by intersecting systems of oppression, such as gender, race, and class, making it a complex and dynamic aspect of research that should also be mapped, i.e., through situational and relational mapping. To grasp the multidimensionality of complex situations such as sustainability transitions in general and energy transitions in particular, Anna-Lisa KLAGES discussed the iterative use of messy and relational mapping strategies to conceptualize interdisciplinary research projects. Interdisciplinary messy and relational mapping could extend researchers' understandings of the complexities in a situation, as their situated meanings could be explored from multiple disciplinary perspectives simultaneously. Joint initial relational mapping could then be translated into research questions or new directions for theoretical sampling and analysis. [18]

According to CLARKE, FRIESE and WASHBURN (2018), spatial elements were part of situations, but those elements were not further explained or conceptualized within SitA. Some presenters tried to close this gap by combining concepts from the field of spatial sociology with SitA (GAEDICKE, 2025; KLING, 2020). A situated concept of space (GAEDICKE, 2025), which relied heavily on the elements identified in the situation according to CLARKE (2005), but also added atmospheric elements to the conceptualization of space in and through SitA, was presented and discussed. [19]

3. Conclusion

The conference attracted researchers from a variety of backgrounds, who came together for an inspiring exchange of ideas and approaches. The evolving application of SitA as a *traveling concept* (OFFENBERGER, 2023) was highlighted. The exchange of creative ideas, mapping strategies, and critical reflections revealed exciting future directions. Additionally, the formation of working and interpretation groups and networks demonstrated that SitA has become an indispensable method in qualitative research. With this conference, not only were the accomplishments of SitA in the field mapped, but new trajectories were also explored, and a strong sense of community fostered, that will continue to thrive beyond this event for critical, justice-oriented qualitative research. [20]

We look forward to future developments of and with SitA and are grateful to contribute to promoting this vital, multi-dimensional, and complexity-embracing power-critical perspective. In a rapidly changing world in which societies are confronted with the threat of significant backlashes concerning cultural sensitivity, inclusion, and diversity, etc., we consider such approaches highly relevant. In this respect, our deepest gratitude goes to Adele CLARKE for the invaluable legacy she has left us and to Carrie FRIESE and Rachel WASHBURN for letting us take part in their brilliant ideas for situated inquiry in contemporary societies. [21]

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The conference program including the speakers can be found here:

- [Program by days](#);
- [Parallel panel sessions](#);
- [Parallel joint analysis sessions](#).

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