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Everyday Routine, Social Structure and Sociological Theory: Using Ethnographic Semantics for Research on Prisons

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Abstract: The ethnographic reconstruction of a selected semantic field within a prison reveals the potential of a method hardly ever used in the research field in the German speaking countries: ethnographic semantics. Thus it is demonstrated how fertile this kind of research on prisons in terms of understanding this particular social order can be. In addition, references to general sociological theory and other super-ordinate discourses concerning prison-practice become intelligible.

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1. Introduction

The first part of this text will introduce the basic features of the method of *ethnographic semantics* and refer to its origin in cognitive anthropology. The methodology part will be presented next using illustrations from my own prison research, followed by a description of mechanism and structures of social control which have been identified as effective means of "narrative inclusion" in an open reformed prison. The result of the study—which was carried out using the method described above—will be tied to the theories of power and sociology of knowledge. In addition to the presentation of a specific ethnographic method it will be demonstrated that sociological fieldwork not only contributes to description, but also provides more encompassing theoretical discourses. [1]

2. Ethnographic Semantics: Origin and Method

From early on the theoretical power and the possible influence of sociological research, which coined the term ethnoscience, has been recognized (PSATHAS, 1973). Originating in American cultural anthropology, it became known as ethnotheory in the German speaking countries (Arbeitsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen, 1973). Although some sociologists interested in qualitative methods turned to it at times (e.g. KNOBLAUCH, 1991; HONER, 1993), this approach remained mostly a part of the US tradition within the field of cultural anthropology (cf. WERNER & SCHOEPFLE, 1986) [2]

In contrast to the past, the contemporaries of "cognitive anthropology" have ceased to confine their research to the analyses of systems such as of kinship, classifications of colors or taxonomies of plants in pre-modern cultures (cf. D'ANDRADE, 1995). The extended techniques of data collection and analysis that is applied to complex cultural scenes and environment of the American society can be traced in more recent publications. The theory has been elaborated and refined considerably (cf. HOLLAND & QUINN, 1987; D'ANDRADE & STRAUSS, 1992; LAKOFF, 1990) and, in the meantime, it has found its way even into epistemological writing (LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1999). [3]

Following on from the tradition of ethno-theory, ethnographic semantics were introduced as core of a pronouncedly distinct method, specifically for qualitative sociology by James P. SPRADLEY. He used ethnographic semantics for his research: on tramps (SPRADLEY, 1970, 1972), the social organization of prison (SPRADLEY, 1973), gender relations in the working environment of a bar (SPRADLEY & MANN, 1975) and about the life of deaf people (SPRADLEY & SPRADLEY, 1978). Through his writings on ethnographic interview (SPRADLEY, 1979), participant observation (SPRADLEY, 1980), an introductory book on ethnographic research for students (SPRADLEY & McCURDY, 1988) and his editorship on ethnographic works, (SPRADLEY & McCURDY, 1990) he produced detailed texts for application, explanation and about the scope of this method. In addition, for a supplementary and deepened description of the underlying theory and method of ethno-theory there has been an encompassing fundamental work since 1987, the two volumes of "Systematic Fieldwork" (WERNER & SCHOEPFLE, 1986, 1987). [4]

The fundamental question of ethnographic semantics can be outlined as follows: which terms are used by the members of a specific culture, group, scene etc. to qualify themselves as *relevant* and *significant* objects and events (also: persons and actions, locations and time) (cf. FRAKE, 1973)? The basic assumption is: the *competent use* of these terms determines the borders of affiliation and membership to cultures, groups and scenes (for a detailed description see: MAEDER & BROSZIEWSKI, 1997a). [5]

From this assumption, two consequences arise and they must be examined. *First*: the focus of semantic analysis is on *words, not on complete texts*. Here the origin of this method from linguistics in clearly visible—however, without the adaptation of its cognitive theories. Terms and words in the context of *observable use* are the first units for reconstruction. *Second*: most important is the qualification of objects and events provided by expressions and not the definition or the significance of the expressions per se. In this respect one can speak of a pragmatic ethnography in a double sense: we are interested in social action and its expression in the field under the premises of symbolic interaction. Therefore, ethnographic semantics cannot start with simple testing of significance or definitions or even interpreting exclusively from recorded conversation in the form of transcripts. The foremost is to observe and register *apt and accepted use* within the culture under scrutiny. We should be looking for codes that enable

active participation in a culture, the forms used in the same sense and thereby marking affiliation or—in a negative sense—non-affiliation. [6]

Roughly said at least four steps in analysis can be distinguished. Following the most prominent representation of the method (SPRADLEY, 1980), we speak of the domain analysis, componential analysis, taxonomic analysis and of cultural themes. With regard to the already mentioned question of qualification we could say, ethnographic semantics is concerned with the compilation of an inventory of qualifications, the description of their relation and their organization according to their central redundancies or recurring figurations. At any point during this procedure different extensions and focuses are possible. Also, decisions have to be made that cannot be deduced from the rules of the method as such. They have to be deduced from the main questions and theoretical interest of the respective study. "It has to be decided on a theoretical level which aspects should be the center of observation and analysis: a specific *group* of actors, a certain type of *situations* or a particular type of *activities*" (MAEDER & BROSZIEWSKI, 1997a, p.336). On these occasions the relation to sociologically interesting questions has to be clarified as well. [7]

According to the initial question concerning the denotation of things and events we can thus begin by putting together a cultural inventory, in other words a connotational dictionary, referring to the original distinction between denotation and connotation. Connotation here not only means definition, but also semantic affinities and associations. For reasons of simplicity such dictionaries use the form of tables, thereby categorizing things, persons and locations on one hand and events or actions on the other. In that sense a rough reconstruction of the field can start with three elements that characterize the social situation: people, places and actions. In the second step central semantic relations are identified that can be found between the elements of the dictionary. In SPRADLEY's work nine different types of semantic relation can be found, e.g. causality, sequentiality etc. (SPRADLEY, 1979, 1980). At the beginning of every reconstruction of a field most often and most reasonably there is a relation of simple inclusion, in the linguistic form of "X is a kind of Y". The term of a domain constructed in that way can be defined like this: "Any symbolic category that includes other categories is a domain. All the members of a domain share at least one feature of meaning" (SPRADLEY, 1979, p.100). In the following analysis of components, the attributes that typify the unity of such relation can be found. At this point the fine distinctions between the categories of the domain have to be analyzed. Finally, the super-ordinate principles of order and possible schemes of meaning within the investigated culture have to be identified too. This topic integrates the concepts of the domain, the taxonomy and the dimensions of contrast condensed to sets of contrasts. If meaningful super-categories of order appear within the material we are working on a cultural theme. SPRADLEY defines these themes as follows:

> "For purposes of ethnographic research I will define a cultural theme as any cognitive principle, tacit or implicit, recurrent in a number of domains and serving as a relationship among subsets of cultural meaning. ...Themes are assertions that have a high degree of generality" (SPRADLEY, 1979, p.186). [8]

3. Description, Localization and Analysis of a Semantic Field in a Prison

With an exemplary description and an analysis of a single domain from the dictionary of expressions of the institutional knowledge the following paragraphs will demonstrate how the method of ethnographic semantics can be used for the understanding of a specific social order. It will also be shown how this analysis is linked to theoretical concepts of the middle range. The restriction to one term only, its pragmatic semantics and its reformulation as a super-ordinate cultural theme may seem to be a gross reduction at first sight. Yet, in consideration of the limited space of this text and also to avoid getting lost in the extensive field of ethnography, proceeding in this exemplary way appears appropriate. The material stems from an investigation done in the first half of the nineties in a Swiss penal institution that practiced the so-called "open prison-practice". This type of prison functions without the otherwise abundant equipment such as weapons, walls, barbed wire, electronic security systems etc. The main characteristic, in contrast to ordinary prison, is the almost complete lack of communication restrictions during group labor, within the large refectory and during spare time spent on the prison site. As in the case described here, the management of such institutions can mostly be considered as part of a reformist strand within the penal system. Only in such environments there is a chance of reasonable access to the field and also some interest for the results of social research.[1] [9]

With a first approximation of the phenomenon of imprisonment in open prison-practice, the pedagogically inspired differentiation of several forms of punishment was analyzed. The original term to describe this open prison-practice was coined relocation. In the following parts of this text I shall describe the emergence of a cultural theme resulting from the domain relocation, starting with an exploration of the manifold connotations of this term within the institutional context. [10]

Relocations, i.e. the assignment of inmates to different forms of prison-practice, belong to a catalogue of possible disciplinary measures within the institution commonly used by management. Within the institution, relocations are organized into five forms of punishment with different sets of deprivation: normal imprisonment, half freedom/half imprisonment, isolation and a special program for those unable to work (original term: additional program). Relocation as a method used for maintaining order within the institution positions the inmate within the existent hierarchy, and it frames the reciprocal possibilities and expectations of social action of all persons involved. With the exception of an ideal trajectory that is valid for all inmates, i.e. "entry—normal punishment/half freedom—exit", relocations are not voluntarily but they are organized by the authority. The following description of a relocation by the prison director is a clear example:

1 Those interested in finding out more details about the prison Saxerriet in the Rhine valley and its internal life should consult the following published articles: MAEDER, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; MAEDER & BROSZIEWSKI, 1997b. These articles also contain more information about encompassing analyses. These texts are available only in German.

> "If you know inmate Tony, he is a severely depressive man whose depression shows in pain and [not understandable]. Everything has been tried on Tony, even in our hospital in Pfäffers [not understandable]. Dr. Frank, our psychiatrist, says, he does not know what else to try, the doctor says, we have examined this and that, we can't carry on since we don't know what it will cost and there is just nothing clear. Sure, there is some stomach problem that could be treated with Antra or something else ... but in the end we decided he will take part in the additional program *and this happens compulsorily. You have to*!"[2] [11]

Another dimension of relocation, or in that case transfer, i.e. enabling to do something, can be seen in the following extract of material from a meeting where staff members were challenged to battle the constant and virulent drug-problem in the institution and to maintain order:

> "In that case we have to try to come to grips with it. *We* [prosodic emphasis] can't really solve it ... but I think we should try to do something about it. We can't get the upper hand on it. But we should not just slacken the reins." [12]

One inmate had drawn the director's attention to an unrest among the other inmates that had arisen from the prisoners' impression that measures taken against a drug consumer were too weak. The inmate metaphorically described this "not just slacken the reins" as physical relocation:

> "This [bangs the table] produced unrest among the folks inside and I told him that. I said, Mr. C, the folks come, hey. They come [bangs the table] [inmate quotes the boss]: 'he was the boss [bangs the table] he would say how things would be handled here—we wouldn't have any say in this at all' and thus the discussion had been ended *since we then all sat against that wall at the back, fluttering*." [13]

He quotes the boss (= C. the prison director) who made it clear to the inmates sitting at the table with him who was calling the shots. This statement seemed so impressive that the inmate and his colleagues felt as if they had been relocated against the wall and as if they were "fluttering", though all of them were still sitting at the table. In this case, the inmates are relocated with the use of power in a face-to-face-situation via language. A relationship that is meaningful for hierarchy in this social order can be clarified in the following manner: there is no doubt, where the power is. [14]

These three cases of transfer or relocation described so far—*practices of sorting inmates*, the *challenge* of staff to make use of delegated *competencies of action* and the clear *statement* about who has the final say—doubtlessly contribute to the disciplinary maintenance of running an institution in an orderly fashion. They situate staff and inmates within the official local social structure and they divide the heterogeneous mass of prisoners into small groups of similar inmates easier to control. However, taken as such they do not allow a sufficiently sound

2 The translations of this and the following interview passages can only be a rough approximation of the contents of the examples in German.

statement about the reasons why the inmates in the institution generally co-operate with this institutional order. [15]

In this institutional culture, power to relocate not only appears in the dimensions described so far. It is differentiated further since it is a semantic field (domain). For inmates transferring is also a form of being at mercy, of menace and exclusion. This form of relocation in the organizational culture is part of an unquestionable everyday knowledge about the institution. It is mentioned in the stories and it is detectable in form of a reference pattern that can be reproduced in manifold and highly routine ways: it refers to a cultural theme. [16]

Some of these stories are well known in the institution because they keep reappearing in similar forms. The horizon of meanings of this type of narrative relocation will be described. The inmate Stefan reports

> "If you are relocated to Regensdorf you have to punch the first inmate who wants anything in the face without prior warning. Even if the other is two meters tall or a Yugo knifer and who is going to make mincemeat of you afterwards. Only this way you can survive there, otherwise they treat you as they like it. There, it is not like here the director who governs, but those who call the shots, the Yugo-mafia and the drug-Columbians." [17]

Answering the question how he would know what to do in Regensdorf (another high security prison) Stefan answered, that one would just find out about it. Everybody would know that! Especially the "Yugos" (Yugoslavs) and the Columbians in Regensdorf are generally feared for their supposed brutality and readiness for knife fights. In Saxerriet they are reported as controlling the drug-dealing in the prison in Regensdorf and that they would regulate debts and other "blunders" with sharpened ballpoints. In unattended moments the victim that had not paid or that would otherwise not obey, would have such a ballpoint rammed into the buttock from behind, as a warning. The victim would also be informed that, next time, any other part of the body could be targeted. Such potential danger can be prevented, according to Stefan, by signalizing from the start, one would oppose against demands for submission by other prisoners. One not only puts oneself in danger fighting with other inmates but also exposes oneself to routine sanctions in the institution: open fights are normally strictly punished by disciplinary action in Swiss prisons. [18]

The story is well worth noting because it reproduces the knowledge of Stefan about a place he does not know personally, but that is highly likely to be used as place for relocations of inmates to and from Saxerriet. Yet, the explicit advice for action is clear and the implicit counter current is coherent: it is better here. The degree of truth in such accounts that cannot be tested in advance by the prisoner is less apparent in instructions like these. Within the interpretation frame the inmates produce a cognitive cell that locks them up mentally into the prison culture just by talking about prison experiences. In a particularly drastic and clear way this is demonstrated in a story about his experiences told by Markus. Before his time in Saxerriet he was imprisoned in the Philippines:

> "Here, this is a kindergarten, an absolute kindergarten. They don't have a clue here what is going on in the prison of Manila. There you must fight to survive, fight for real, with a knife. You can never sleep peacefully there, you always have to take care that nobody gets hold of you there. You can forget about food, you have to buy it from the wardens and they are corrupt and you have no money. After a short time there I was as thin as my little finger. Well, I knocked one down that wanted to bugger me. I let him have it and then they knew they couldn't fuck me around. There, 30 people are in one cell and it is so small that they can't all lie down at the same time. And you're just always in there. You don't have anything there: nothing to do, nothing to eat but you have to be on guard constantly." [19]

In this story the current whereabouts are not introduced as suitable like the kindergarten metaphor indicates. But compared to the prison in the Philippines the current situation looks undoubtedly better. [20]

Not only in direct face-to-face talk but also in the institution's journal "Bricks" from April 1994 such knowledge about relocation to other institutions can be found. It is common practice to print a one- or two-monthly record of important events in the prison on the back cover of the journal. The respective author of this text is an inmate with the pseudonym "the chronicler". In the record from February 15th to the Easter holiday in 1994 we find a story that fits neatly into the picture given above. Referring to the obligatory monthly inmate assembly on March 22nd of 1994 where the new building of the high security prison Regensdorf was introduced by the director, we find the following text:

> "Generally, Regensdorf is responsible for re-offenders, with a proportion of foreigners of about 70%. Surely this is not always easy to handle for the 230 staff members. In particular the different languages and cultures often lead to complication.
>
> According to a statement of the prison director every day without major violence is a good day". [21]

The distribution of knowledge about other institutions that implicitly and involuntarily emphasizes the positive situation in the prison investigated can be proven through at least three channels. The inmates tell each other horror stories about other institutions. On the occasion of the obligatory information assembly, the external director reports about the biggest high security prison in Switzerland and in the journal distributed to all inmates the lecture about the prison in Regensdorf reappears, condensed into a few sentences bearing the essential message. [22]

At this point one could argue the examples given are too extreme: the largest high security prison in Switzerland with more than 300 inmates and its proportion of 70% foreigners and a foreign prison in an underdeveloped country are not comparable to the model institution Saxerriet with a proportion of foreigners of 20 to 30%. But this objection is hardly convincing, since in other comparable open institutions we find similar relocation stories, for example, as the inmate Thomas reports about another open prison in the village of Realta in the canton of

Grisons. Thomas, a 31 year-old male, explained he was a complete cripple because he had lost all his teeth and because his hand was full of surgical plastic and screws. He attributes this damaged hand precisely to his imprisonment in Realta. According to his story, he had been forced to work even though he had regularly consulted the doctor. Though the doctor had confirmed tendovaginitis, the institution had not believed him. Moreover, they had him relocated on purpose to another kind of work that damaged his hand even further. They had him suffer so long there that his hand was completely destroyed. In the hospital he had threatened to commit suicide in case if he was sent back to Realta. Here everything was better, one could talk to the staff and in particular there was not so much hassle about "shit" (Cannabis) as elsewhere. If one got caught there was punishment and that was it. No additional harassment like the allocation of particularly bad work. This kind of treatment was common practice in all other institutions he knew. [23]

4. Conclusion

We can now ask ourselves what the competent narrator in the field has to report in order to introduce a story in this institution that blends in with the cultural theme of the place that is linked to the term of relocation. He would have to explain that every institutional location within reach and all those he has gone through are more dangerous and worse than the one he is actually in. The stories with their immanent cognitive structure of relocation and the comparisons of other institutions to the "here and now" produce the structural power of language in this case in the form of explicit and implicit lessons. Each of the persons present is subjected to this power. Due to the communicative permeability of the organization and because of the function of this language as a pointer toward different perspectives in the sense of a membership categorization device (SILVERMAN, 1993, pp.80-89), it produces a limited emotional attachment in the inmates for the current whereabouts. [24]

Viewed from a sociology of knowledge perspective, such stories produce "small transcendences of everyday life" (LUCKMANN, 1991, pp.167f) due to the reality-producing power of integration into the "machinery of conversation" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1969, p.163). These stories refer to concepts of the sociology of religion since the report to recipients is about something non-experienced that is indicated in the current flow of communication. But his non-experienced realms are generally being considered as possible outcomes in the real life of prisoners. The importance of such transcendences stored up narratively in the institutional culture of a prison is implied by the fact that they refer to a part of the "world" that the reporters and the listeners know very well from elsewhere—in religious stories: underworlds, hell(s) and other places that are—socially conveyed—and individually at hand as cognitive schemes of punishment for nonconformist action. Seen from a theory of power perspective these stories represent an element for the effective production of co-operation through self-disciplining. In that way, the architecturally and, with regard to the governance, reformed and communicatively open prison becomes an apparatus of power in FOUCAULT's terms. In an open prison, a *narrative microphysics of power* spreads in such a way that the inmates

subordinate themselves to the existing social order for having the privilege to communicate. This power is nothing which belongs to someone but something which unfolds through webs of meaning (FOUCAULT, 1977, pp.38f). [25]

In correspondence with the theory of structuration we can see and hear within the field how bigger social formations are rendered topical and are stabilized. GIDDENS wrote: "All social systems, no matter how grand or far-flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life" (1984, p.36). Everyday talk of inmates in open prison-practice, at first sight insignificant, describes and links the internal life in the organization with the outside and super-ordinate social structure of the penal system. And it stabilizes the local order owing to its status of cultural theme in the sense of ethnographic semantics. Unfortunately this result also has less pleasant political consequences for the penal system: the humane punishment in open institutions with less restricted communication among inmates is probably only recognized if the grislier, high security institutions also exist and its conditions known to prisoners. This motivates the inmates in open prisons to cooperate and it allows the open prisons to function properly. [26]

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