

The field worker and the analyst. Combining the strengths of methodological discourses in the U.S. and Germany.

Stephanie Bethmann & Debora Niermann (Freiburg University)

Paper presented at the „8th International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry“, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (05/19/2012)

In this paper, we suggest two metaphorical concepts to illustrate tendencies in qualitative methodologies in the U.S. and Germany: the fieldworker and the analyst. The described differences between the field worker and the analyst do not strictly run across the country lines but in the sense of Weberian “ideal types” refer to the predominance of respective methods within the two country’s methodological landscapes. The fieldworker is usually presented as deeply engaged in his or her field, while the analyst stands for a more detached, analytical gaze on textual data. We argue that the methodological discussion may profit from the combination of the both approach’s strengths. Our proposition is to use positioning analysis as a strategy for integrating self-reflexive subjectivity and textual analysis. Positioning analysis allows researchers to reflect upon their engagement and actions within the field, and ground these reflections in transcribed data.

1. The field worker and the analyst

To begin, we briefly examine an account a fieldworker gives of her work: Lisa Wade, a sociologist who has researched on gendered bodies in the field of Lindy Hop swing dancing.

“As the start of this inquiry I had been dancing lindy hop intensely for three years. My dancing, then, was one mode of data collection. My ability also offered me some cultural capital with my informants and the ability to interpret and make insights available only to those whose body has achieved a high level of specialization. (...) Alongside this deep data on the body designed to tap into how it feels to do gender as a lindy hopper, I watched how dancers used their bodies” (Wade 2011, 228, emphasis added).

We have chosen this particular account of fieldwork, because it displays some notable characteristics of ethnographic research: Firstly, the visibility of the researcher as a person interacting in the field, secondly, the conceptualisation of data gathering through personal, bodily experience, thirdly, the importance of personal relationships and fourthly, the mentioning of time spent in the researched community. As a result of these characteristics of her research, Wade claims she comes to insights into the field and valid interpretations of what is going on in the field, knowledge which would be opaque to her otherwise.

The concept of a researcher as fieldworker is linked to a specific methodological premise: Understanding other people’s worlds occurs by putting oneself in their place, by perceiving and acting alongside them. “Being there” is crucial to understanding, and constructs the researcher as “expert”. The credibility of results is often measured by the length of stay in the field and the level one has “gone native”. The field is understood by ‘entering into it’ (Bergson, quoted in Charmaz/Mitchell 2001: 163).

Consequentially, the field worker becomes part of the investigated phenomenon, and reflects upon his or her own position in the field. Since the crisis of representation (Clifford/Marcus 1986; Behar/Gordon 1996) it is has become an almost obligatory practice of ethnographic writing to clarify one’s own subjectivity as a researcher. In so doing, one high-

lights the data's co-constructive character. The same claim is observable as well in other prevalent methods in the US, such as Grounded Theory's "Second Generation" (Morse 2009; Charmaz 2006; Clarke 2005)

Ever since the early Chicago school, ethnography has played a central role in sociological studies in the U.S. In contrast, ethnography is present German sociology, but it tends to play a rather marginal role. The most notable German research methods, developed since the 1970s (Flick 2005), focus on the microscopic analysis of transcribed textual data (Maiwald 2005). It is less the field worker, we metaphorically argue, and rather the analyst who dominates this landscape.

To give a short example of a typical research account of an analyst, we have translated the following segment from Meike Schwabe's study on how young patients with seizures present themselves in consultations with their physicians. The following analysis focuses on the patient's agency:

Doctor: ye:s (-) what would YOU like (-) to be the outcome today,

Patient: I dunNO; well .hh mommy said we would come HERE, and then talk with=you, (-) and that you'll check, whether (-)

whether it'd be BETter, for me to again

(---) for me to (-) come here for another short period;

Doctor: mh,

Patient: or something (Schwabe 2006: 212, translation by S.B.&D.N.)

In her paper, Schwabe analyses the segment as follows:

"(...) By reconstructing a past situation, [the patient] gives her mother the agentic role ("mommy said"). The patient herself is not recognizable as an acting subject, only as part of a "we" in an object position. Even though, the patient thereby constructs herself as part of an acting collective, the "we" has the function of diminishing her position as an autonomous actor." (Schwabe 2006: 112f., translation by S.B.&D.N.)

In comparison to the account quoted before, we would like to again stress some characteristics: Firstly, the focus on data-centred analysis, meticulously grounding interpretation in textual data. Secondly, the invisibility of the researcher in the writing. Typically, the interpretation appears as if independent from the researchers presence and perspective in the field. Thirdly, the claim of authority is grounded in thorough analysis, and not in 'being there'.

The fieldworker tries to understand a unique social world by living in it. The analyst, in contrast, is trying to detach him- or herself from the studied phenomena through refined methods of textual analysis. One methodological reason lies in the impossibility of understanding, which Alfred Schütz (1967) and Harold Garfinkel (1967), among others, have elaborated: We always understand the actions and utterances of others through our own preconceptions ("system of relevance") and from our own point of view. Analysts aim to methodologically control inevitable preconceptions by transparently grounding in data how they come to their interpretations. Dismissing the authority of "being there", it follows that the emphasis lies not on collecting data, but on analysing it, the latter taking up more time and resources. As a result, the analyst will construct him- or herself as detached from the field, and barely dis-

relationships between researchers and researched, nor his or her own subjectivity. Moreover, these topics are almost tabooed in German sociology – a troubling affiliation with positivistic science.

Like Kathy Charmaz has criticised with reference to grounded theory: The constructionist paradigm has led to exploring subjective worldviews of the researched. But the subjectivity of the researcher is unlikely to be systematically taken into account by this type of analyst (Charmaz 2006).

2. Positioning Analysis

We suggest to utilize positioning analysis as a methodological bridge across the gap between the fieldworker and the analyst. It is possible to apply thorough analysis techniques to reflect on documented interaction between researchers and researched. This makes visible „the mutual creation of knowledge by researchers and research participants“ (Charmaz/Mitchell 2008, 160). It prompts a self-reflection in the field that is more transparent and data-centred. And it helps to develop a self-reflection that truly treats our own actions as data, equal to the actions of the research participants. As Mannheim (2004/1922: 117) has stated: When we intend to understand the *social* meaning of our own actions, we have to analyze the manifest objectifications of these actions as if we were strangers to ourselves. This brings the interpretation of researcher’s and participants’ action onto the same level: the actions of neither can be understood through introspection.

Positioning analysis was developed in the Anglo-Saxon discursive psychology. The method has been particularly advanced by the works of Michael Bamberg and Neil Korobov (Korobov/Bamberg 2004; Korobov 2001), among others (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2000; Wolf 2000). Positioning is characterized as a speech act through which speakers claim a position within social contexts. In their manner of speaking, they make visible their relation to themselves, to others whether present or absent, and to the topics being discussed. At the same time, they are communicating how they would like to be seen by the person with whom they are speaking. Both self-positioning and positioning of the other can be either explicit, or implicit. Whatever we say, we always, even unintentionally, position ourselves.

How can positioning analysis be useful for both the “field worker“ and the “analyst?“ We will analyze a translated interview excerpt from the study “Legitimization of technology – technique of legitimization. A qualitative study on the use of MAXqda in qualitative research“ by Christian Schmieder (2009). Schmieder, the German interviewer, conducted the study for his Magister thesis. The interviewee is a young graduated researcher who uses the software MaxQDA in her own qualitative studies.

Interviewee: DO you have experience with (.) the program?

Christian: i have already (.) worked a little with maxqda (.) umm but ONLY (.) learning by doing. one time~ i had this 30 day version [mhm,] had for uh paper (.) and then read this book from KUckartz [mhm,] (.) this: ähm:: the INtroduction i did the Exercises [mhm, mhm,] and=umm (1) wanna REALly. do the magister thesis with maxqda (.) organize [mhm,] (.) a:nd that is why i am in the organisation class [mhm,] (1) <<quieter>bu:t um> i HAVE already worked with atlasti [mhm,] onna project where I was WORking as a TA (1) [mhm, mhm,] <<quieter> bu:t> (.) so: REALly intense [mhm.] (.) intense insights ive neve had before.

Interviewee: mhm. (1) ja, i think that is important, right? That you really KNOW the programm. [mhm.] SO that you can interview people that use it; (.) then you could understand the problem the people !HAVE! [mhm] (.) with the program. if you know what you are doin. because SO (.) OK ill say: its about the coding diagram an then (.) donno if THAT'S what you MEANT or NOT; [mhm, mhm.] but i think that you have to be good if you wanna do an (.) <<quieter> evaluation. (.) it's an evaluation your doin or how is it more? (.) to understand?> (Schmieder 2009: 34, translation by S.B.&D.N.)

We cannot demonstrate a detailed analysis here, but would like to point out some acts of positioning in this segment:

In the beginning, the Interviewee turns the tables: The interview situation defines her to be answering questions. Now she claims the role of interviewing Christian. In so doing, she positions him as obliged to answer her. The emphasis on the first word indicates that she is in doubt of his experience. Asking him, she makes it clear that *his* experience is a relevant issue to the interview situation. Christian accepts the role ascribed to him: His answer to her question is detailed and obliging. He does not demand back his position as the interviewer. Some keywords further highlight Christian's positioning toward the topic which the Interviewee has defined, his experience with the program MAXQDA: a little, only, learning by doing, 30 day version, paper, Introduction, Exercises, wanna ... do the magister thesis, class, TA, never before. Using these phrases, Christian positions himself modestly: as a learner. The interviewee picks up on that self-positioning and lectures him about his shortcomings. Therein she positions herself as a more experienced researcher who can give the younger colleague advise, but also criticises him rather openly. In her manner of speaking, she makes a claim to define the competences needed for conducting such an interview – competences Christian lacks in her view.

How does the mutual positioning instruct us to actually understand the field better? The interviewee turns the interview into an investigation on competence and professionalism. It turns out in Christian's work that using software is an important means of positioning oneself as competent and one's work as scientific. What we are looking at is not only an informative interview. It is also a competitive situation in which competence is actively negotiated. What is crucial to the situation is the relative position of the Interviewee and Christian in the field of study. Christian as the slightly younger researcher, has unintentionally challenged the Interviewees understanding of research during the interview. She thinks of it as an evaluation, while for Christian it is a sociology of science study, and some of his questions about her understanding of data and texts had been irritating to her (ibid.: 135). He then finds himself in the middle of positioning processes, which are central to the studied field.

3. Conclusion

Positioning analysis can serve as a way to combine strengths of methodological discourses in the U.S. and Germany. It enables a data-centred analysis of one's own subjectivity, and relationships in the field. This facilitates a self-reflection that does not rely on introspection and provides a valuable insight into the process of co-constructing knowledge in research.

4. References

- Behar, Ruth/ Gordon, Deborah A. (eds.) (1995): *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley/L.A./London: University of California Press.
- Charmaz, Kathy/ Mitchell, Richard G. (2001): *Grounded Theory in Ethnography*. In: Atkinson, Paul/ Doffey, Amanda/ Delamont, Sarah/ Lofland, John/ Lofland, Lyn (eds.): *The SAGE Handbook of Ethnography*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp. 160-174.
- Charmaz, Kathy (2006): *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Clarke, Adele (2005): *Situational Analysis. Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Clifford, James/Marcus, George E. (eds.) (1986): *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1967): *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Korobov, Neill/ Bamberg, Michael (2004) Positioning a 'mature' self in interactive practices: How adolescent males negotiate 'physical attraction' in group talk and Development as micro-genetic positioning. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 22, pp. 471-492.
- Korobov, Neill (2001, September): *Reconciling Theory with Method: From Conversation Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to Positioning Analysis* [36 paragraphs]. 2(3). Available at: <http://www.qualitativeresearch.net/fqs/fqseng.htm>.
- Lucius-Hoene, G./ Deppermann, A. (2000): *Narrative identity empiricized. A dialogical and positioning approach to autobiographical research interviews*. *Narrative Inquiry*, 10/1, pp. 199-222.
- Maiwald, Kai-Olaf (2005): *Competence and Praxis: Sequential Analysis in German Sociology* [46 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3), Art. 31, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0503310>.
- Mannheim, Karl (2004/1922): *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation*. In: Strübing, Jörg/Schnettler, Bernt (Hg.): *Methodologie interpretativer Sozialforschung. Klassische Grundlagentexte*. Konstanz: UVK, pp. 101-153.
- Morse, Janice/ Stern, Phyllis Noerager/ Bowers, Barbara/ Corbin, Juliet M./ Charmaz, Kathy/ Clarke, Adele E. (2009): *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.
- Schmieder, Christian (2009): *Computergestützte qualitative Datenanalyse – Technik der Legitimation – Legitimation der Technik*. S. 34-37. URL: http://www.freidok.uni-freiburg.de/volltexte/7082/pdf/schmieder_caqdas_dec.pdf
- Schütz, Alfred (1967): *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Schwabe, Meike (2006): „Ich weiß das jetzt am besten auch“. *Agency im Sprechen anfallserkrankter Kinder und Jugendlicher*. *Gesprächsforschung – Online Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion*, 7, pp. 201 – 223.
- Wade, Lisa (2011): *The emancipatory promise of the habitus: Lindy hop, the body, and social change*. In: *Ethnography* 12/2, pp. 224-246.
- Wolf, Ricarda (2000): *Soziale Positionierung im Gespräch*. In: *Deutsche Sprache. Zeitschrift für Theorie, Praxis und Dokumentation*, 27. Berlin, pp. 69-94.