

Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften

Institut für Grundlagen der Gesellschaftswissenschaften

Prof. Dr. Phil C. Langer
Juniorprofessor für soziologische Sozialpsychologie
Dr. Angela Kühner
Vertretungsprofessorin für qualitative Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung im WiSe 2011/12

Durchwahl +49 (0)69-798 22535
Mobil: +49 (0)176-23621104
Telefax +49 (0)69-798 28062
E-Mail langer@soz.uni-frankfurt.de

6. Mai 2012

Welcome & Introduction to the Methods Conference 2012

Phil C. Langer & Angela Kühner

Good morning and welcome to the conference „On Meaning and Interpretation Authority: Claims in Qualitative Research“. Although Frankfurt may be home to many of you, some others have undertaken quite a journey to join the conference. We greatly appreciate this and hope that the coffee will be strong enough to countervail your trans-Atlantic and trans-African jetlags. Thank you all for coming to this conference and contributing to its (hopeful) success by giving speeches and chairing workshops, presenting posters and participating in the general discussions. It is a pleasure to be here with you today.

As you may have seen in the programme, I planned to share this pleasure with my colleague Angela Kühner, who has co-organized this conference during her visiting professorship for qualitative methods. Unfortunately Angela became ill and I would like to frame this introduction by emphasizing the collaborative nature of this conference, which is rooted in a longstanding research, exchange and discussion process between the two of us.

Addressing “Positions, strategies and perspectives of (self-)critical knowledge production” in qualitative research at a scientific conference is a matter of course and a tricky thing at the same time.

It seems to be a matter of course on the one hand because despite the ongoing diversification of the qualitative paradigm critical claims are essential for the professional self-concept of most of us who

identify as qualitative and socially responsible researchers. (I take this collective “us” for granted, at least for the sake of my argument in this introduction – another problematic claim of course.) Probably it is no coincidence that many innovative developments in qualitative methodology have been driven by critical social sciences like gender, psychosocial or postcolonial studies in the last decade. On the other hand, applying the implicit or explicit critical claims to one’s own research practices sometimes poses considerable challenges. It happens that we find ourselves in research situations, when it seems to be difficult – or even impossible – to implement and do justice to our theoretical or ethical (as methodological) claims, when theoretically sound critique meets paradigmatically bound methodologies. Of course we can talk about these experiences internally in our working groups or confidentially with close colleagues – but talking about them at a public scientific conference? It frames these denominations differently. What does it mean there – that is: here – not only to abstractly admit but personally prove that qualitative research always faces a certain precariousness and moments of failure? Beyond feelings of narcissistic mortification, how may it effect our (real or anticipated) recognition in the scientific community and its attributions of competence? Suddenly the stakes are high.

Having said this the conference has a lot in common with a qualitative research project itself, a kind of experiment, perhaps even a crisis experiment in Garfinkel’s sense. It temporarily brings a space into being to critically reflect how our scientific habitus copes with dilemma situations in qualitative research through certain – often ad hoc – practices, when we cannot – or do not want to – rely on formal and authorized rules.

We assume that these challenges we are confronted with in our everyday research practice, these experiences of demanding references to our critical claims, that they are not incomparable individual cases that have to do only with a specific choice of research question, time or financial resources. In contrast we assume that they point to structural dilemmas that are inscribed into the scientific knowledge production in qualitative research itself.

Let me exemplify this by specifying some questions that have marked the starting point of our thinking about this conference. What, for instance, does it methodologically mean, if we understand both the researching and the researched subject as “decentered” in accordance to Foucault, Butler, Hall and others?” In the interdependence of interactive and fluid construction and re-construction dynamics of subjectivity – who in effect does research on whom? How do I understand my subject position as a power-sensitive researcher, if I act on the assumption that power differences are constitutively inscribed in research? If we take serious the proclaimed crises of representation, how do we cope with the dilemma of difference that researching societal relations of stigmatisation and marginalisation seems to presuppose a – at least reflexive – construction of the phenomenon and runs the risk of re-producing a kind of quasi-essentialist othering that one wants to study. And I do not even dare

to imagine what it may methodologically involve to take over Karen Barad's posthumanist notion into empirical social research...

Structural conflicts also emerge, if we assume that our social as critical research requires scientific authorization itself to have a certain impact. Regarding a potential claim of a critical deconstruction of the hegemonic scientific discourse and the societal and political practices that it legitimize, one can raise the question: How can I be heard, if I aim at radically challenging the very conditions of the possibility of speaking itself because I perceive them to be saturated with power and producing manifold exclusions? Which standards do I have to submit to be read and taken serious and how does this subordination effect my position and the power of critique of the discourse that I am still part of? To what extent do possible subversive strategies just self-reflexively rotate around themselves and self-referentially lose the subject-matter of research?

Another thematic field I would like to mention is related to the increasingly important claims of participation of those that were traditionally perceived as mere objects of research. We might agree that the topos of "giving voice to the other" is highly problematic because it always goes along with a paternalistic research position. But what does it, then, mean in our research practice to let the other speak of herself? Where is the necessary limit of participation, if our activity is to be recognized as a scientific research practice and not just any social or political activism? And who is in the position to define this limit? How easy am I tempted to enforce my claims as a professional researcher in the process of a joint interpretation of data? Given the significance of scientific authorship – do I, at the end of the day, really affiliate the co- and peer researchers on my journal paper?

Finally: How do we cope with competing methodical claims in times of a codification in qualitative research? How is the dilemma to be aware of the relativity of one's own theoretical or methodological position on the one hand and to sustain the will to produce significant „true“ knowledge on the other expressed in our research practice?

These more general questions that will be subject to more detailed and empirically based explorations in the thematic workshops crosscut disciplines and established discursive fields, are not just asked in sociology or with regard to gender issues or particular methods. As a consequence we made the decision not to re-discipline the discussion at this conference by, for instance, offering workshops on social science methods, biographical research or the narrative interview. In contrast we see a particular chance of this conference in its potential to bring together quite different disciplines, discursive references, research questions and methodical approaches in which similar challenges occur. The conference, therefore, is about an exchange of difficult experiences in conceptualizing and conducting qualitative research from critical positions. It is about sharing strategies that we may have developed ad hoc or reflexively post hoc to cope with these difficulties, sometimes more, sometimes less productively. And it is about perspectives, whether these strategies can

be translated from the individual case into a broader methodological and methodic discussion in qualitative research. We all have questions, right? And, hopefully, some answers as well.

In this sense Bourdieus expectation for an inspiring seminar reflects our expectation for this conference. He writes – I quote in German: “Was ich erwarte, ist gerade kein formvollendeter, das heißt defensiver und in sich geschlossener Diskurs, der (verständlicherweise) vor allem eines soll, nämlich die Angst vor Kritik bannen; sondern eine einfache, bescheidene Darstellung der Arbeit, die man gemacht hat, der Schwierigkeiten, auf die man gestoßen ist, der Probleme usw. Nichts ist so allgemein und verallgemeinerbar wie die Schwierigkeiten. Es wird mit Sicherheit ein Trost für jeden sein, dass so manche Schwierigkeit, die er auf seine eigene Unbeholfenheit oder Inkompetenz geschoben hat, bei allen auftritt; und alle werden realer von den scheinbar ganz auf den Eintelfall zugeschnittenen Ratschlägen profitieren“, die – und hier verändere ich Bourdieus Aussage ein wenig – wir gemeinsam erarbeiten können.

The conference, hence, brings together social and political scientist, pedagogical and ethnological researchers and even literary scholars from, for example, critical migration, gender and postcolonial studies, discourse and psychoanalyses. With this regard it seems to be at quite „right“ here in Frankfurt as a paradigmatic place of critique with its versatile traditions of thinking.

Within this lively academic patchwork the conference was initiated from a particular social psychological perspective that tries to interlink research on subjectivity, reflexivity and critical knowledge production with the endeavour to conceptually and methodologically integrate doubts, uncertainties and ambivalences as normal and productive into qualitative research. Understanding the conference as kind of a crisis experiment with regard to us as organizers and all of us in this particular situation of the conference has been posing two questions: Who would come? And what would – or will – happen? And in the light of the difficulties to publicly speak about the outlined dilemmas we would not identify as sociological social psychologists, if we haven't thought about taking up the anticipated conference dynamics in our concept. A couple of specific reflexive elements are inscribed in the conference flow. One is the panel with open participant observers at the end of each day that shall allow for reflecting about what has been said and what could not be said and why – or why not. Metaphorically and non-metaphysically speaking: the conference observes itself. At the flip chart over there you will have the opportunity to bring in your own impressions, observations and critical remarks during the conference. Just take a card, for example during coffee break or the poster forum, and pin down your comment. In addition, there will be an open space in the last workshop phase tomorrow that you can use freely use to discuss questions and issues that might come up in the course of the conference but are not yet represented in the program. This other flip chart over there is meant for all participants of this conference to collect possible ideas of what one could imagine to be interesting to discuss in the open space. A somewhat paradoxical aim: We really wish

that something new might emerge in the conference discussion that would break up the framework of the conference – but, nevertheless, in a proper and controlled space, of course.

Having said this I am already in the middle of some brief notes on the concept and structure of this conference. It is aimed at bringing together programmatic keynote speeches, more interactive workshops, reflection panels and a poster forum in the late afternoon today. On a conference website we would like to continue the discussion that will have begun here hopefully. In a password protected website area we will make articles, papers and the PowerPoint presentations of the conference available and will provide an open discussion forum. You are warmly invited to participate in this process. The informal registration that is necessary due to copyright can be done at the reception counter or by email.

Let me advise you of three distinctive features of this conference: Firstly, the systematic inclusion of students in the process of conceptualising, organising and performing the conference seems to be noteworthy. Not only do Vesna Glavaski, Constanze Oth, Aisha-Nusrat Ahmad and Benjamin Klemm as students of sociology at the faculty officially act as co-organisers of the conference, the former two have initiated two workshops sessions autonomously, one with a distinct call for papers for student's qualification theses. Even at the risk of sounding a bit paternalistic: You'de done a marvellous job! We regard a student's involvement in the scientific discourse and in research practices at any early stage to be essential. Following this claim we have made the decision not to raise a conference fee to avoid the exclusion mechanisms based on economic resources and to allow students to participate in the scientific exchange.

Secondly, the conference is aimed at encouraging young academics. The poster forum for the presentation of their research experiences after the second workshop phase means a venture of course. We are quite aware of the challenges that occur when one tries to fix critical methodological reflections on a DIN A 1 format. Our special thanks therefore are addressed to the seven researchers from Germany and Austria for their courage and efforts. We are looking forward to seeing how you have met these challenges and your own theoretical and critical claims and discussing your findings or questions in a cooperative and helpful atmosphere.

Thirdly, you certainly have not missed the curious mix of languages in the context of the conference: in the propaganda materials like flyers, booklets, the website, in the overall communications, here at the conference itself. The keynote lectures by our speakers from London and Toronto will be given in English, some workshops will be carried out in German, some in English. Just take the detailed description of the particular sessions in the booklet for orientation. Of course I could peripatetically try to legitimate the language patchwork conceptually by emphasising the promotional effects on communication and interaction or the idea of qualitative research as an interpretative endeavour for understanding that may be staged here. The simple truth is that it just happened in the course of the conference preparation. There will be an English translation from the Spanish today as well, but

unfortunately we did not manage to offer a sign language translator for the keynote lectures to work against the structural exclusion of people from a scientific discourse that is so much based on the spoken word. We hope, however, that you will engage in this mix-up of languages, that you may enjoy it at least a bit, and help each other when ad hoc translations should be necessary.

As another challenge of this conference we will have to change locations several times: for the workshops within this building today and to the Campus Westend tomorrow. Our apologies for any inconvenience related to the campus migration that has become necessary due to the ongoing semester lectures and the comparatively short prearrangement of the conference. The first keynote lecture following this introduction and the reflection panel on intermediate results at the end of the day will take place in this auditorium. The posters will be presented in the foyer after the second workshop phase. However, they are displayed throughout the conference. For the sessions of each of the two workshop phases today we reserved three rooms in this building. In addition to the auditorium one will be performed in the Alter Senatssaal one level below, another one in room 32 B on ground level. You should have received a plan with the locations where the sessions are scheduled at the reception. Please note that some sessions had to be undergone changes due to illness of speakers. The directions to the rooms are signposted, but be free to approach any of our team, if you have problems finding your way.

Please also appeal to us concerning lunch options in this area. At the reception you can find information and maps that not only include the obligatory canteen at the campus but different restaurants and bistros nearby.

To meet your smaller physical or psychological needs during the conference different coffees, teas and soft drinks as well as hand-made brownies and carrot cake are available in front of the auditorium. This refers to a very personal concern: There are, you know, quite different kinds of conferences: small and large ones, weeklong and half-day-short ones, some are inspiring, others quite boring, some are traditionally organized, others – well – avant-garde. But they usually have one thing in common: that is bad coffee. Therefore, the offer of the two guys in the foyer who are responsible for the catering at this conference to serve the city's best coffee was really convincing. I just couldn't resist to finally be able to organize a conference with good coffee and to have the opportunity to support a former student's project at the same time.

The other side of the story, however, is the dilemma that came along with the simultaneous realisation of both of our claims to provide free and open access to the conference and create a pleasant conference atmosphere by a tasty catering service: some kind of a financial gap. Sincerely hoping that you might appreciate both things as well, that both things are – in a precise sense – worth to you, we kindly ask you for a contribution that can be made at donation boxes at the registration and the coffee bar.

And in case your abundance of passion to this conference and catering service will result in a profit in this particular issue the money will be turned over to the faculty's students committee for the organization of an autonomous methods tutorial.

You then would then be joining the illustrious cooperation and sponsorship partners that make such a conference possible. Hence, we would like to express our gratitude to the Methodenzentrum Sozialwissenschaften, the Cornelia Goethe Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the International Postgraduate Center Social Sciences, the Stiftung zur Förderung der internationalen wissenschaftlichen Beziehungen der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität and the Institute for the Foundations of Social Sciences for their support of the conference.

We also like to thank the administration, management and technical staff, the speakers and workshop organizers of course and – last but not least – Hannes who developed the intriguing layout and corporate design of our propaganda materials.

Coming to the end of this introduction and referring again to the perception of the conference as a crisis experiment I would like to express my hope that the remarkable and unexpected response the conference has gotten may be a promising sign that our wishes will be fulfilled: that the exchange of the research experiences in this room will give new impulses for the qualitative methods discussion in general and our own empirical research practices; and that through our discussions we can continue developing and strengthening international scientific networks beyond disciplinary boundaries and discursive fields. We just tried to assemble an appealing program and give some space for a fruitful conference discussion, and now it's up to you to fill this space with your experiences, ideas and – of course – critique.

In this spirit I am looking forward to an exciting conference with lots of critical moments. But before I may introduce our first keynote speaker it is my pleasure to pass over for a brief welcome address of the Faculty of Social Sciences to the faculty's vice dean, Birgit Blättel-Mink.