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The Researcher in an Intercultural Context – A Commentary

Abstracts

EN

The contributions collected in section 2 focus on the role and positioning of the researcher in the research field. Although the contributions are compiled in a comparable way – on the basis of ethnography as a shared research strategy, simultaneously very different perspectives on researchers in the research field are being developed, stemming from different social and cultural backgrounds that structure research practice and the field. The commentary proceeds in two steps: first, the scientific norms of acting in the field codified in ethnography are discussed. In a second step, the article comments on the concrete field approaches in two research projects, which the researchers methodologically reflect on as learning processes.

DE

Die in Teil 2 versammelten Beiträge konzentrieren sich auf die Rolle und Positionierung des:der Forscher:in im Forschungsfeld. Obwohl die Beiträge in vergleichbarer Weise – auf der Grundlage der Ethnographie als gemeinsamer Forschungsstrategie – verfasst sind, werden gleichzeitig sehr unterschiedliche Perspektiven auf die Forschenden im Forschungsfeld entwickelt, die aus unterschiedlichen sozialen und kulturellen Hintergründen herrühren, die die Forschungspraxis und das Feld strukturieren. Der Kommentar geht in zwei Schritten vor: Zunächst werden die in der Ethnographie kodifizierten wissenschaftlichen Normen des Handelns im Feld diskutiert. In einem zweiten Schritt werden die konkreten Feldzugänge in zwei Forschungsprojekten kommentiert, die von den Forschenden methodisch als Lernprozesse reflektiert werden.

PT

As contribuições recolhidas na secção 2 centram-se no papel e no posicionamento do investigador no campo de investigação. Embora os contributos

sejam compilados de forma comparável – com base na etnografia como estratégia de investigação partilhada, estão simultaneamente a ser desenvolvidas perspectivas muito diferentes sobre os investigadores no campo de investigação, decorrentes de diferentes contextos sociais e culturais que estruturam a prática de investigação e o campo. O comentário prossegue em dois passos: primeiro, são discutidas as normas científicas de atuação no terreno codificadas na etnografia. Num segundo passo, o artigo comenta as abordagens de campo concretas em dois projectos de investigação, sobre as quais os investigadores reflectem metodologicamente como processos de aprendizagem.

JA

第二部に収録された各論稿は、研究フィールドでの研究者の役割と立ち位置に焦点を当てている。これらの論文は、エスノグラフィの方法をとっており、相互に類似した論点をもつものの、フィールドでの研究者に対するまなざしはひじょうに異なっている。これは、研究実践とフィールドとを構成している社会的・文化的背景の違いから生じている。コメントは二段階に分けておこなった：第一に、エスノグラフィに盛り込まれたフィールドでの行為に関する学術的規範を議論した。第二に、二つの研究プロジェクトでとられた具体的なフィールドへのアプローチ方法にコメントした。ここでは、研究者が方法論に照らして自身の学習プロセスとして省察するアプローチを検討した。

Ethnography: acting in the field as a research norm

The contribution by Karin Bräu and Laura Fuhrmann opens the chapter with a general introduction to ethnography and key challenges in collecting data. The two authors present ethnography as an open research strategy that always values appropriateness to the research objects more highly than accurate adherence to certain methodological norms – of course, this is also a norm that the researcher has to follow. The great strength of ethnography is that it is genuine field research. The researcher's task is to position themselves in the field in such a way that direct contact with those being researched, and the most unobstructed insight possible into their everyday practice, can be achieved. Openness is the decisive criterion for this and means a fundamental openness to the new things that can be experienced in the context of research as well as a corresponding openness in addressing the field and its members, of the research question and of the observation perspectives. Because it is not the established scientific categories that guide knowledge, but what is experienced in the field, the development of genuinely new knowledge becomes

possible. The goal that guides knowledge production is to find out “what the hell is going on” (Geertz 1973). The aim is to recognise the implicit rules and structures according to which the everyday social life of the people under research functions. Ethnography is primarily concerned with description as a prerequisite for understanding, not with evaluations on the basis of categories that are thought to be universal. Bräu and Fuhrmann problematise access to the field (here: schools and the classroom) and the positioning of researchers in it in two main ways: on the one hand, as a problem of formal access, which requires knowledge of explicit and implicit hierarchies in schools and school administration (who has the power/authority to grant or deny the researcher access to the field); on the other hand, as a problem of access to so-called “gatekeepers” in the field who allow observation of their everyday practice. The positioning of the researcher in the field is characterised as a field of tension between sensitivity towards the research field, and towards the rules and expectations of scientific discourse: on the one hand, proximity and involvement in the field are crucial (relationship to the situation and field). On the other hand, results must be generalisable in order to be recognised in scientific discourse. Accordingly, any forms of “going native” and “over-identification” (Amann & Hirschauer 1997) should be avoided. The presentation primarily refers to relevant methodological literature from German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries, but problematises the Eurocentric and colonial roots of the approach in ethnology of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Acting in the field as a practical problem and learning opportunity

The two texts by Laura-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi and Félix J. Mulhanga use the research strategy of ethnography in research contexts that are characterised by a high degree of social and cultural difference between the researcher and the researched. The report on both research projects makes it clear that ethnography is a suitable strategy for productively processing these differences and making them fruitful for scientific knowledge. At the same time, it becomes clear what the openness required in ethnography as a fundamental attitude of the researchers can also imply: in certain research fields, in which researchers have great experiences of foreignness, openness means that the researchers have to carry out profound learning processes in order to be recognised in the field.

In her self-reflective article “From taxis to classroom in Khayelitsha”, Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi describes the researcher as a learner. The title already marks clearly that we must assume a multi-level entry into the research

field. This multi-level nature of field access is certainly not a specific characteristic of the field that Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi is investigating. However, due to the cultural differences, it is particularly tangible here and therefore accessible for methodological reflection. In the case of Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi's research project, field access does not begin when you enter school or classroom, but rather when you arrive. The researcher wants to research teaching in a South African township school and finds that the township, as the dominant social structure in a highly segregated society, forms the crucial framework for the research: research on teaching in the townships cannot be separated from social conditions on a macro level. Entering the field is not entering the classroom, but entering the surrounding culture. Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi describes how the security she acquired living in South Africa and acting as a field researcher is dissolving. She describes herself as disoriented and "visible" in an unpleasant way. She writes: "I was an object of curiosity, a White body in a Black space, as I realised now. That body made me visible where I wanted to be inconspicuous. It made me insecure where I wanted to play it cool." This form of visibility is certainly largely unknown to the German ethnographer in the German school, who firstly has to actively create an "alienation of his own culture" (Amann & Hirschauer 1997) in order to adopt an ethnographic observation stance. Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi's perception of being visible to everyone, of standing out and of being an object of curiosity, indicates that an experience of foreignness occurs for the researcher without any involvement of her own. The initial discomfort, caused by her own unavoidable visibility, may be explained by the fact that the ethnographer actually wants to avoid being particularly visible in order to be able to pursue her observations undisturbed and without being disruptive. At the same time, this creates a productive tension that, on the one hand, enables valuable methodological reflection by the researcher in the field. On the other hand, Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi gains deeper insights into the structure of the field, which are highly relevant to her research question. The researcher finds herself involved in a history of power, control and disregard that unfolds in South Africa along the difference of being 'white' or 'black': the field initially does not allow Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi to transform herself into an observer in order to conduct research, because for the people in the field, the white observer cannot be separated from power structures of evaluation and judgement. Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi describes how the uncertainty of her role in the field and her identity as a researcher gave rise to a profound learning process.

Félix J. Mulhanga reflects on his experience as a researcher in the field in rural Mozambique against the background of an explicit postcolonial classification of the education system. Mulhanga draws attention to the highly

heterogeneous society in Mozambique, which can be described, among other things, by the difference between urban and rural areas – a difference that plays a crucial role for Mulhanga as a research background, having grown up in a rural area and moved to urban areas in the course of his education. Cultural difference to the research field, in his case, does not stem from different geographical origin, but from a life course of moving away and returning. Rural areas are particularly interesting for Mulhanga because he sees a strong “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Albrecht 1991): On the one hand, there is a continuity of a centralised school system in rural areas that has colonial roots and an assimilating function during the colonial period. On the other hand, many pre-colonial traditions, practices and social structures are alive in rural areas. His research approach aimed to describe how these pre-colonial traditions and social structures influence schools and can be preserved through schools and school education. The knowledge acquired through ethnography should be a basis for a ‘dialogue’ between the school and its rural context. When reflecting on his observer perspective, Mulhanga emphasises two aspects: The question of how the research approach of ethnography explores the “crucial realm of ‘unseen’, ‘unheard’ and ‘unspoken’ (for example in the sense of supernatural/metaphysical knowledge/wisdom) knowledge production particular to rural areas in Mozambique”. This question makes it clear that the field can be foreign to the researcher – not so much as a person, but in terms of his boundedness to a scientific discourse and its epistemological and methodological norms. The problem is, to what extent it is possible to describe forms of indigenous knowledge production and epistemology in a ‘scientifically’ (as referring to the mostly Western-dominated discourse) appropriate or connectable way. The second aspect of Mulhanga’s reflection concerns the question of how and as what the researcher is recognised in the field. With the concept of “non-transparency” (Lang-Wojtasik 2002) he addresses the fact that a special translation work has to be carried out when the social communities being researched have no concept or idea of research or the researcher. This question makes it clear that the researcher is a foreigner to the field. Both experiences of foreignness are situated differently than those of Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi, but also develop a strong potential for methodological reflection and a more intensive opportunity to acquire knowledge, which is also used in the article.

The two contributions by Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi and Félix Mulhanga make it clear that research is not a neutral practice, but is perceived in the field as a colonial epistemic practice. In Lara-Stephanie Krause-Alzaidi’s article, the role of the researcher in the field is problematised primarily along the lines of the difference between ‘black’ and ‘white’. The central difference in Félix Mulhanga’s contribution seems to lie between pre- and post-colonial thinking. In

both contributions, school is recognised as a legacy of colonial rule. Furthermore, research is not perceived as a neutral practice, but is designed by the field as a colonial epistemic practice. Both researchers show themselves to be very sensitive to these tensions and structure their research in the field as personal learning processes. The critical status of ethnography as a colonial knowledge practice is reflected and a warning is given against universalising this Western-inspired form of knowledge acquisition and its epistemic values. At the same time, both researchers emphasise that ethnography, thanks to its openness and methodologically anchored reflexivity, still represents a suitable means of generating knowledge in postcolonial contexts. Conceptualising research as learning can help to reflect on forms of knowledge production and the power constellations embedded therein and to prevent ethnocentric, ahistorical, depoliticised or paternalistic approaches to the world from being reproduced (Andreotti & de Souza 2012).

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