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Introduction to reconstructive methodologies and methods

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Introduction to Reconstructive Methodologies and Methods

Abstracts

EN

This article presents an overview of reconstructive methods, which are part of qualitative research methods, and their methodologies. It will neither describe in detail the individual methods in their usage nor hold a debate on methodological details. Reconstructive methods differ in their theoretical roots their theoretical roots and backgrounds as well as in the data collection and data analysis. But they also have some similarities, which will be emphasised in this paper. The aim is to point out basic principles and fields of application and thus going beyond the similarities and differences the similarities and the differences of reconstructive research methods, so as to furthermore discern, which method seems suitable for which research question. This paper is an introduction to the topic of reconstructive methodologies with particular reference to school and teaching research.

First, general ideas, key assumptions and principles of reconstructive research methods are pointed out. As the second step, the focus shifts to typical topics and questions of reconstructive social research and which method seems appropriate in each respective case.

DE

Dieser Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die rekonstruktiven Methoden, die Teil der qualitativen Forschungsmethoden sind, und ihre Methodologien. Dabei werden weder die einzelnen Methoden in ihrer Anwendung detailliert beschrieben, noch wird eine Debatte über methodologische Details geführt. Rekonstruktive Methoden unterscheiden sich in ihren theoretischen Wurzeln und Hintergründen sowie in der Datenerhebung und Datenanalyse. Sie weisen aber auch einige Gemeinsamkeiten auf, die in diesem Artikel hervorgehoben werden sollen. Ziel ist es, über die Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede der rekonstruktiven Forschungsmethoden hinaus, Grundprinzipien und Anwendungsbereiche aufzuzeigen, um darüber hinaus zu

erkennen, welche Methode für welche Fragestellung geeignet erscheint. Dieser Artikel ist eine Einführung in das Thema rekonstruktive Methoden mit besonderem Bezug zur Schul- und Unterrichtsforschung.

Zunächst werden allgemeine Ideen, Grundannahmen und Prinzipien rekonstruktiver Forschungsmethoden aufgezeigt. In einem zweiten Schritt wird der Fokus auf typische Themen und Fragestellungen der rekonstruktiven Sozialforschung gelegt und aufgezeigt, welche Methode im jeweiligen Fall angemessen erscheint.

PT

Este artigo apresenta uma visão geral dos métodos reconstitutivos que fazem parte dos métodos de investigação qualitativa e das suas metodologias. Os métodos individuais não são descritos em pormenor, nem é feito um debate sobre os detalhes metodológicos. Os métodos reconstitutivos diferem nas suas raízes e fundamentos teóricos, bem como na recolha e análise de dados. No entanto, também têm algumas semelhanças, que serão realçadas neste artigo. Para além das semelhanças e diferenças entre os métodos de investigação reconstitutiva, o objetivo é realçar os princípios básicos e as áreas de aplicação, de modo a reconhecer qual o método que se revela adequado para cada questão de investigação. Este artigo é uma introdução ao tema dos métodos reconstitutivos, com especial referência à investigação na escola e na sala de aula.

Em primeiro lugar, são apresentadas ideias gerais, pressupostos básicos e princípios dos métodos de investigação reconstitutivos. Numa segunda fase, o foco é colocado em tópicos e questões típicas da investigação social reconstitutiva e é mostrado qual o método que parece adequado em cada caso.

JA

本稿では、質的研究方法の一部をなす再構成的方法とその方法論を概観する。ただし、個別の方法について活用方法を詳述したり、方法論の細部にわたる論争を紹介するものではない。理論的なルーツや背景に応じて、またデータ収集と分析の各段階に対しても、再構成的方法は多岐にわたる。しかし、類似性を強調することもできる。基本原則と活用の場合を示すという目的に向け、再構成的研究方法の類似点と相違点を踏まえたうえで、さらにどの方法がどの研究設問に適しているかを見極める。本稿は、学校と教授の研究分野での再構成的方法論の議論への導入となる。

さいしよに、再構成的研究方法の全体を支える考え方、鍵となる理論的立場や原則を示す。次のステップとして、再構成的社会関係研究におい

て特徴的な論点や疑問へと焦点を移し、どの方法が個別の事例において適切であるかを見てゆく。

1 Key Assumptions and Principles: Common Features of Reconstructive Methods

1.1 Goals

What are the goals of reconstructive social research? Generally speaking, the main goal is to understand and explain human (everyday) action. The purpose is to reconstruct and understand the meaning and sense that the actors assign to their social world. Understanding is therefore the central principle of recognition. The aim is to discover something new, to understand and describe something in a way not previously considered. Therefore, the targeted result is theory formation. Thus, reconstructive research differs diametrically from quantitative research, which starts with the formulation of a theory or hypotheses. However, this approach of quantitative research bears the risk of reproducing what the researchers already assume. Reconstructive research counters this risk by examining patterns of interpretation of the subjects of research. For this purpose, it does not check one's own assumptions as hypotheses, but rather tries to control them reflexively.

Noticeably, the methodology of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998) already refers in its name to the fact that an appropriate to the object and data grounded theory, is the result of the research. This theory, often referred to as a 'middle-range' theory (Hood 2010: 156), can take various forms. It can consist of a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) in which human action is conceptualised. In other cases, type formation is the result of reconstructive research and in this respect data analysis reconstructs explanations for the acting of actors and/or for institutional systems. In all cases, contrasts of single cases, of text excerpts, codes, categories, and concepts are a central measure within theory formation.

1.2 Key Assumptions

The basic assumptions and theoretical frameworks of reconstructive social research shall be presented in the following sections. The justifiable premises, assumptions or concepts on the human image, human reality and the perspective on the world are the basis for the goal mentioned above to understand and explain human action.

Reconstructive social research presumes a “theory of everyday action and recognition”¹ (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2014: 12) and a social-constructivist understanding of social reality (Rosenthal 2011: 15, 38). The human is understood as an individual who creates (and not only reacts to) social reality in interactions with others. The world is constantly interpreted subjectively and constructed by humans. This is what Alfred Schütz calls the “first order constructions” (Schütz 1971: 68). But these interpretations of subjects take place in an already pre-structured and thus supra-subjective world.

“The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people [...]. The degree to which a given account of the world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitude of social processes” (Gergen 1994: 49-50).

The way of perceiving and interpreting occurring events depends on one’s own, and therefore subjective, experiences, the present milieu, gender and other factors. Therefore, it is site-dependent. These interpretations structure the everyday actions mostly without one being aware of it. The action and the interpretation of the world on which the action is based become “self-evident” and “normal” and therefore cannot be easily consciously articulated. As a result, they need to be *reconstructed*. This is what reconstructive research aims to do.

These scientific constructions must connect to the interpretations and primary constructions of the actors in everyday life (Flick 2009: 77) and interpret them. Therefore, scientific concept formations are “second order constructions”:

“The intellectual objects formed by social scientists relate to and are based on mental objects that are formed in the understanding of people living among their fellow people in everyday life. The constructions that the social scientist uses are therefore, so to speak, second order constructions: they are constructions of those constructions that are formed by the actors in the social field” (Schütz 1971: 6).

Reconstructive social research claims to reconstruct the complex constructional achievements of the actors in the field, especially when or because they are not explicable.

This means: Since researchers are subject to site-dependency and therefore have no direct access to the imaginaries of the research field, they must take the path of methodically controlled foreign understanding (second-order constructions). They must also constantly reflect their own perspective on the analytical and interpretative process.

1 German quotes have been translated by the author of this paper.

Summarised: Subjects with their meanings and interests are the starting point for reconstructive social research. Their actions develop step by step and intertwine with others and the available resources. On the one hand, supra-subjective framings, for example social institutions, influence acting. On the other hand, although the acting is not fully determined, it is free in a certain way. Thus, social pre-structures only become powerful if they receive meaning and importance by the acting person.

Although these key assumptions apply to all reconstructive methods, other theoretical framings are particularly relevant depending on the individual method. I would like to mention just a few without going into detail: symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, sociology of knowledge, practice theory, psychoanalysis.

1.3 Principles

Some basic principles (e. g., Flick 2009: 14) apply to the reconstructive social research which may be understood as research attitude:

Openness

Reconstructive social research requires a fundamental openness on the part of the researcher towards research subjects, situations and in some cases even methods.

"[...] because qualitative research aims at a complex analysis of the respective field, the openness to the field approach is an important condition. Qualitative research strategies do not want to put pre-formulated theory concepts on the respective field or, like quantitative research, to check pre-formulated hypothesis in real life. They want to gain generalisations and models out of the researcher's own genuine experience in the research field. The process is structured through questions and theoretical reflections, but these are to be permanently modified and extended during the survey" (Krüger 2010: 53, paraphrasing Strauss & Corbin 1998: 8).

Openness is necessary to remain receptive to unexpected information and to be able to react to changing circumstances. The research field is to be recorded from the participants' point of view and their relevance structures. Therefore, the researcher must approach the field or the participants without explicit assumptions and hypotheses on the field and with data collection methods that pre-structure as little as possible. This turns out to be one of the central challenges in the field of school and teaching research. Based on the assumption that a majority will have attended school at some stage in their life, the topic of school will be familiar to most of us. Therefore, the aim not to be influenced by one's own experiences is particularly difficult. In practical re-

search, the principle of openness means that sometimes the research question is not yet clearly defined and sharpens in the course of research,

- the choice of interview partners or the places to be visited is based on the principle of theoretical sampling,
- interviews include open questions or just give one input impulse and stimulate a flow of speech and free conversation as far as possible,
- observations follow the research field and not a predetermined structure.

This principle of openness in the field access and data collection is countered by methodical control during data interpretation (for example strict sequentiality, formal analysis, common interpretation in groups, contrasting cases...). Nevertheless, the principle of openness in the sense of creativity and spontaneity also applies to the data interpretation which is permitted and later needs to be controlled, reviewed and reflected.

Communication

The researcher and the participants of the research communicate and interact with each other. The researchers are often present during the data collection, so that the data is not – like in quantitative social research – collected independently from the researcher. Data collection is a communicative achievement. During group discussions and interviews, for example, it can be very decisive which impulses are set or how questions are asked to start a free conversation. During videography or participating observation, it is possible that direct reactions towards the present researcher or the camera may occur. The fact that data collection depends on the researcher is not considered as erroneous in the reconstructive research but is used by interpreting this as a part of the social world of the field and by reflecting the researcher's influence. To ensure that the researcher's role will be reflected and interpreted, the data must make the researcher visible: for example, the interview questions are literally transcribed, ethnographic protocols include researcher's impressions and scenes in which she or he is involved.

Reflexivity (Steger 2003)

Reflexivity plays a role in different ways. Reflexivity supports the principle of openness as it allows a permanent act of thinking about (1) what is going on, (2) one's own influence on the field and the situation and (3) what possible effects may the presence of the researchers have on the actors or interview partners. Reflexivity thereby enables to rethink first interpretations of situations and potentially create new ones.

2 Major Research questions and Methods of Reconstructive Research

2.1 Major Research Questions

Understanding human action under these basic assumptions can mean different things. I would like to distinguish between four goals of scientific knowledge, introduced as four major research questions.

1. Description of subjective views: *What is the subject's view?*

The goal of this research question is to create an understanding of the subjective views of the actors in the field. This means to put oneself into the subjective realities and world views of the participants and to record them in an appropriate and comprehensible way. It also involves the reconstruction of inconsistencies. Generalisations and theory formation are for example to form types of views or perspectives. Biographical studies in particular pursue this research question.

Example: *How do English teachers from the former German Democratic Republic experience the transformation of their profession after the fall of Berlin Wall?* (Dirks 2000)

2. Description of real-life realities and/or structures of interaction as well as of social practices: *How does everyday life work in social milieus? Which social practices can be reconstructed?*

Question number two focuses on understanding of real-life realities and their rules as well as the actions that have become natural and are not questioned by the participants. An ethnographic approach and the perspective of practice theory are particularly suitable.

Example: *What is the homework situation like for children and their parents at home?* (Bräu, Harring & Weyl 2017)

3. Reconstructions of action guiding structures and the 'objective' meaning and latent deep structure of human expressions: *What are the objective structures on which action is based? Which structural logic exists?*

What is referred to here is not about the intentions of the participants or interview partners, but the deeper-lying structures that are understood as an own level of reality. These deeply embedded structures guide the actions without

the participants themselves being aware of it. Many studies using "Objective Hermeneutics" (Oevermann et al. 1987) pursue this line of questioning. Example: *What can be said about the culture of a school regarding the enrolment and farewell speeches?* (Helsper 2008)

4. Reconstruction of socially pre-typed knowledge patterns and interpretation work of the participants: *Which knowledge orders and orientations do the participants have? Which discourses or discourse logics are effective in the field?*

These studies are about the reconstruction of the participant's orientations, attitudes and/ or what has emerged and is communicated as unquestioned truths in a field or milieu. Such 'discourses' are powerful because they define what is regarded as reasonable (Keller, Knoblauch & Reichertz 2013). Especially the Documentary Method (Bohnsack, Pfaff & Weller 2010) and various forms of the discourse analysis (Fegter et al. 2015; Keller 2011) are suitable for identifying orientations and attitudes of social groups.

Examples: *How do teachers construct and address differences in inclusive classrooms?* (Sturm 2018) *Which discourses about people with a migrant background are powerful in school?* (Akbaba 2017)

Certain methods are particularly suitable for each question. Nonetheless, it is by no means possible to link one method directly to one research question. In addition to that, it is even more complex if several of these questions are approached in a study, e.g., the description of everyday actions and their embedment in knowledge orders and discourses.

2.2 Methods of Reconstructive Social Research

It is necessary to distinguish between methods of data collection and of data interpretation although they are sometimes closely related.

In principle, there are four basic data collection procedures in research: interview/survey, observation, collection of documents/artefacts and experiment. The last procedure can be disregarded – qualitative experimental designs are rarely done. The remaining data collection procedures are divided into the following methods of data collection (table 1):

Tab: 1: Methods of data collection

Main data collection procedures	Method	Collected and edited data	Description of data collection
interview/ survey	guided interviews/ expert interviews	transcript	interviews based on guide-line with narrower and more open questions
	biographical interviews		narrative interview with open impulse; interview partners should speak as freely as possible; afterwards immanent and exmanent questions
	group discussions		discussion with natural or assembled groups; discussion impulse so that interview partners should speak and discuss as freely as possible; immanent and exmanent questions
observation	participatory observation	field notes/ protocol	presence at the social event
	videography/ technical record	transcript/ still images/ film	use of handheld or fixed cameras; one or more cameras and perspectives; focusing on the entire classroom, on specific areas or moveable as handheld camera
collection of documents or artefacts	document analysis artefact analysis	objects/ texts/ photo- graphs/ films	for example homepages, protocols, worksheets, photographs, black board, books, furniture, pens etc.

In many cases the results of the data collection are recorded in texts, such as transcripts of interviews and film sequences or observation protocols. In addition, photographs, films or objects can be analysed directly, i.e., without being transferred into text. Alternatively, photographs are part of protocols of participatory observation. For example, one can study schoolbooks as documents, but one can also observe and study how teachers and students utilise the schoolbook.

The most widely known methods of data interpretation in reconstructive research are shown in the following table 2:

Tab. 2: Methods of data interpretation

Method	Procedure Features	Goals
Grounded Theory	coding, categorizing	Theory formation (e.g. type formation, case structure hypothesis ...)
Documentary method (see Martens & Kinoshita in this volume)	formulating interpretation, reflecting interpretation, immanent und exmanent case comparisons, case description, type formation	
Objective hermeneutics (see Mbaye & Schelle in this volume)	sequence analysis, creating interpretations, Case structure hypothesis	
Biographical and narrative analysis	formal text analysis, structural description, analytical abstraction, knowledge analysis, case comparison, type formation	
Video analysis (see Leicht in this volume)	uses several/different methods and steps of data interpretation	

To show the complex relationship between research questions, theoretical framing, and the methods of data collection and data interpretation, they are combined in table 3, inspired by Reichertz (2016: 36-37).

Tab. 3: Relation of research question, theoretical frame, methods of data collection and data interpretation (following Reichertz 2016: 36-37, but adapted)

Research goal (research question)	Description of subjective views	Life/ of social practices/ of structures of interaction	Reconstruction of the structural logic of action and interaction/ latent meaning	Reconstruction of socially pre-typed knowledge patterns and discourses
Reference point	Subjects and their views	(Everyday-) action in milieus	structural logic latent meaning	tacit knowledge, orientations/attitudes, knowledge order, discourse logics
Theoretical frames	Symbolic Interactionism, Theory of Narration	Praxeology Symbolic Interactionism, Ethnomethodology, Sociology of knowledge, (Social-)Constructivism, Cultural Studies	Theory of Socialization Psychoanalysis	Sociology of Knowledge Praxeology (Social-)Constructivism
Methods of data collection	Interviews (biographic, guided) Collection of documents and artefacts: e.g., diaries, autobiographies	Participant Observation (Ethnography), Group discussions, interviews, video recordings, photographs, collection of artefacts	Interviews, group discussions, video recordings, any kind of data	Interviews, group discussions, collection of documents and artefacts, video recordings,
Methods of data interpretation	Biographical and Narrative analysis	Grounded Theory, Documentary Method, Analysis of conversation	Objective Hermeneutics Deep Hermeneutics Narrative Analysis Discourse Analysis	Documentary Method Discourse Analysis, Grounded Theory
Fields of application, e.g. ...	Biographical Research (teachers, students, head masters ...) Research on Acceptance (e.g., of a teaching method)	Research an everyday life in school	Research on school books Teaching Research	Teaching Research Discourse Research Research on school books
Examples	<i>How do English teachers from the former GDR experience the transformation of their job after the fall of Berlin Wall?</i> (Dirks 2000)	<i>What is the homework situation like for children and their parents at home?</i> (Bräu 2017)	<i>What can be said about the culture of a school regarding the enrolment and farewell speeches?</i> (Helsper 2008)	<i>How do teachers construct and address differences in inclusive classrooms?</i> (Sturm 2018) <i>Which discourses about people with a migrant background are powerful in school?</i> (Akbaba 2017)

Finally: It is very important to use methods consciously depending on knowledge interests and the questioning pursued. Nevertheless, we should remember that the central focus of research is not the methods but the contents.

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