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The Role of Theoretical and Cultural Pre-Understandings – A Commentary

Abstracts

EN

In this article, the author looks back and reflects on the contributions in section 3, discussing the role of theoretical and cultural pre-understandings and presumptions. Achievements and challenges of qualitative research are discussed based on the contributions.

DE

In diesem Artikel blickt der Autor zurück und reflektiert die Beiträge in Teil 3, um die Rolle von theoretischen und kulturellen Vorverständnissen und Annahmen zu erörtern. Anhand der Beiträge werden Leistungen und Herausforderungen der qualitativen Forschung diskutiert.

PT

Neste artigo, o autor faz uma retrospectiva e reflete sobre os contribuições na seção 3, discutindo o papel das pré-entendimentos e pressupostos teóricos e culturais. Com base nas contribuições, são discutidas as possibilidades e os desafios da investigação qualitativa.

JA

本稿では第三章を振り返り、理論や文化にかかわって前提とされている見方や推測が果たしている役割を検討した。質的研究でできることとできないこと、これからの課題は何かについて、筆者がもつ文化的な前提とあわせて考察をおこなった。

Introduction

As the prime metaphor in this section – “Standortgebundenheit” (local situatedness) – illustrates, we have travelled through many places on the academic map of reconstructive methods in qualitative research: Starting from the general introduction by Karin Bräu, contributors introduced the approaches of various research methods. Before we leave this field, I would like to look back on the landscape of this field of reconstructive methods and each contribution briefly and leave comments on achievements and challenges.

1 Assumptions in reconstructive methods

The main theme in section 3 is to reflect on cultural and theoretical pre-understandings/presumptions in teaching research. This area of focus is discussed throughout the section as each contribution reflectively presents appertaining stances and perspectives.

In the first article of the section, Bräu provides a concise guide map of reconstructive research methods. The ground concept of this field is illustrated as the endeavour to *understand and explain the human action*. Our everyday understanding of the world and self is deeply rooted in multi-layered, implicit, unconscious, and even sometimes undetectable presumptions and cultural contexts, by which the action and the interpretation of the world become ‘self-evident’ and ‘normal’, and “therefore cannot be easily consciously entitled”. Due to such “site-dependency”, researchers “must take the path of methodically controlled foreign understanding”, which results in the need for the interpreted objects to be *reconstructed*. Bräu also provides a list of how data collection, analysis, and theoretical framework in reconstructive social research are to be conducted.

Mbaye and Schelle introduce a method referred to as “objective hermeneutics”. They state that the basic concept of this method “is all about tracing down general structural characteristics, [or] the structure of the case, of a particular life experience”. The basic assumption in this method is thus summarised: “The method of objective hermeneutics is oriented towards the idea that there actually are regularities which exist beyond subjective feeling and meaning and determine the actions of each individual”. This assumption effectively authorises devising a *methodically objective* interpretative process. To be well-designed, objective hermeneutics determines five principles to govern the analysis. This method was also examined by/through/in its application to the research practice of intercultural comparative teaching research in the following chapter by Schelle and Mbaye. According to the contributors, objective hermeneutics also maintains a sensitivity to differentiability that al-

lows one to relativise “the impregnation of one’s own view” and to reflect on “habits of seeing and thinking” and thus “avoid risks of ethnocentrism”.

The revisit to objective hermeneutics in the chapter ‘Comparative Reconstructions of Subject Matter and Addressing Practices in Senegalese and German Classrooms’ effectively promotes our understanding of how this method can be an effective tool to explore comparative research. Schelle and Mbaye introduce a case study from Senegal and Germany to argue “the imperative to carefully reconstruct specific aspects of the respective cultural context”. After carrying out their “detective work” in the comparison of two countries’ teaching practices, they point out methodical and theoretical challenges regarding blind spots. As observations are selective and subjective, observers must presume that there is always an aspect that they cannot see. This argument urges us to reflect on the main theme of cultural presumptions. It is also important to note that they mention the issue of language for exploring the intercultural comparative studies. It does not stay within the translation problem, but it is the crucial matter of interpretive process because, as shown in the example of the Senegalese case, the transcript written in French may not represent students’ intended meaning. Language is the prime tool to gain access to the objective regularities to be detected, but there is a need to be careful about understanding how a word (or text) is produced in connection to the previous and following sentences (or context).

We then visited the area where Leicht introduces reconstructive video-analysis. The use of video has an advantageous potential “for new insights into multimodal classroom interaction” by which “language”, “non-verbal aspects, the use of artifacts and space become[s] observable”. Nevertheless, such advantages imply a risk of empirical instability as video contains an overwhelming amount of information, which appropriately calls for the rigid limit to “observable” objects with two methodical procedures: segmentation and sequence analysis. These methods will be consistent and cogent only when researchers “reflect basic assumptions and the fundamental understanding”, but Leicht maintains that this approach must be subjected to the iterative research process where researchers must visit, revisit and adjust the interpretation every time they proceed to new segments. This method is explored further by Spendrin and Hallitzky in their article.

This section proceeds into further explorations of introduced methods. Spendrin and Hallitzky develop a double layered reflection showing their cultural and theoretical understanding with their reflection of those understandings, that is titled “observe our observation”. Thanks to this meta-levelled reflection, it becomes apparent how pre-understandings function in the process of research and analysis and interestingly, the authors also include their struggles and deliberations in interpretations. Their reflection is centred on

the grounding concepts such as “culture”, “lesson”, and “democratic education”, which help readers not only understand how their analysis and results are produced (the first layer), but also – more importantly – elucidate the effect of pre-understanding (assumption) as “from behind our backs” (the second layer) where they point out that “theoretical assumption is certainly guided our interpretation” but still “we are not ‘restricted’ to our theoretical assumptions”. The *beneficial and risky* role of pre-understanding lies in guiding and misleading the interpretations, so it must be carefully reflected.

In the next article, Martens and Kinoshita introduce the Documentary Method. The Documentary Method seeks to analyse “configurations of knowledge that are at work in personal and collective practice”. The first step to take is “formulating interpretation” (describing what they are doing), via “reflecting interpretation” to reveal implicit meaning on the material to “formulating the type” beyond an individual case. Martens and Kinoshita argue for cultural constructions in their research practice, where they relate clearly “how the researcher constructs a certain understanding of the classroom interaction by choosing certain instruments of data collection, such as the way of placing video camera”.

2 Achievements and challenges of reconstructive methods

In this section, we have looked at remarkable landmarks, the distinctiveness of each approach and the commonalities of the reconstructive research methods. I would like to leave some comments on these contributions regarding achievements and challenges.

2.1 Achievements

The role of pre-understandings/presumptions

Consistent with the title, the role of theoretical and cultural pre-understandings could be stated as following: pre-understanding/presumption in qualitative teaching research plays an unshakable role and is the most basic determinant in the story-making from one’s research including setting the focal point, data collection, analysis, and conclusion. It could even be said that the pre-understanding/presumption may determine the way of constructing a theoretical framework and research methods. This notion has already been mentioned in the contributions. It is quite interesting that every statement regarding the role of pre-understanding/presumption in each article is delivered through different contexts and approaches, whereby we could observe the typical pre-understanding or site-dependency: Schelle and Mbaye prefer to speak strictly “from Niklas Luhmann’s point of view” while Spendrin and Hallitzky provide a broader view including science philosophy by Galison and Daston. I would

rather follow/adopt the viewpoint of Gadamer's *hermeneutic tradition* regarding "Vorurteile" (prejudice) so that (from *my viewpoint*) it can connect discussions of qualitative teaching research to the broader historical-philosophical context touching the Heidegger and Kantian tradition. The hermeneutical tradition is also understood as one of the most influential frameworks in qualitative research: Brinkmann, Jakobsen & Christiansen (2015) briefly summarise the important role of prejudice with Gadamer in the context of qualitative research, stating that "[t]he idea of *reflexivity*, which is central to much qualitative research, has also been articulated within hermeneutic philosophy. Interpretation depends on certain *pre-judices*, as Gadamer famously argued, without which no understanding would be possible... There are no fundamental "givens", for all understanding depends on a larger horizon of non-thematised meanings. This horizon gives meaning to everyday life activities, it is what we must engage with as we do qualitative research" (ibid: 22; for another reference, see Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The connection between qualitative research and hermeneutical-historical-philosophical approaches may broaden the perspective on what is going on in the classroom, because it may bring, for example, phenomenological, anthropological and epistemological arguments into the discussion. I also see more potential to discuss one's *Bildung* process in the discourse of examining lessons in classrooms (though there have been so many critics against this). As such, I acknowledge a certain kind of presumption – or so to say *expectation* about what I want to see in the classroom – to discover facts differently from other points of view. Irrespective of his/her background, it seems an important agreement among all the contributors in this section that qualitative research should be reflective about the pre-understanding/presumption of one's research conducts.

The "viewpoint" or "perspective" just mentioned above, might hit the nail on the head of the essential attribution of the role of pre-understandings/presumptions. Researchers take a *standpoint* and *view* the objects where he/she must take a microscope or telescope to see the object clearly from that point, while another researcher must take another tool to see the same object from another perspective – again this metaphor also resonates with Gadamer's description of *horizon*. Geographical distribution of researchers now presents the *cultural* matter: The place where a researcher stands has its *cultural* asset and certainly influences an observer's *way* of viewing. Spendrin and Hallitzky have already shown us a clear definition that I also agree with: "culture comprises sets of practices, being patterns of understanding the world, moving in it, dealing with objects, wishing for or doing something. [...] Therefore, we also interpret research practices as a cultural phenomenon, a research culture". The way of viewing should be well considered because it is the very structure of one's conduct of research.

The necessity of reflecting pre-understandings/presumptions

All contributors concur that these pre-understandings/presumptions must be reflectively articulated. In the geographical metaphor, a climber should know his/her location on the map. As Bräu spreads the map of qualitative methods that facilitated understanding where each contributor is located, she already answers the question why they need to be reflective – to avoid reproducing what the researchers already assume. “Reconstructive research counters this risk by aiming at the patterns of interpretation of the subjects or research” by “trying to reflexively control them”. I believe we can make this more general. To identify what a reconstructive research accomplishes, researchers need to place themselves into the relations to previous researches, or academic contexts, which need to be reflective: “observation of the observation”. This reflectivity has become an imperative that James Calderhead (1996) already pointed out about researchers in qualitative studies who “have drawn attention to the possibility that researchers can extract from this data interpretations *to which they are themselves particularly disposed*” (ibid.: 712, italic added). The text to which researchers are disposed will be accomplished when researchers begin with looking at the implicit historical contexts behind their viewpoints.

2.2 Challenges

Throughout this section, the importance of being reflective on pre-understandings/presumptions has been well demonstrated, but there remain several questions on these discussions:

1. *What are the NEW findings for qualitative teaching research? If we just stay within understanding the focused case, how could the research avoid the reproduction of pre-understood/presumed ideas?*

On reading results and findings in each contribution, one may notice that their results may have similar words and concepts that are actually almost identical to the prominently established concepts. Hierarchy, authority, and the dilemma of “controlling” and “opening” sound almost homologous to Theodor Litt’s famous thesis “Führung oder Wachsenlassen”, or even John Dewey’s “The Child and The Curriculum”, so to say the dualistic perspective of teacher’s instruction and learner’s free will. Qualitative research tends to reproduce already discovered aspects. In my presumption based on the Japanese Jugyo Kenkyu tradition, the ‘case’ in qualitative research has the power to reverse the precedent understanding on concepts. Spendrin and Hallitzky state their concern corresponding to this point, asking “is this (research finding) not just something we have already been assuming before?” Their answer “Yes/No” sounds very accurate, but I would like to claim this could be a matter of the conventional and the most basic rules in qualitative research paper, “theoret-

ical framework". Therefore, beyond the achievements of contributions in this section, an inevitable challenge is now revealed in the researchers struggle with being captured within the frame and being open to the new insights on theory itself.

2. *How relevant is the finding of research to pedagogical research? In applying sociological categories to understand phenomena in school and classroom, is there a need of existence of 'educational' researcher or the faculty of education?*

The methods especially sketched by Leicht, Martens, and Kinoshita are very useful tools to address the phenomena in classroom. However, along with the first question, it struck me that all key words and phrases are retrieved from sociological (and political) categories. I assume that all contributors perceived the phenomena as an interactive character. A "lesson" is "understood as a chain of particular practices". It is acceptable, but debates occurring in the congress, chats heard in the aisle of museum, and conferences for academics are all interactions. Political, aesthetic, academic, religious, economic, ethical, and academic actions are all dealing with the very long chain of a particular form of interactive process among people and objects. No one could disagree that the phenomena happening in classrooms or during lessons are interactive, but it does not explain how it is *pedagogical* notion. To apply sociological methods into classroom phenomena is not problematic, but it is the job of sociologists. 'Authority' might illustrate but could be identical to political relation. 'Addressing' sounds very unique for teacher-student relationship, but how could this unique phenomenon be differentiated from the addressing act by artists? After experiencing the rise of empirical studies, namely 'realistic turn' (realistische Wende) in the 1970s and 'empirical turn' (empirische Wende) in the 2000s, it is said that the hegemonic disciplines in didactic and pedagogy shifted from philosophical and hermeneutic to sociological and psychological (Zierer 2018: 341). In this transition, qualitative enquires barely answered the question of *education* (Zedler 2011: 320). This tendency in educational science with qualitative approach is a remarkable matter when observing what researchers in the faculty of education are doing.

This concern may provoke the question, what then could be pedagogical? It is not my intention to rigidly determine the pedagogical but would rather suggest the need of identifying this notion in qualitative teaching research (which tends to stay silent about this). I will soon regret to simplify the contributors' deliberative texts where they reflect upon "the pedagogical point of view" (Spendrin and Hallitzky) and "education traditionelle" (Schelle and Mbaye), so I would suggest the need to keep thinking about the problem of the state of educational science. I would like not to problematise their ways of discussion as a kind of deficit of reflecting on how pedagogical their researches are.

I would rather view these contributions as problem-posing about the state of educational science as an independent science or a subjugated science under several disciplines of social sciences. When accepting all the contributors' approaches from sociological perspective(s), educational science seemingly no longer possesses an independent arena, but is characterised as an interdisciplinary place that education is dissolved into socio-political (and perhaps psychological and philosophical) terminologies and conceptual frameworks. Yet, there has been and there is still another assumption of viewing educational science as a relatively independent science that holds specific interests and concepts apart from other disciplines (see for example the discussion of "pedagogical situation" by Petersen (1953: 9-43) in the classical text, and Benner (2015) in the recent studies). Contributors have seemingly already affirmed the assumption, that educational science is based on sociological methodologies – as I come from another tradition, I felt a little bit alienated from this perception. I would like to suggest a discussion about the disciplinary character of educational research as a challenge to be reflected upon.

Readers would have noticed that these comments were the very notion that contributors have already mentioned and consciously tackled with. Moreover, contributors have already proposed several paths to respond to those challenges: to put ourselves into *intercultural* situation. So now we are stepping forward to another cultural horizon in the Lesson Study tour, where ways of how educational research could articulate pedagogical notions could be gained.

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