

The Analysis of Professional Practice, the Self-Reflection of Practitioners, and their Way of Doing Things. Resources of Biography Analysis and Other Interpretative Approaches

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Abstract: The article serves as an introduction into the subject matter of this thematic issue of *FQS* and deals with the question how problems of professional work can become a topic of qualitative research. Focusing on issues of professional work has had an important place in biographical research for a long time. The consequences of professional interventions for the life histories of clients have been at the center of many studies, but also the relationships between the structures of experience and interpretation of professionals, on the one hand, and the specific features of their practice and their case analyses, on the other hand. Biographical research provides an empirically grounded critique and "enlightenment" of professional practice. It is often taught and practiced at professional schools, and (future) professionals can use it as a resource for discovery and understanding themselves—together with other interpretative approaches. By acquiring such research competencies they learn to look at their own practice with clients and the practice of others in a different way and they get ideas how to do things differently. The contributions to this thematic issue focus on preconditions, problems and consequences of professional work in different fields and illuminate the connection of the analysis of practice, professionals' self-reflection and their way of doing things. The articles were written by authors who belong to different disciplines in the social sciences and they are based on different approaches within the current spectrum of interpretative social research.

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What is constitutive of professional work? Can certain occupations be regarded as professions or are there "essential" limits which they cannot overcome? Which tendencies of a collective deprofessionalization are visible in classical professions like medicine? And what about changes in the relationship between professions and organizations? How do established and new professions deal with each other? These are some of the problems which sociologists, educators and members of other disciplines have addressed again for quite some time. Some of these problems are rather old, if you think of the work of such diverse sociologists like Everett HUGHES (1984) and Talcott PARSONS (1939). Other problems have moved into the foreground in the last two decades. When you listen to the passionate debates whether or not certain occupations (like social work) deserve the title of a "profession," you can notice that these are not merely academic discussions. There is more at stake: claiming, attributing and withholding societal respect; securing resources; and the preservation resp. extension of spheres of

influence.¹ The growing interest in the topic of profession and professionalization among German social scientists has led (among other things) to the foundation of the section "sociology of professions" in the German Sociological Association in 2006.² [1]

There has been a long tradition of focusing at problems, "blind spots" and consequences of professional work in biographical research (within the social sciences) as well.³ Biographical studies on the experience of chronic illness (HANSES, 1996) or on trajectories of suffering of mental patients (RIEMANN, 1987) also took a look at the consequences of professional interventions and institutional processing for the life-histories and autobiographical theories of the patients. It was noticeable, too, that professionals often did not perceive these processes or could not systematically take them into account in their work with patients. Biographical researchers have hoped that such studies could be useful for practitioners so that they could take a closer look at such "blind spots" in their work and could draw inferences for their work. Other studies focused at the life-histories of professionals and/or addressed the problem how their practice could also be understood in the light of their own biographies—e.g., their sources of meaning, their competencies and their dispositions to "fall into certain traps"—as well as in the light of their professional socialization (cf. e.g. REIM, 1995, and the article by [Claudia SCHEID](#) in this thematic issue). It was important for the creation of a bridge between biographical research and research on professional work that (at least in Germany) milieus in which such studies were conducted often developed in "professional schools." [2]

In the last years the intensive and continuous interest of biographical researchers in the analysis of professional work, its conditions and consequences has become visible in a number of volumes and thematic issues of journals (cf. CHAMBERLAYNE, BORNAT & APITZSCH, 2004; HANSES, 2004; HELSPER, KRÜGER & RABE-KLEBERG, 2000; KRAUL, MAROTZKI & SCHWEPPE, 2002; KRÜGER & MAROTZKI, 1999), but also in conferences and other activities like, e.g., the temporary graduate college on "biographical risks and new professional challenges" at the universities of Halle and Magdeburg, which was sponsored by the Hans-Böckler Foundation.⁴ [3]

1 Cf. the volumes edited by DEWE, FERCHHOFF and RADTKE (1992) and by COMBE and HELSPER (1996), which contain important positions in these debates (e.g., OEVERMANN, 1996 and SCHÜTZE, 1996).

2 Cf. PFADENHAUER (2005) as a publication in this context.

3 This is also true for biographical research in the early Chicago sociology. The "classical" study of Clifford SHAW (1966) on the "Jack-Roller" Stanley, which was published in 1930 for the first time, can be regarded as an attempt to make professionals and representatives of institutions look at themselves in a mirror and learn to be self-critical. At the same time, the author tried to explicate the conditions of resocialization of the criminal youth.—SHAW was the first sociologist who was employed by the Chicago Child Guidance Clinic since the end of the 1920s (CAREY, 1975, p.84).

4 In the meantime a "network for reconstructive social work research and biography" ("Netzwerk für rekonstruktive Sozialarbeitsforschung und Biografie") has been founded, which has organized different conferences and a research workshop (for social work researchers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland). Members of this network have also started a series on "reconstructive research in social work" in the Barbara Budrich publishing company (cf. e.g. GIEBELER, FISCHER, GOBLIRSCH, MIETHE & RIEMANN, 2007; MIETHE, FISCHER,

The spectrum of the articles in this thematic issue of *FQS* ranges from the analysis to the self-reflection and shaping of professional work—and how different approaches of interpretative social research, especially biographical research, can contribute to this endeavor.⁵ Invoking a bridge between the analysis of work, the self-reflection of practitioners and a circumspect practice might appear strange to some readers, since this is a challenge to firmly established jurisdictions: Something which has been widely regarded as obviously given—the contrast of researchers and those who are the objects of this research—is not respected any more. Qualitative approaches upon which the studies that are represented in this thematic issue are based have a considerable potential for the discovery of processes and problems of professional practice. But beyond that, acquiring and using such procedures of data collection and analysis does not just belong to the domain of social researchers, who arrive "from the outside" and don't master the practical skills themselves, but can become a domain of the practitioners themselves. That doesn't mean that the research of social scientists "from the outside" is not necessary any more, but certain distinctions and contradictions are dissolving. Representatives of "disciplines" trying to protect their borders may get nervous when professional practitioners start discovering things which they were not supposed to find out by themselves and take part in the discourse formerly reserved for "pure" social scientists by offering their own research contributions. [4]

Perhaps many readers of this journal feel that this emphatic invocation of changes in the distribution of labor is a matter of carrying coals to Newcastle. However, we would remind them that the rhetoric of many social scientists is still marked by the tendency to assure themselves of their own worth and their own accomplishments by stressing a significant distance to an "unenlightened" professional practice, which can only be "enlightened" from the outside. A telling example is the history of a tense relationship between sociology and social work. If one wants to understand this history, characterized as it is by mutual resentments, it is helpful to take into account that such a distance was already being cultivated in the Chicago sociology of the 1920s and early 1930s, a period which can be regarded as founding phase of sociological biographical research. Robert PARK often disparagingly emphasized the distance between his sociological project and social work—thereby erasing the important contributions of (especially female) social work researchers for whom this division was not essential. Think of Jane ADDAMS (DEEGAN, 1990, pp.159-159). PARK certainly had good reasons for sharpening the profile of sociology by stressing the distance to "moral crusades" and reform activities lacking a sound empirical base.

GIEBELER, GOBLIRSCH & RIEMANN, 2007, as well as the conference report "Quo vadis reconstructive social work research?" by [Ulrike LOCH & Silke-Birgitta GAHLEITNER](#) in this issue of *FQS*).

- 5 The starting point was an annual conference of the section "Biographical Research" of the German Sociological Association that was devoted to this topic. We had organized this conference in the Department of Social Work of the University of Bamberg in 2002. Most of the articles in this thematic issue are based on papers which were given at this conference. They were recently thoroughly revised and brought up-to-date. We thank the authors for their cooperation and regret that we could not finish our joint project at an earlier date. This was due to time-consuming and long-term obligations in our work at different sites which we could not postpone.

But his devaluation of social work was also influenced by stereotypes and he didn't sufficiently bear in mind to what extent sociological research in Chicago relied on preliminary studies and the unassuming cooperation of social workers. [5]

Such tensions decreased in later phases of Chicago interactionism. Anselm STRAUSS was certainly significant and influential in this context. He worked in an institution of "applied" research, a School of Nursing within a medical university (the San Francisco campus of the University of Sociology). Among his closest collaborators were social scientists that had been trained and had worked as nurses: Juliet CORBIN and Shizuko FAGERHAUGH (cf. CORBIN & STRAUSS, 1988; FAGERHAUGH & STRAUSS, 1977). When STRAUSS talked about "grounded theory," he did not just think of sociologists but of colleagues in different disciplines and professions in general who could gain something from this style of research (especially because of research questions which had emerged from their own practical professional problems). Among them were nurses, social workers and members of other professions.⁶ [6]

This is the background of the collection of studies which are represented in this thematic issue. Single contributions pick different aspects as their central theme. They deal with different fields of professional practice, societal contexts and theoretical, disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses. What they have in common is the fact that they make use of concepts and methods of interpretative social research, especially procedures of biography analysis. When working together on this thematic issue we took the following points into consideration:

- As mentioned above, biographical research has made important contributions to the analysis of preconditions, problems and consequences of professional work. Fritz SCHÜTZE's research on "paradoxes of professional work" (1992, 1996, and 2000) is a case in point. It has been stimulated by quite different sources, but biographical research is certainly one of them. The analysis of many autobiographical narratives of persons who had become clients or patients at one time in their lives revealed the relevance of professional interventions for biographical turning-points, significant action schemes of regaining control, and the balancing of their everyday life, but also for the intensification of pain. And, of course, these studies showed how professional interventions had an impact on how clients and patients developed their own theories about their lives, predicaments, and selves. Professional practitioners often don't pay much attention to these processes or cannot detect them in the first place. We claim that studies on the biographical perspectives or experiences of clients, patients or "users" of professional services can sensitize practitioners in different ways. They may become more modest with regard to the range and limits of their interventions, but, at the same time, more circumspect in facilitating and supporting the "biographical work" of their clients (cf. the article of Engel PRINS on the "maturing out" of drug addicts

6 STRAUSS remarks on "grounded theory" (STRAUSS, 1987, p.xi): "Although its originators and principal users to date are sociologists, it has been found useful by social scientists from other disciplines, as well as researchers in education, public health, social work, and nursing—found useful because it is a general style of doing analysis that does not depend on particular disciplinary perspectives."

and the article by [Michaela KÖTTIG](#) on the biographical approach in case work with girls and young women belonging to the extreme right).

- The empirical research on processes and problems of professional work seems to be a field in which the communication of different approaches of interpretative social research is fostered and in which the clear division of fields of responsibility (as it is visible in the emergence of different disciplinary sections with their traditional inventories of methods) is challenged and overcome. When different approaches are combined and different analytical procedures and types of data are "triangulated," it becomes possible to discover and tackle new and complex research problems. Think, e.g., of the relationship between the communicative and work styles of professionals, on the one hand, and their biographical processes and "imprints," on the other hand; or of the transformation of the dialogue of professionals and clients (in counseling and therapy) into the autobiographical "soliloquy" of clients (cf. RIEMANN, 2000, pp.203-238). In our thematic issue [Kirsten SANDER](#) reports on her study on "power games in the hospital: *doing gender* or *doing profession*?"—a study which had been inspired by GOFFMAN's "Frame Analysis." [Kai-Olaf MAIWALD](#) and [Claudia SCHEID](#) present case analyses on professional work and practical case analyses in the context of family mediation and family law. Their studies have been informed by Objective Hermeneutics. [Regina KLEIN](#) presents a symbol-theoretical sketch of the socio-pedagogical realm of action. [Kirsten HOHN](#) and [Andreas HANSES](#) analyze biographical interviews with women who suffer from psychosomatic illnesses in order to discover the relevance of different forms of knowledge during their ambulatory and in-patient phases. The authors use biographical narrative presentations of self for considerations in terms of the sociology of knowledge. [Martina SCHIEBEL](#)'s article on biographical processes of professionalization among women in leading positions in the East German welfare system shows a clear relationship between the professional positioning of the biographers and their life-historical constructions of experience and meaning in the context of societal processes of transformation. [Heidemarie WINKEL](#)'s analysis, which had been inspired by systems theory, focuses on the phenomenon of mourning and its implications for professional concepts of grief counseling. She develops the thesis that mourning is a "biography generator."
- The dynamics of biographical research in the social sciences also derives from the fact that professionals and future professionals themselves are drawn into such processes of research and become "social researchers in their own affairs." The most interesting data and analyses can often be found in students' theses, which are usually not noticed outside of one's own work milieu.⁷ An important part of the practical work of professionals consists in listening to what clients have to tell in order to learn something about their histories. Procedures of biography analysis and other interpretative approaches provide a firm foundation of professionals' own practical analyses—"short cut" analyses that always have to be carried out under a heavy

7 SCHÜTZE's (1992, 1996, 2000) research on professional work has been very much informed by his supervision of students' research projects in the context of social work and supervision.

pressure so that professionals can act and make quick decisions. This line of thinking is visible in the articles by [Wolfram FISCHER and Martina GOBLIRSCH](#), [Heidrun SCHULZE](#) and [Ulrike LOCH](#). The practical use of biographical research in the field of community organizing is also a topic in [Lena INOWLOCKI's interview with Catherine DELCROIX](#). This topic has been explored in publications on social work since the 1990s, but other professions seem to be receptive for such considerations, too, as Jeanette BÖHME (2004) shows in her discussion of qualitative research on schools. But also think of articles on "narrative based medicine" (in contrast to the concept of an "evidence based medicine"), which have appeared in the *British Medical Journal* (e.g., GREENHALGH & HURWITZ, 1999, and ELWYN & GWYN, 1999). Against this backdrop it is very important to discuss how students in the professions can acquire relevant research competencies (e.g., DAUSIEN, 2007). [Bettina VÖLTER](#) discusses this issue with regard to social work and [Andreas FEINDT and Andreas BROSZIO](#) with regard to teacher education. FEINDT and BROSZIO demonstrate (on the basis of a case example) the close relationship between students' research, their biographies and their professionalization. Bettina VÖLTER's article also tries to clarify in general how interpretative social research can be made relevant for social work. Principles of qualitative research can finally be used in a self-reflexive vein in order to reconstruct biographies of social scientists and to understand their styles of practice and institutional arrangements. That means taking a look at "ourselves." [Gert DRESSEL and Nikola LANGREITER](#)'s study investigates forms of a professional presentation of self in the cultural sciences and explicates collective rules of academic professionalism resp. facades of professionalism (by reconstructing individual perspectives). [Sylvia KADE](#) approaches the topic of professional biographies from an institutional perspective. Her study of two knowledge-based institutions shows the constellation of career structures in "aging institutions" and their consequences for the development of the employees' careers and competencies. [7]

The report of the Gulbenkian commission for restructuring the social sciences (WALLERSTEIN, JUMA, KELLER, KOCKA, LECOURT, MUDIMBE, MUSHAKOJI, PRIGOGINE, TAYLOR & TROUILLOT, 1996) stresses that interdisciplinary discourses have been a fertile ground for decisive new discoveries in the social sciences in the last decades. Biographical research seems to be an important case in point. For participants in this discourse it is irrelevant if they are "at home" in sociology, the educational sciences, social work, psychology or another discipline or profession. The authors of the articles in this thematic issue belong to different disciplines and professions and work in interdisciplinary research milieus. [8]

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