

Symbolic Interactionism and Qualitative Network Research— Theoretical and Method(olog)ical Implications for the Analysis of Social Networks

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Abstract: In network research, qualitative approaches have increasingly become established for the study of social relationships and social networks. What is lacking so far, however, is a specification of a genuinely qualitative perspective on the network as an object of research as well as a consistent research practice in the sense of a methodical holism. In this contribution, we discuss which theoretical and methodological perspectives in line with symbolic interactionism in the tradition of Herbert BLUMER are implied in the qualitative study of social networks. The point of departure of an interactionist understanding of reality are the interpretations of actors and which meanings they create in interaction and via symbols in situations. In accordance with this perspective, we understand social networks at the theoretical level as meaningfully structured, interactively negotiated, and situated processes of ordering. The key thrust of an interactionist-empirical approach to social networks is to extrapolate from situations and their linkages how social networks become visible and exert an effect. With our situation generator, we introduce a way of empirically addressing situations and discuss method(olog)ical consequences for an interpretive and reflexive analysis of social networks.

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1. Laboratory for Qualitative Network Research

In essence, a social network can be defined as a set of actors that are connected with each other through various kinds of relations (MITCHELL, 1973). Such webs of relationships, which can take the form, for instance, of friendship, collaboration, or support networks, imply a relational understanding of social reality. Crucial in this respect is that actors are always conceived as being embedded in social relationships. Their positions within a network have specific meanings and consequences. In an exposed form, we see this, for example, for the position of a broker, who represents the connection between different (sub-)networks (BURT, 2005). Different positions in a network entail differential access to resources such as information or power. Social network research investigates a variety of objects at the individual and collective level for the effects and mechanisms of various configurations of social embeddedness. Network researchers inquire into, for example, the meanings of social relationships and the access to resources (social capital) that they provide for labor market entry (BEHRMANN & HOLLSTEIN, 2012), the influence (e.g., diffusion of knowledge) of a network on the decision to start a family (BERNARDI, 2003), or the consequences of specific positions and network configurations in a school class for the reproduction of social inequality (HÄUßLING, 2010). [1]

Drawing on the basic idea underlying network research, scholars have developed various conceptions of networks as well as approaches to their analysis. Social network analysis (SNA) has become the dominant mode, which in most cases involves analyzing the structures and effects of social networks by employing formal-quantitative methods. This strand of network research renders social networks structurally describable and analyzable by means of formally operationalized nodes and edges, various metrics (e.g., of density or centrality), as well as modeling (for an overview, see HENNIG, BRANDES, PFEFFER & MERGEL, 2012; SCOTT & CARRINGTON, 2011; WASSERMAN & FAUST, 1994). The rapid development of formal methods of network analysis since the 1980s has increasingly occasioned a debate on the scope and limitations of formal structural analyses in network research. It has been argued that, although the formal examination of social networks has yielded considerable insights in terms of describing and understanding the effects of network structures, such perspectives fall short when it comes to considering the level of meanings that networks have for actors (e.g., MISCHE, 2011). A pointed argument has been made that methods of structural analysis could be caught up to structural determinism (EMIRBAYER & GOODWIN, 1994) and that they are based on a formal conception of the network in which the cultural embeddedness of actors and their interpretations and agency involved in producing and reproducing relational structures are neglected (DIAZ-BONE, 2006; FUHSE, 2015; FUHSE & MÜTZEL, 2011; KNOX, SAVAGE & HARVEY, 2006; MISCHE, 2003, 2011; PACHUCKI & BREIGER, 2010). Debates of this kind have provided the starting point for linking formal-structural network analyses with the study of meanings, culture, and agency (e.g., PADGETT & ANSELL, 1993) or employing mixed-method designs (BELLOTTI, 2014; DOMÍNGUEZ & HOLLSTEIN, 2014). Moreover, network researchers in the context of relational sociology in particular

(MISCHE, 2011; WHITE, 2008) have suggested ontological and methodological concepts to incorporate culturalist perspectives in network research. [2]

In this vein, various endeavors have been intensified to develop and establish qualitative approaches in network research that focus more strongly on actors' constructive efforts and the meanings involved therein. That said, basic qualitative perspectives in network studies are not really new; rather, they are implicitly or explicitly drawn on anthropological network approaches of the 1950s to 1970s (BARNES, 1954; BOTT, 1957; MITCHELL, 1973). What is new is the attempt to position a qualitative perspective in network research by means of specific markers and labels. HOLLSTEIN and STRAUS (2006), for instance, spoke of "qualitative network analysis",¹ HEATH, FULLER and JOHNSTON (2009) of "qualitative social network analysis," HOLLSTEIN (2011) of "qualitative approaches," and BELLOTTI (2014) of "qualitative networks." In network research, qualitative approaches and methods are used with a great variety of terminological, theoretical, and methodical references. For this reason, answering the question as to whether there is a common core of qualitative network research is probably just as challenging as it is for qualitative research in general (HITZLER, 2007; HOLLSTEIN & ULLRICH, 2003; MEY, 2016). How "qualitative" and "network" interact theoretically, methodologically, and methodically is spelled out differently and discussed at different levels of reference. As "qualitative sources" (CROSSLEY et al., 2015, p.44), qualitative data have been employed for the analysis of social networks. These data are generated, for example, through open-ended interviews (often in combination with network maps; DOBBIE, REITH & McCONVILLE, 2018; RYAN, MULHOLLAND & AGOSTON, 2014), participant observation (CROSSLEY, 2010a), or derived from documents from archives (BELLOTTI, 2014). Another level of reference is qualitative methods and procedures for the analysis of networks. Here, researchers draw on techniques established in qualitative social research, such as the coding procedures of grounded theory methodology (SCHEIBELHOFER, 2006), the development of different lines of interpretation in objective hermeneutics (HOLLSTEIN, 2002), as well as methods specifically tailored to the network as an object of research such as qualitative structural analysis (HERZ, PETERS & TRUSCHKAT, 2015) or relational ethnography (DESMOND, 2014). The choice of suitable methodical procedures is tied to the question of what the objects or aspects of interest are in qualitative network research. Mention has been made of the meanings of relationships and of types of relationships, network practices and interactions, network contexts and boundaries, as well as network formation and dynamics (FUHSE, 2009, 2016; HÄUßLING, 2006; HOLLSTEIN, 2011). [3]

Whereas qualitative methods for data collection and analysis have been developed for and applied in a large number of empirical network studies, *qualitative network research* still lacks a rigorous fit between ontological positions, methodologies, and procedures in the sense of a *methodical holism*. This would consist in "a coherent fit of theory, methodical practice, and the design of the techniques that these apply" (DIAZ-BONE, 2013, §10; see also ATKINSON,

1 All translations from non-English texts are ours.

2005; DIAZ-BONE, 2017).² The lack of an ontological substantiation of the design of procedures bears the risk of applying methods as if they were techniques of data collection and analysis that do not require any particular preconditions to be met. Yet a coherent research design that builds on action-theoretical assumptions about reality and which is applied and reflected upon in research practice in ways appropriate to the object of research is crucial for the integrity and quality of a qualitative study and its results (PRZYBORSKI & WOHLRAB-SAHR, 2014; STEINKE, 2010; STRÜBING, HIRSCHAUER, AYAß, KRÄHNKE & SCHEFFER, 2018; SUDDABY, 2006). The decision to apply qualitative method(ologie)s derives from certain basic theoretical assumptions that prove to be informative in view of the object of research and the research question (MRUCK & MEY, 2005). In research practice, these theoretical foundations guide the decisions that need to be made in the research process (FLICK, 2000; GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). In the "developmental laboratory" (STRAUS, 2006, p.481) of qualitative network research, the theoretical and methodological grounding of empirical procedures and the interest in networks as an object of research is the area that remains the least elaborated. Although various approaches within the interpretive paradigm (e.g., symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology) are pointed out in overviews of the qualitative perspective in network research (HOLLSTEIN, 2006, 2011; see also FUHSE, 2016), the specific theoretical and method(ological) implications of the various approaches have thus far not been spelled out systematically. [4]

We have furthermore increasingly seen attempts in recent years not only to develop and advance qualitative approaches in network research but also to formulate a *qualitative network research* that is less a "complementary perspective" (DIAZ-BONE, 2006, §18) to formal network analysis but rather an "alternative perspective" (ibid.) with a foundation and claims to validity in its own right. Conceptually, this shift in perspective rests roughly speaking on a view of social networks as constructed on the basis of meaning, tied to perspectives, and processual. In this view, networks are not conceived as structures and forms that are "simply given" and guide actors in what they do but as being created by actors in the process of doing and as becoming meaningful in their createdness as multiply interconnected processes of interaction. This implies a different view of structure—and thus of networks—that is directed toward the rules of the everyday, situational, and symbolic production of social reality and thus toward processes of creating social order (SCHWALBE, 2020). [5]

In this contribution, we discuss which theoretical and methodological perspectives that symbolic interactionism (SI) holds for qualitative network research and outline the consequences for research practice. SI is one of the key theoretical approaches of the interpretive paradigm (others are, e.g., ethnomethodology, phenomenology, the sociology of knowledge), which is the theoretical and

2 DIAZ-BONE (2013, §10) pointed out the distinction between methodical and methodological holism: "This methodical holism must not be confused with a methodological holism that refers to a logic of explanation which draws on supra-individual phenomena as principles that are real and have explanatory potential and rejects the methodical aggregation of supra-individual phenomena as reductionism. By contrast, methodical holism pertains to a fit between theory and methodical practice."

methodological foundation of numerous empirical, largely non-standardized, qualitative studies (for an overview, see DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2011; KELLER, 2012). SI encompasses a range of varieties and advancements that are by no means limited to qualitative social research only (for an overview, see CARTER & FULLER, 2016; CARTER & MONTES ALVARADO, 2017).³ In our discussion, we focus on SI in the tradition of the Chicago School and especially on its foundations as spelled out by Herbert BLUMER (1986 [1969]), who proposed adopting an interpretive-inductive approach to social reality (or realities). We choose four aspects to show in greater detail that the perspective offered by SI yields benefits for network research:

- From a theoretical point of view, SI can be described as a *relational approach* (DIAZ-BONE, 2017; WITTE, SCHMITZ & SCHMIDT-WELLENBURG, 2017). In SI the interactive creation of meaning via negotiating situations and focuses on actor interpretations is emphasized. Negotiations are a constitutive element in the construction of social reality in the web of relationships with other actors, interactions, and situations. It is precisely here where we see the connection of SI with the network perspective.
- SI's methodological foundation as an *interpretive approach* opens up an avenue for the analysis of the negotiation, emergence, and types of networks.
- By designing research as an interactive process, SI results in an inherently *reflexive stance* at the epistemological level, which has been given (too) little attention in network research thus far.
- Finally, linking SI's theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and methodical perspectives results in a *holistic approach* that can be drawn on to ground qualitative network research. [6]

To date, there has been very little work that discusses the potential and possibilities for utilizing SI in network research (CROSSLEY, 2010a; FINE & KLEINMAN, 1983; SALVINI, 2010). SALVINI (2010) criticized that network research has rarely systematically considered or discussed the implications of an interactionist network perspective at the theoretical, methodological, and practical level of research. According to this critique, empirical network studies have also largely ignored actors' meanings and interpretations or at best considered them implicitly (similarly, CROSSLEY, 2010a; FINE & KLEINMAN, 1983). It is at the same time surprising that much work on qualitative approaches in network research—for instance, the New York School of relational sociology (e.g., MISCHE, 2011)—hardly makes mention of SI or addresses it in an abbreviated version, even though partly making the same or similar assumptions. We therefore ask, from the vantage point of SI, what theoretical and methodological perspectives on social networks can be unfolded? What are the implications of an interactionist perspective on networks for research practice? This contribution

3 In this contribution, we can address neither differences between versions of SI nor in the reception of SI in the German-speaking and English-speaking world. As our research has shown, this comparative review of the culturally and field-specific reception of SI is a research desideratum. On the establishment of symbolic interactionism, its eclectic reception, and, building on the latter, its criticism in German-speaking countries, see JOAS (1988), KELLER (2012), and STRÜBING (1997); on the different receptions and (mis-)interpretations of BLUMER's interactionism in the English-speaking world, see LOW and BOWDEN (2020).

aims to provide an outline of an interactionist approach to network research—one in which we will discuss not so much specific techniques but first and foremost the guiding ideas underpinning an interactionist research perspective. In so doing, we offer a version of a theoretically and methodologically reflected qualitative network research and invite others to participate in its further development. [7]

We begin by showing how social networks can be conceptualized from an interactionist perspective (Section 2). To this end, we outline SI as a relational approach (Section 2.1) and indicate its basic conceptual building blocks (Section 2.2). We make the proposed theoretical perspective fruitful for network research and derive from it interactionist objects of qualitative network research (Section 2.3). Thereafter, we briefly introduce the epistemological and methodological premises of SI (Section 3) and discuss implications for the interactionist study of social networks (Section 4). In this context, we devise, on the basis of the guiding ideas of interactionism, practical approaches to a methods design that is appropriate to the objects of research (Section 4.1). We discuss approaches to the exploration of situations—as hinges to the empirical analysis of social networks (Section 4.2)—and show the extent to which network research is situated and requires an all-encompassing reflexivity (Section 4.3). We combine these perspectives and give some cues for how an interpretive inspection of social networks might proceed (Section 4.4). Lastly, we situate the outlined interactionist approach in the context of network research and point out consequences for qualitative network research (Section 5). [8]

2. Symbolic Interactionism and Social Networks

2.1 Symbolic interactionism as a relational approach

We will first position SI theoretically and show cursorily to what extent SI's approach to reality can be understood as a relational one. In so doing, we reveal the extent to which perspectives of networking and networks as objects are already inherent in SI. SI is identified as a social theory in which negotiating meaning in situations through interaction plays a key role (ATKINSON & HOUSLEY, 2003; KELLER, 2012). Inspired by US-American pragmatism associated with scholars such as DEWEY, JAMES, and PEIRCE (for an overview, see SCHUBERT, 2009; SHALIN, 1986), the premises of SI rest on the social-psychological thought of George Herbert MEAD (1964, 1967 [1934]) on socialization, identity formation, and the relevance of symbol use. MEAD's basic position was as follows: A conception of the self is inconceivable without relating to others; it is thus always already social by its very nature. MEAD conceived of the *self* as the totality of an individual, as an identity that results from the interplay of *I* and *me*. *I*, in his view, involves the impulsive, active, and motivational element of consciousness. *Me* is a perspective that an individual develops in relation to others (e.g., how do others perceive me, and how do they perceive what I do? What are their expectations regarding my behavior?). In a kind of interaction with their self, actors can thus consider their own actions through the mirror of others' perceptions (similarly, COOLEY, 1992 [1902]). MEAD (1967 [1934]) saw such

behavioral expectations and experiences as emerging from interactions with significant others as their foundation. According to him, these interactions with significant others are interrelated with expectations of how others would typically act and with the responses normally elicited by one's own behavior. MEAD called collective notions of this kind "the generalized other" (p.194). It represents "what 'one' usually does in certain situations and what one can therefore also quite rightly expect of all participants" (ABELS, 2019, p.195). This taking the perspective of the other, which extends beyond specific others, forms the framework for interaction. Actors coordinate action by mutually observing one another, indicating action to each other, and interpreting the other by means of adopting that other's perspective. Concatenating acts of mutually adopting the other's perspective thus become the driver of interaction, in which actively adopting a role (*role-taking*) is intertwined with individually shaping it (*role-making*) (TURNER, 1956). MEAD's concept of identity, based on self, I, and me, finally implies an image of actors according to which humans have the faculty of reflection and can render themselves—in relation to others—an object of their own action. Consequently, this leads to a concept of action according to which action cannot be reduced to attributing it to an individual subject but must invariably be understood as relational, as social action. [9]

In the 1930s, Herbert BLUMER, guided by MEAD's thinking, coined the term *symbolic interactionism* (on the ontological and methodological differences between BLUMER and MEAD, see BLUMER, 1980). In his seminal thoughts on the "methodological position of symbolic interactionism" in particular, BLUMER (1986 [1969], p.2) elaborated the fundamental ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of SI. Building on MEAD's social-psychological assumptions about the significance of interaction, communication, and the use of symbols for the constitution of experiences, symbolic interactionists inquire how "social phenomena are constituted by the human use of symbols" (KELLER, 2012, p.86). In this vein, "(s)ymbolic interactionism sees social action as consisting of the individual and collective activities of people who are engaged in social interaction—that is to say, activities whose own formation is made in the light of the activity of one another" (BLUMER, 1986 [1969], pp.54f.). Building on three premises, BLUMER thus drew a picture of human beings as creative actors who, first, attribute meaning to "the divergent things"—that is, to the substance of interaction, interaction partners, categories, objects, and so on. Second, these meanings are always interactively negotiated in situations and, third, produced, renewed, or also altered in a process of interpretation (pp.81ff.; see also KOOB, 2007). In such negotiations, for instance, asymmetric power relations, conflicts, or consensus are established and options created for the continuation of interaction. This gives rise to lines of action that, for example, force subsequent moves or also elicit expectations of certain responses (HIRSCHAUER, 2016). Orientation in situations is provided by *significant symbols* such as greeting rituals. Symbols refer to something; they bear meaning and are produced in interaction. They are understood and used in the same way by multiple actors and facilitate mutual understanding. In interaction, actors mutually create and reproduce symbols and, in so doing, interpret situations and coordinate action. [10]

Symbolic interaction is always a multiply layered process in which people interpret and define situations from their perspective and attribute to them *subjective meaning*.⁴ In a mutual process of interpretation, actors indicate their behavior to one another in order to negotiate little by little a situational interaction order and create social meaning (GOFFMAN, 1983). Thus, the construction of social reality is a multiply relational process: first, via relations of subjective experience; second, via the inevitable mutual effects that the interactants have on one another; and third, via the interlinkage of various situations. We understand this analytic separation as a heuristic, for subjective experience, interaction, and situation all interrelate and overlap (similarly, HIRSCHAUER, 2016). BLUMER (1986 [1969], p.20) already characterized social action as *interlinked* both *horizontally* (e.g., via different contexts) and *vertically* (via different points in time). Ultimately, such interlinkages result in "large complex networks of action involving an interlinkage and interdependency of diverse actions of diverse people" (p.19). We take this perspective of interlinked and embedded interaction that BLUMER unfolds in elaborating the theme of interlinkage as a sign of a genuinely relational understanding of social reality.⁵ Thinking this through systematically leads us to conclude along with CROSSLEY (2010a, p.345): "In this respect, though the point is not spelled out, societies [...] are always relational configurations: networks." [11]

Consequently, social networks also become social figures or objects that are addressed in interactionist research. We find implicit reference to networks already in the classical works of MEAD (1967 [1934]) and BLUMER (1986 [1969]), although they are not necessarily designated as such. Whereas MEAD discussed relations with a stronger focus on dyads, BLUMER and a number of other protagonists of the Chicago School (e.g., BECKER, 1963; SHIBUTANI, 1955) turned their attention to groups as key social units and asked, for instance, how do medical students, in the course of university training and among the ensemble of teachers and fellow students, become "physicians"? ("Boys in White"; BECKER, GEER, HUGHES & STRAUSS, 1961). Or how are social entities and groups in an urban neighborhood constituted? ("Street Corner Society"; WHYTE, 1993 [1943]). Conceptually, groups can even be described as a specific form of network: "Although groups are distinguished from networks through their boundaries, pasts, and identifications, groups are in some regards dense networks" (FINE, 2012, p.168; on the distinction of group and network, see also FINE & KLEINMAN, 1983; FUHSE, 2006). [12]

In SI, we furthermore find other explicit references to networks in organizational sociology (FINE, 2012; HALL, 1987, 2003; MCGINTY, 2014) as well as, above all, in studies of social worlds⁶ (BECKER, 1982; STRAUSS, 1973, 1993). There, social networks have been described as important analytical building blocks for

4 Drawing on MEAD and SI, we conceive of subjective attributions of meaning as being social by nature; that is to say, actors are embedded in a "continuous flow of activity, which, for the individual living being, proceeds with modal fluctuations between routine and reflexive problem-solving, yet in which joint action is the normal case" (HIRSCHAUER, 2016, p.47). We thus address actors not as quasi autonomous, self-directed individuals but rather as always being socially embedded.

5 In SI in the BLUMER tradition, the position of an anticategorical imperative is represented, which is also referred to in network research (EMIRBAYER & GOODWIN, 1994).

the interactionist inquiry into social order and initial connections made to "classical" network research (for an overview, see CROSSLEY, 2010a). Finally, FINE and KLEINMAN (1983) were the first to conceptually and systematically flesh out the network concept within the context of SI. They drew on the anthropological tradition of network research and developed a first outline of an interactionist network perspective. They elaborated the benefits and implications of employing the concept of network as opposed to that of group and demonstrated—first and foremost at the theoretical conceptual level—how social networks in the understanding of SI are constituted and structured by meaning, yet without explicitly addressing the practical implications for research. [13]

We hold that the action-theoretical emphasis on interaction and relations suggests conceptualizing the concept of network from an interactionist perspective. In so doing, the concept of social network in the tradition of SI is neither historically new nor theoretically insignificant. A network perspective is rather an inherent part of the architecture of interactionist theory (although not always spelled out explicitly). Whereas a network perspective for SI has therefore at least been discussed rudimentarily, an interactionist perspective has thus far received little systematic attention in network research, neither theoretically conceptually nor analytically empirically (CROSSLEY, 2010a; SALVINI, 2010). [14]

2.2 Basic conceptual building blocks: Situation, interaction, relationship, and network

We will now revisit the theoretical foundations of SI indicated in the previous section, elaborate it, and make it fertile for network research by focusing on key concepts such as interaction, situation, and relationship. We suggest taking as our point of departure for an interactionist network research the meaningful and social creation of networks as situationally rooted processes of ordering (*acts of networking*). We begin by pointing out that concepts such as interaction and relationship have already found prominent use in network research, in particular as both are often formalized in terms of edges (relations) between nodes (actors). Many network studies employ, for example, name generators to determine with whom someone has a relationship (e.g., Who are your three closest friends? LAUMANN 1973). Sometimes the focus is also on the question of with whom someone engaged in a specific interaction (e.g., With whom have you spoken about important matters during the last six months?; BURT, 1984; PFENNING & PFENNING, 1987). From such a set of ego—alter relationships, the researcher then usually constructs networks via alter—alter relations (e.g., Are friend A and friend B also friends?). In the following, we seek to theoretically underpin, from a perspective informed by interactionism, the conceptual foundations of a qualitative network research and expound the method(ological) consequences for the research process. What turns out to be a key and fertile element of a qualitative network research that moves *networking* to the center of attention is in

6 SHIBUTANI (1955, p.566) characterized social worlds as follows: "Each social world [...] is a culture area, the boundaries of which are set neither by territory nor by formal group membership but by the limits of effective communication." CROSSLEY (2010a, 2010b) defined social worlds in this respect as social networks and, in so doing, demonstrated the connection between and conceptual proximity of the two concepts.

particular the hitherto underexposed concept of situation (similarly, STEGBAUER, 2016). [15]

2.2.1 Interaction and situation

The foundation of an interactionist perspective of social order is the concept of interaction. According to ABELS, interaction means "that individuals affect one another, be it that they act in conjunction and influence each others' thinking and doing, be it that they orient their thinking and doing on a certain concrete or also imagined other" (2019, p.185). Interaction is conceived as a continuous, relational process "of directly mutually oriented social action, [which], accentuates the symbolically mediated character of social action" (JOAS, 1988, p.419). That is to say, interactive negotiations—drawing on signs, gestures, and symbols—take place permanently and meanings are constantly refreshed, reproduced, or altered on the one hand. On the other, meaning created in interaction is invariably social and can be neither attributed to an individual—particularly in increasingly mediatized societies—nor reduced to the mere physical co-presence of actors (REICHERTZ & WILZ, 2015; similarly, HIRSCHAUER, 2014). [16]

Interaction is performed in situations: "No interaction starts at zero, is unconditional, and each is contextualized in many ways" (HIRSCHAUER, 2014, p.111). Interaction thus does not occur in a void but is embedded in a nexus of interconnections and references—(and is) thus always situated. THOMAS (1931, pp.176f.) early on conceived of interaction in this way:

"The situation in which the person finds himself is taken as containing the configuration of factors conditioning the behavior reaction. Of course, it is not the spatial material situation which is meant, but the situation of social relationships. It involves all the institutions and more—family, gang, church, school, the press, the movies, and the attitudes and values of other persons with which his own come in conflict or co-operation." [17]

In this way, the situation is positioned as the "basic unit of research" (REICHERTZ & WILZ, 2015, p.42) that frames and conditions interaction. CLARKE (2003) made this assumption the point of departure of a research agenda of her own—namely, situation analysis—and postulated that empirical data be approached primarily via the situation: "Action is not enough. Our analytic focus needs to be fully on the situation of inquiry broadly conceived" (2003, p.556). DIAZ-BONE (2017, p.395) took this up and, adding a comprehensive concept of situation, emphasized that "the concept of 'situation' is no longer understood as being limited to interaction situations among co-present actors but [that] socio-historical constellations and processes are considered as situations as well." According to this reasoning, a situation is more than only the place where interaction occurs and also comprises, aside from actor experiences, attitudes, values, and expectations—and this is particularly relevant to network research—"an invisible third" (STRAUSS, 1968 [1959], p.58) and "implicated actors" (CLARKE, 2005, p.77), "the generalized other" (MEAD, 1967 [1934], p.154), institutions and other social formations, physical conditions, and much

more. Ultimately, everything that actors "contribute" and produce in interaction is part of the situation: "The fundamental assumption is that everything in the situation both constitutes and affects most everything else in the situation in some way(s)" (CLARKE, 2005, p.72). With this in mind, a situation can be viewed neither as an objective circumstance that can be observed from the outside nor as an individual's subjective perception. A situation must rather be described as an ensemble of conditions of action—one that is always socially mediated, mutually created, and results in interaction running a specific course and not otherwise. THOMAS and THOMAS (1970 [1928], pp.572) early on pointedly emphasized the power of situations in forming social action in what has been called the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." BLUMER (1986 [1969]) accordingly conceived of the definition of the situation—negotiated in an interplay of the subjective and social attribution of meaning—as always interlinked horizontally and vertically with other situations. In any situation, we thus always find connections and references to other social, cultural, and historical constellations. [18]

The sociological concept of situation hence differs from a commonsensical understanding that refers to a purely singular event that, as such, has been completed (for instance, people in a specific constellation with one another, conflict with colleagues; see also REICHERTZ & WILZ, 2015). In this vein, an encounter in the hallway can be a situation just as a migration process or life in a big city. What unfolds here is the idea that a "situation is both an object confronted and an ongoing process subsequent to that confrontation. Situations have a career-like quality and are linked in various ways to other situations" (MORRIONE, 1985, pp.161f., cited in CLARKE, 2005, p.21). The basic contours of the complexity of relations between and in situations becomes clear: Social situations are *multi-modally relational*. As CLARKE explained, it is particularly the gestalt of a situation that is relevant to interactionist research: "[A] situation is always greater than the sum of its parts because it includes their relationality in a particular temporal and spatial moment" (2005, p.65). The specificity of how various conditions of action take effect in interaction in situations thus becomes the focus of an interactionist perspective, for it is the interlinkage of situations that gives rise to patterns of order such as rules or roles. Situations and interaction hence play a key part in the construction, stability, and change of social order. [19]

2.2.2 Interaction and relationship

In network research, social relationships as units of social networks are of particular interest. How the transition from interaction to relationships comes about exactly, that is, when interactions (as the mutual coordination of action between two or more actors) actually evolve into relationships, is not fully illuminated in BLUMER's version of SI (CROSSLEY, 2010a). Interaction and relationships are both constituted by actors' mutual references to one another. They are not "simply there" but rather constructed in a process and structured by meaning. At the same time, we can distinguish the two concepts: "Interactions can have properties not present in the actions of isolated individuals, and relationships have properties not present in their constituent interactions"

(HINDE, 1979, p.V). In relationships, actors are thus connected in a specific way. Whereas relationship research describes social relationships as forms of social organization that are institutionalized, for example, via specific stores of knowledge, forms of communication, and rituals (LENZ, 2009; McCALL, 1988), an interactionist perspective will focus on the formation of relationships as a mutual process of internalized representations of others that shapes (future) action (CROSSLEY, 2010a). Relationships emerge via interaction and develop a history that gives rise to expectations regarding future interaction. In this way, they become a sort of condition of action that ultimately gives shape to lines of action (similarly, HOLLSTEIN, 2001). Put pointedly, a social relationship itself becomes a situation that orients interaction. This raises interesting questions: How are interactions and relationships constituted? Are they different in terms of how actors make mutual reference to one another? How does the (type of) relationship affect the negotiation of situations? Using an example, we want to illustrate conceptual ideas on interaction and relationship and their relations. [20]

Person A and B meet for the first time and talk with one another at a party of a mutual acquaintance. Out of a variety of conceivable scenarios, we pick two possible developments that this might take.

- In the first scenario, A and B part ways after some superficial small talk and shortly afterwards can only vaguely remember the respective other guest at the party. [21]

In this scenario, their interaction is oriented toward the situation (party) in which the other is perceived, with reference to the generalized other, in terms of how he/she performs his/her role (guest). This interaction reproduces these role conceptions in the form of the generalized other but does not initiate any mutual orientation of action on the part of [the] two specific others that would result in a personal relationship. The situation "creates" specific conditions for interaction that would allow for the emergence of a (personal) relationship in principle, which does not materialize in this example, however. The genesis of a relationship thus requires more than an opportunity for interaction (e.g., the perception of closeness on account of shared experiences, mindsets, or interests on the basis of which a future interlinkage can be anticipated). Our example leads to the following proposition: Interaction is a foundational element of sociation, whereas relationships are types thereof.

- In our second scenario, A and B discover that they share certain interests, and they take a liking to each other. In their interaction at the party, they define a shared foundation for further interaction, for instance, the expectation that they will have fun together. Subsequently, they meet again and pursue common hobbies. Over time and via the interlinkage of multiple interactions, they establish "shared mutual definitions of the relationship" (JOAS, 1988, p.419)—in this case, an affectually constructed social relationship: the dyadic friendship relationship. [22]

From an interactionist perspective, the conditions of action and the processes that constitute the interaction(s) between A and B now become relevant. In the following considerations, let us assume the second scenario, the establishment of a personal relationship. This "we definition" of being friends arises from the perception of a commonality (or several ones) and is driven by the history of interaction (vertical interlinkage). It is likewise embedded in contexts of other relationships, for example, other friendship experiences, a society's cultural conceptions, or the social background (horizontal interlinkage). In a social relationship, the actors develop a perspective that extends beyond the interaction. Although a social relationship is by necessity reproduced in interaction, it transcends—transsituationally—any single interaction. In a certain sense, an enduring social relationship is established but "not [one] stabilized once and for all but rather open and tied to regular mutual recognition" (ibid.). The use of "significant symbols" enables a common orientation and indicates the lines of action within which certain expectations, rules, and procedural forms become established. Friends can play different roles and serve different functions in different situations (e.g., that of a critic or a mediator). Like the relationship itself, these meanings are subject to continuous processes of reproduction, although not always conscious ones and intended as such. The meaning of friendship (what it is and what not) can change. What it means to be called a "friend" can thus in principle be interpreted differently or constructed differently in terms of attributed meaning, both interindividually and intersituationally. The crucial aspect in this regard is less the designation itself but rather the extent to which action is coordinated via the symbolic meanings and references that underlie these designations. How does friendship become (or how is it rendered) relevant in a concrete situation? From life-history and life-course research, we know, for example, that specific relationships, especially during transitions in the life course, come under pressure to change and are often redefined (HOLLSTEIN, 2002). However, social relationships are conceptually under dynamic tension and must be considered fluid (FINE & KLEINMAN, 1983). Yet the degree of fluidity is an empirical question (ibid.). For the study of the genesis and dynamics of social relationships in the vein of SI, we must consider situational processes of construction in the interplay of subjective and social constructions of meaning as well as social-historical interlinkages of interactions and situations. [23]

2.2.3 Social networks in interactionist perspective

On the basis of the relational approach to reality in SI, especially in the sense of BLUMER's (1986 [1969]) theme of interlinkage, we have outlined how the genesis and dynamics of social relationships can be conceptualized in terms of "large complex networks of action" (p.19). We see that, even in dyadic relationships, additional others are of significance depending on the situation, be it by reference to concrete or invisible others. Social relationships thus always emerge and exist in relation to other relationships. Via this perspective of the embeddedness of relationships, social networks can be analytically reconstructed as conditions of action (as a social influence) on the one hand. On the other, social networks themselves (as social formations) become the product of action in the context of horizontal and vertical interlinkages of interactions and

relationships. A situation is ultimately a moment of crystallization in which participants negotiate how social networks affect action and how action affects social networks. [24]

Building on this, we intend to explore in greater depth the interactionist perspective on the social network as a social figure. BLUMER described the everyday and academic significance of networks as "the extended connection of actions that make up so much of human group life" (ibid.) yet criticized academic approaches that "view such networks [...] as self-operating entities, following their own dynamics and not requiring that attention be given to the participants within the network" (ibid.). Subsequently, he elaborated a perspective that is able to describe how social networks become relevant to action via the actors' engagement in interactive construction and their social positioning:

"One should recognize what is true, namely, that the diverse array of participants occupying different points in the network engage in their actions at those points on the basis of using given sets of meanings. A network or an institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act. [...] It is necessary to recognize that the sets of meanings that lead participants to act as they do at their stationed points in the network have their own setting in a localized process of social interaction—and that these meanings are formed, sustained, weakened, strengthened, or transformed, as the case may be, through a socially defining process. Both the functioning and the fate of institutions are set by this process of interpretation as it takes place among the diverse sets of participants" (pp.19-20). [25]

On the basis of BLUMER's profound considerations, we can state four fundamental premises for an interactionist understanding of social networks. Social networks are 1. structured by meaning, 2. constituted through social negotiations, 3. situated, and 4. processes of social ordering. SI is interested in how actors produce and reproduce social networks via interaction (SALVINI, 2010). Researchers reconstructing a network thus does not per se render significant positions such as that of a broker relevant to action. Positions gain relevance only once they are situationally negotiated in action in terms of an act of positioning. From an interactionist perspective, the key starting points of social networks are therefore the meanings that are generated in and about interactions and relationships. The meanings of social relationships are hence tied to social positions, refer to something, and are conditional upon the actors' respective definitions of the situation (HOLLSTEIN, 2006). Relationships—and consequently networks as well—are thus 1. *structured by meaning* and must be interpreted from the actors' perspective[s] and their contexts of action. FINE and KLEINMAN (1983, p.97) once defined a social network in this respect as "a set of relationships which people imbue with meaning and use for personal or collective purposes." Social networks are hence not generated at will but always through social meaning while embedded in social interactions and situations. [26]

They are 2. (re-)produced in continuous processes of *social negotiation*. In line with STRAUSS, this process can be conceptualized as "negotiated order" (1978, p.6) or "processual ordering" (1993, p.254). Specific processes of ordering are established and reproduced on the basis of interlinkages of interactions. What actors do is thus not determined by the forms and structures of networks; rather they actively negotiate positions and their meanings depending on the relevance they attribute to them; they do this in encounters with other people and their life histories as well as in various contexts of socialization and realms of experience. In other words, social networks are "combinations of meanings that are formed in the interactions among individuals, and that, in their turn, orient and contribute to giving sense to those same interactions" (SALVINI, 2010, p.378). This is not to misconceive social networks as being the result of subjective intentions or representations; rather they are an expression of the interlinkage of social processes of negotiation. As such, they can become (or be rendered) relevant to action in different ways. [27]

The way in which social networks are constituted and take effect is always tied to their situational gestalt. From an interactionist perspective, 3. they must be viewed as *situated*. Even if networks as "institutionalized structures" appear to be transsituational, they are rendered relevant to action, in terms of their specificity and from the perspective of a situation, by actors "siz[ing] up the situation in which they occur" (BLUMER, 1986 [1969], p.97). This does not contradict the fact that social networks can be described as formations. The crucial aspect from the vantage point of SI is that social networks are not entities *sui generis* but rather that they become meaningful depending on the definition of the situation and that they make selective reference, both within and by means of the network, to other situations. [28]

From an interactionist point of view, a social network can be conceived in terms of a process of networking, that is, meanings are dynamic and must be recurrently reproduced—and they can also change. If we assume that the gestalt of networks—their structure—is not predetermined but is produced and altered as a negotiated order by means of the situatedness of interactions, it follows that networks can appear both in different formations (e.g., as triads or in various clusters) as well as in different degrees of institutionalization. By socially activating relationships in situations, specific relationships can also always remain in latency and play no role in the moment, or they can become relevant as references (e.g., as the "invisible third"; STRAUSS (1968 [1959], p.58). CROSSLEY (2010a, p.356) concluded accordingly: "This should remind us that network structure is never fixed. It is always structure-in-process." Processes of ordering can diverge within a network (by using significant symbols). CROSSLEY called attention to the fact that, for instance, the inner core of a group attends to different processes than the fringes and, in pointing this out, demonstrated the fluidity of network boundaries (p.353). Networks at the same time also differ in terms of their historical linkages. For example, there are forms of joint action that display greater continuity and more stable lines of action than others—among them are, according to BLUMER (1986 [1969]), institutions and organizations (for

organizational research, see STRÜBING, 2005). For this reason, social networks are 4. *always social processes of ordering*. [29]

When tying these ends together, we see that SI opens up a specific perspective on social networks: both via the actors' interactive attribution of relevance and as variable conditions depending on the respective situation. SI focuses on interacting actors as interpreters of social relationships and networks. In so doing, an interactionist perspective does not deny the existence of structure—a frequent misunderstanding—but rather aims for a shift in perspective: one that zeros in on the everyday interactive production and affirmation of these structures or, as the case may be, on their change. Social networks can indeed be perceived as a solidified—structural—moment, for instance, in the sense of a realm of experience for actors in which they generate and reproduce orientations and actions as they interact. However, a social network is not a "structure as such" that is imposed upon the actors; rather, it exerts a concrete effect as part of the set of conditions of action in a situation with its interlinkages.⁷ This understanding rests on an interactionist concept of order according to which networks, like structures, "are the consequences of prior actions sustained through past and present practices and experienced as obdurate" (CLARKE, 2005, p.65; see also BLUMER (1986 [1969]; STRAUSS, 1993). In this context, structure is conceptualized as a specific processual order that emerges by means of vertical and horizontal interlinkages of interactions.⁸ [30]

The interactionist perspective on the relationship of interaction, relationship, and network outlined above implies an understanding of social realities according to which social phenomena become accessible via interpretations and definitions of situations. These interpretations are not arbitrary or individual ones but are rather produced in interaction and therefore always already social. We can thus aptly summarize, SI considers *how* people create social order in their daily dealings with one another (similarly, SNOW, 2001). [31]

7 Being rooted in "methodological situationalism" (DIAZ-BONE, 2017, p.395; similarly, HIRSCHAUER, 2014), an interactionist perspective cannot attribute social processes and forms exclusively to the micro, meso, or macro level. Rather, interactions, relationships, and networks overlap, or are intertwined, in a situation. The situation is understood as a culmination point in which references from different social entities are possible. In our reading, attributions are misleading that see network research as positioned at the meso level and SI as focused exclusively on the micro level (similarly, CLARKE, 2005; HIRSCHAUER, 2016; KNORR-CETINA, 2009).

8 We see a fundamental need for network research to reflect systematically on the ontological underpinnings of the concept of structure. Aspects such as form, micro, meso, and macro level must be determined more precisely (KNOX et al., 2006; similarly, HOLLSTEIN, 2003) and related to network concepts such as the total network, the ego-centric network, and the agency of actors.

2.3 The objects of interactionist network research

In qualitative research, issues of fundamental interest to research are negotiated in "material" form on the basis of "objects." The research process is continuously adjusted by reference to objects, which require "multiple fit" (STRÜBING et al., 2018, p.88). Drawing on our conceptualization of social networks and our theoretical linkage of the concepts of interaction, relationship, and situation, we can highlight various kinds of objects that are predestined.⁹ [32]

First, it makes sense to consider social relationships and social networks—in the sense of "processual ordering" (STRAUSS, 1993, p.254)—as interactive processes of negotiation in a dynamic perspective. The *formation, reproduction, and dynamic of social relationships and networks* can be described as key objects of research accordingly. How do social networks interactively constitute themselves as such in the first place? How is the path paved for social relationships? How are they stabilized or dissolved? How can we conceive of processes of institutionalizing social order? These questions address the act of *networking* as a process of (de-)formation. One way of getting to the bottom of such processes is to focus particularly on new relationships in the making or also on seemingly established relationships that are eroding (MØNSTED, 1995). Here, various areas of research are conceivable: Changes in the meaning of social relationships appear, for instance, in transitions during the life course (e.g., when entering the labor market), when first immersing oneself in new social worlds (e.g., by moving to a new neighborhood), in the context of processes of intervention and transformation (e.g., when two departments of an organization merge), or in processes of social in- and exclusion (SALVINI, 2010). Another area that could be addressed is new forms of sociality, for example, via the various communicative modalities of online and offline interaction as well as mediated interaction (ibid.). At the same time, symbolic interactionists are also interested in rituals and routines, that which repeats (or seems to repeat) on an everyday basis. [33]

Closely linked with processes of social network formation is *boundary-drawing by or within social networks*. Where do actors consider networks to be closed? How is network affiliation or membership processed? How do certain groups constitute themselves? How fluid are social formations? How are they linked with others? These are some of the questions that classical interactionist research has

9 From the perspective outlined here, social networks must be conceptualized as everyday negotiatory work, and this not in the reductive sense of the subjective attribution of meaning and thus the individual attribution of relevance by an actor but rather in the social sense of interactive (and symbolic) structuration by actors. In this vein, SI prioritizes the question of social meaning; the objective is to understand meaning in terms of how meaning is inherently constituted and, to do so, to focus on the dynamic, interactively generated, and shared reality of the actors by considering situations. Although it is possible to employ an interactionist approach to target the level of subjective meaning—for example, to explore how an individual person conceptualizes friendship—what we frequently see is an exclusive focus on an individual actor's subjective meaning without at the very least also considering the social construction of meaning. This is a reductionism that undermines the potential of the interactionist approach to social reality. In approaching empirical reality, we must thus always start from the attribution of meaning by the actors involved in interactions as well as, above all, the meaning of the interactions themselves. Such a perspective on social reality calls for methods of qualitative research.

pursued many a time in the study of social worlds. In participant observation research conducted in a Boston district characterized by Italian immigrants, WHYTE (1993 [1943]), for instance, showed how the relationships between social groups and social worlds become solidified in the "Street Corner Society." In this process, making reference to as well as setting oneself apart from one another play a role as does the construction of a group-specific identity. Research questions of this kind that ask about the role of certain types of relationships for drawing ethnic boundaries are relevant for understanding the emergence and ossification of social inequality. [34]

Another focus is *social networks' situational relevance to action*. How do social relationships and social networks become (or are made) relevant to action, for example, to specific decisions and interactions over the life course? Social networks in this sense are conceptualized as situational conditions of action, which raises the question of the extent to which references to social networks affect the situation. How do supposedly institutionalized relationships affect interaction? Of great interest in our view is that an interactionist perspective facilitates directing attention to how others who are present—and even more so implicit or invisible others—become relevant in or to interaction. A case in point is STRAUSS' work "Mirrors and Masks" (1968 [1959]) in which he showed how identities and identification emerge from processes of interaction. A variety of other areas of application are conceivable here: for example, the rather classical question in network research of how the network influences the provision of concrete support or also processes of knowledge diffusion within the network. Other questions that might be raised—for example, in the context of social worlds—is how social networks become situationally efficacious in action by means of, for example, their specific structure and type of institutionalization. Here, attention might be directed to the meaning of specific network positions and the *positioning* that this entails. Take the position of broker, for example: the broker disseminates knowledge, establishes processes, and represents structures. But how is the position of the broker, in the sense of the linkage between *role-making* and *role-taking*, ultimately interpreted and filled with meaning? What are the consequences of network positioning for social action, and how do these consequences differ in various situations? How do the interlinkages of situations lead from positioning to manifest positions? In an ethnographic study of sports courses, CROSSLEY (2008) showed, for example, how network configurations can constrain and enable interaction, how positions such as the established and the outsider emerge, and how positioning as a broker along with processes of social closure affect action. He illustrated that the broker position must by no means necessarily be a beneficial and influential one but can also be perceived as a sign of fragmentation between multiple groups. [35]

If we assume that in interactive negotiations *symbols serve to coordinate action*, this raises the question of what significant symbols are and how they become established as "codes" for *networking*. This would refer to relationship concepts (e.g., What does being a friend imply, and how does it contribute to structuring negotiations?) but also to all other symbols that are employed in coordinating the rules of social action or in *networking*. What comes to mind here is "classical"

interactionist contexts such as certain groups (e.g., gangs) or social worlds (e.g., subcultures) but also other everyday settings (e.g., family celebrations). In this vein, BECKER (1963) concerned himself with how people engaging in allegedly deviant behavior became outsiders and demonstrated how labeling others served to define situations such that symbols and positions were established. [36]

Distinguishing these kinds of objects should be understood as an analytical collection of ideas that can illustrate different thrusts of interactionist network research. In empirical reality, these objects coincide. Whether it is processes, dynamics, boundary-drawing, positioning, or symbolization, what they all have in common is that they provide us with insight into the interactive processes of *networking* in the situations to which they are invariably tied. The areas of application are limited neither by discipline nor by topic as long as human-made interaction is the basis. KOOB (2007, §49) provided a pointed description of the diversity of empirical references that an interactionist perspective unlocks: "In short, one who, equipped with the theoretical and methodological toolbox of symbolic interactionism, embarks on a journey through social milieus will be surprised at how much social order can still be detected in the strangest interaction situations." This being the case, we believe that interactionist research has additional potential to contribute to methodological development. Findings that show that different relations between relationships affect action in different social worlds can inspire future research designs. [37]

3. Basic Epistemological and Methodological Assumptions of Interactionist (Network) Research

In the vein of a holistic approach, the research process is largely calibrated by the theoretical premises of SI and implies specific epistemological and methodological perspectives: At the epistemological level, SI's conception of social reality evokes a specific view of the situatedness of research, the research process, and the research subjects. Accordingly, the social world is not simply a relationless outside: "The social world can talk back [...] Like all actors, a sociologist also acts within that world and meets an eternally reacting social reality" (VERHOEVEN, 1991, p.118). This means first of all that data are not discovered but are negotiated from the angle of perspectives in processes of interaction. Interaction—and thus the joint negotiation of realities—pervades every phase of the research process, from contouring the object of research, establishing contacts in the field, collecting data, through compiling field notes (e.g., descriptions or maps) to presenting the findings (e.g., in an article). This results in an understanding of the research process itself as an interlinkage of situated interactions. In this context, the continuous reflection involved in an interactive research process also requires that the researchers engage in an internal and external dialogue geared toward making their *self* (in MEAD's sense; see MILLIKEN & SCHREIBER, 2012) an issue and thus their "set of pre-established imagines" (BLUMER, 1986 [1969], p.36), preconceptions, expectations, and patterns of action that they bring with them and modify as the case may be (similarly, HAMMERSLEY, 1989). From this derives for the relation of theory and empirical research, in BLUMER's (1986 [1969]) view, the *primacy of*

empirical evidence. Following him, the only way to ensure the validity of empirical evidence is

"to go directly to the empirical social world—to see through meticulous examination of it whether one's premises or root images of it, one's questions and problems posed for it, the data one chooses out of it, the concepts through which one sees and analyzes it, and the interpretations one applies to it are actually borne out" (p.32). [38]

The starting point is the fact that the only way to access a reality—as the reality itself—is by means of interpretation based on interaction. Researchers are therefore not representing the empirical world the way that it really is (DENZIN, 1997, 2003); rather, they require appropriate, interpretive approaches to social reality, geared toward comprehending meaning, in order to enable understanding in the sense of an understanding of others. At the methodological level, BLUMER (1986 [1969]) proposed two intertwined phases of an interpretive research process, exploration and inspection, that iterative-cyclically link access to the field and data collection on the one hand with analysis and reflection on the other. He explicated basic principles as essential to the research process, principles that have been further developed and have found entry into qualitative social research (for a more detailed discussion, see BREUER, MRUCK & ROTH, 2002; KRUSE, 2014; MRUCK & BREUER, 2003; STEINKE, 2010; STRÜBING et al., 2018). To understand social reality from the actor perspective, BLUMER (1986 [1969]) saw as crucial for successful research an openness toward the subject matter, constant comparison of empirical data with prior (theoretical) knowledge, flexibility in the field, and a basic stance geared toward understanding meaning. Pursuing this approach requires a research process permeated by instruments of reflection (e.g., research diaries, memos, interpretation groups, supervision) to document and reflect on explorations in the field, the dismissed, the omitted, the situatedness of the researchers, their preconceptions, as well as their different readings (similarly, the grounded theory methodology; see, e.g., MRUCK & MEY, 2019; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998 [1990]). BLUMER's (1986 [1969]) approach consequently leads to adopting a specific stance in research and opposing strong regimentation and canonization of procedures and techniques. In his view, the issue is not "correct research procedure" (p.127) but rather to do justice to the composition, the "obdurate" and "resistant character" (p.23), of the empirical world. Instruments or procedures must, he thus argues, prove "their capacity [...] for discovering what is taking place in actual group life" (p.50) and be appropriate to the processual nature of the world of those subject to research and their definitions of the situation. Understanding meaning can be ensured only by methodical approaches that enable those subjects to scholarly inquiry to unfold their systems of relevance and by researchers who are willing to let these surprise them. In this sense, the following practical implications for research should be seen as possible perspectives, the usefulness of which must continuously be assessed in light of the object of research. [39]

4. Practical Implications of Interactionist Network Research

At this point, we want to outline cursorily on the basis of SI's theoretical, epistemological, and methodological alignment some practical implications for interactionist network research. This is less about specific *dos and don'ts* but rather about key perspectives and essential mindsets for a research practice based on SI. Developing a research interest involves a methodological positioning that indicates how the researcher will explore and inspect the chosen object (see Section 2.3). Accordingly, the researcher must successively contour, at the beginning and during an empirical study, on which aspects of social relationships and social networks the research will focus and which theoretical perspectives this involves (HOLLSTEIN, 2011). Guided by the *primacy of empirical evidence*, symbolic interactionists pursue an inductive approach to social reality that is not free of theory, in the sense of a "naive inductivism" (KRUSE, 2014, p.110; similarly, STRÜBING, 2004) but is rather oriented by "sensitizing concepts" (BLUMER, 1954, p.7). These serve as a kind of analytical lens for guidance in developing various interpretations and are helpful in generating questions and reflecting on one's own preconceptions. In the context of social networks, such sensitizing concepts can be structural components (triads, cliques; for an overview, see WASSERMAN & FAUST, 1994), positions (e.g., brokers; BURT, 2005), or concepts such as homophily (McPHERSON, SMITH-LOVIN & COOK, 2001), reciprocity (GOULDNER, 1960), foci (FELD, 1981), or *strong and weak ties* (GRANOVETTER, 1973). Constantly referring back to sensitizing concepts informed by network theory enables theory-building—as a process of dismissing, reproducing, or reconceptualizing theories. [40]

4.1 Methods of data collection from an interactionist perspective

Drawing on SI's approach to reality—with a primary focus on the level of social meaning—we see that, out of the large potpourri of qualitative methods of data collection, certain methodical approaches are a likelier choice than others. Scholars working in the tradition of SI typically opt for ethnographic methods that involve intense field work and combine, for instance, participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. In SI, it is assumed that these methods enable the researcher to do justice, to an approximate degree, to the complexity of the interactive production of social reality (BLUMER (1986 [1969])). [41]

Ethnographic methods focus on interactions as they take place, oftentimes (but not necessarily) in situations in which several persons are present at the same time. Ethnography allows the researcher to study over a period of time how people position themselves and how they utilize these positions (e.g., as a broker; see CROSSLEY, 2008) or how network boundaries are negotiated (DESMOND, 2014). Online ethnographies, of virtual communities in particular, can be combined with interactionist network research provided that they grant insight into communicative processes of negotiation (e.g., via chats; MAROTZKI, 2017 [2003]). Ethnographies concerned with social relationships often leave unanswered which concrete research strategies (informed by network research) would have to be employed to successfully address questions concerning the

genesis and dynamics of relationships or the situational and transsituational relevance of networks to action.¹⁰ This requires clarifying the question of the extent to which we can gain access to relationships and networks via the ethnographic investigation of concrete interactions. [42]

The situation is different when it comes to the widespread *interview studies* in network research. These studies inquire into (subjective) orientations of action as well as the meanings of specific relationships, for example, how certain roles and positions are perceived (for an overview, see HOLLSTEIN, 2011). To do so, more or less standardized network maps are frequently incorporated into interviews. Such network maps are generated using a verbal name generator, which prompts the interviewee, in line with the respective research question, to name specific actors (e.g., friends). This raises the question of what it is that we are capturing when we ask about networks or relationships. In accordance with the interest that SI places on social sense-making, data collection via reactive methods such as interviews, conversations, or group discussion would require designing a mode of data collection that is as "natural" as possible and allowed to run its own course [without requiring further intervention on the part of the person conducting the interview, conversation, or supervising the discussion]. Mutual references between interactants must be "findable" in the data. In our reading, interactionist network research focuses less on singular ego-centric networks (e.g., a friendship network from the perspective of a single person) and their subjective representations. Interviews using ego-centric network maps can nevertheless be made fertile for an interactionist perspective, first and foremost, to explore conditions of action—situations, that is—and by this means address, for instance, the meanings attributed to generalized others, absent thirds, or implicit actors. Conceivable is furthermore to combine several ego-centric perspectives (BERNARDI, KEIM & VON DER LIPPE, 2007; HEATH et al., 2009) to multi-informed networks that can be used for interactionist analysis or to employ couple interviews, group discussions, or focus groups. [43]

4.2 Network research as the exploration of situations

Collecting network data in line with interactionist network research poses two key challenges: first, how to design a methodical approach to interaction, and second, how to probe into, on the basis of situations, how actors mutually relate to one another as well as to other interactions, relationships, and networks. Irrespective of which specific methodical approach researchers choose, we suggest a strategy of accessing interactions, social relationships, and networks via situations. Such a strategy takes seriously that networks, from an interactionist perspective, are meaningfully structured and socially negotiated processes of ordering in situations (see Section 2.2.3). Particularly well suited for exploring situations empirically are ethnographic methods. We further propose the situation generator as an expedient tool of interviewing that is sensitive to situations. The

¹⁰ Although there are indeed a few ethnographies with a genuine network focus (DOMÍNGUEZ & WATKINS, 2003; MISCHÉ, 2008; UZZI, 1997), we rarely find decidedly interactionist network ethnographies.

key question that we must first answer is how situations can be addressed and which ones? [44]

When employing observation methods or working with documents, we must take into account that, in choosing situations and sequences, the researcher influences (along with other factors) which actors and relations to focus on in the first place. In principle, the spectrum of research approaches—ranging from focused to *multi-sited ethnography*—features a variety of possibilities, differentiated by time and place, for selecting situations and settings for observation as well as materials (BREIDENSTEIN, HIRSCHAUER, KALTHOFF & NIESWAND, 2015; HIRSCHAUER, 2014). With relational ethnography, DESMOND (2014) developed a method that is genuinely geared toward network phenomena. For field work, he suggested the following heuristic to guide the researcher in exploring the object of research: "(1) fields rather than places; (2) boundaries rather than bounded groups; (3) processes rather than processed people; and (4) cultural conflict rather than groupculture" (p.548). This heuristic reveals basic assumptions, namely, that situations are more than places and that groups can also be embedded, that the focus is on processes and not on the actors alone, and that in conflicts certain regularities and rules in networks become (more) apparent. Exploration thus implies throwing the spotlight on the processual level of positioning, boundary-drawing, and ultimately networking. Exploration thus requires iteratively and cyclically sounding out which relationships and processes of ordering are relevant to the object of research and in which situations they emerge specifically. In an ethnographic setting, it is conceivable to employ "situational questions" (CLARKE, 2005, p.22) to explore ad hoc why something was done in this way and not otherwise and in which way references were made to other situations. A kind of overarching question to guide this inquiry is: "How do these conditions appear—make themselves felt as consequential—inside the empirical situation under examination?" (p.72). [45]

If interviews, or conversations and group discussions, are used in an interactionist fashion, we propose employing a *situation generator*. In the ideal case, its use prompts narrations (or descriptions, as the case may be; see KALLMEYER & SCHÜTZE, 1977; RIEMANN, 2003; SCHÜTZE, 2014) in which the narrator offers a detailed account of situations and the interactions unfolding in these contexts. By this means, the researcher can address references to social relationships and networks as well as their meanings (RIEMANN, 2003; ROSENTHAL, 2005). Let us assume we were interested in the genesis of and *networking* within a research collaboration. We could begin an interview with the collaborators with the following prompt: "Think of your existing research collaboration and how you and your project partners cooperate. Tell me, how do you actually work with one another? I am interested in anything that is important to you and, in your view, important for the research collaboration. Please feel free to take your time." This initial prompt—in which the interviewer refrains from further comments—gives the interviewee the opportunity to outline one or several situations and unfold her or his system of relevance. Only once this opening is exhausted should the interviewer follow up with immanent questions geared toward gaining a more precise picture of the conditions of interaction. Frequently,

the previous narration or description then facilitates addressing specific situations in greater detail. For example, "You previously mentioned that Professor X caused problems in a project meeting because of the way that he conducted himself. Please tell me in more detail what happened in this situation." Further immanent inquiry can then prompt elaboration of specific aspects of the situation (e.g., segments of interaction, actors, spatio-temporal settings) and thus specific conditions of action. This additionally requires making systematic reference to trans- and intersituational relations and indicating their situational significance (e.g., How does a specific relationship affect action in a specific interaction situation? Which generalized others play a role in this situation?) Exmanent follow-up questions serve to relate the vertical or horizontal relations of the situation to other situations (e.g., to what extent can key situations be identified by relating several other situations with one another?). We believe that situation generators can be applied in various interview formats (also in ethnographic conversations) to address various kinds of situations, be they concrete everyday encounters in a café, a crucial situation in life, or life in the countryside. In essence, the various techniques for designing and conducting interviews in qualitative social research have been discussed many times and in comprehensive fashion (GUBRIUM, HOLSTEIN, MARVASTI & MCKINNEY, 2012; PRZYBORSKI & WOHLRAB-SAHR, 2013; RIEMANN, 2003; ROSENTHAL, 2005). The situation generator does not represent a new kind of tool for interviewing but rather one that moves sensitivity to the exploration of situations to the center of interactionist network research. This owes itself to the tradition in network research to use name generators—thus to collect data on *alteri*—to depict networks (see Section 2.2). The situation generator is our interactionist answer to the demand that the method "needs to be extended from a name generator to a relation generator" (HERZ et al., 2015, §18). [46]

Situation generators can be combined with visual prompts. Qualitative interviews in the context of network research have shown that network maps can function as narration generators (DOBBIE et al., 2018; HOLLSTEIN & PFEFFER, 2010; HOLLSTEIN, TÖPFER & PFEFFER, 2020; RYAN et al., 2014).¹¹ Since, from an interactionist perspective, the focus is more on interaction than on actors, it would seem to lie close at hand, depending on the object of research, to utilize group

11 Interviews based on network maps are presumably the most-discussed method of data collection in qualitative network research. In this context, we must keep in mind, however, that network maps at best represent snapshots of networks (MARKHAM & LINDGREN, 2014; RYAN et al., 2014). Only via the accounts of the interviewees—and not simply via the static visualizations provided, for instance, by network maps—can we gain access to the embedded dynamics and meanings of social relationships (RYAN & D'ANGELO, 2018; RYAN et al., 2014). The task is to track down the multiple meanings of social relationships and networks and understand how they take effect in a situation, at just this moment, and in just this way. Accordingly, the focus should be on the perspective of the interviewee, that person's constructions and interpretations, that is, "the meaning this representation of reality has to the person being interviewed" (KRUSE, 2014, p.40). In engaging with the respective name generator, the interviewees themselves define the boundaries of their networks and who or what they refer to as a social relationship and consider a part of the network (similarly, BAILEY & MARSDEN, 1999; BEARMAN & PARIGI, 2004; RYAN et al., 2014). In this sense, network maps are not confined to picturing (living) persons but can pertain to any other entity or activity that might emerge as a relevant condition of action. For example, a deceased mother can act as an implicit adviser just as a musical idol can orient action or a pet can be an individual's best friend (similarly, HOLLSTEIN et al., 2020).

settings in particular (e.g., interviews with couples, group discussions, focus groups) to address interactive processes of negotiation.¹² [47]

4.3 Research as situated interaction(s)

In an interactionist understanding, empirical social research is invariably a situation or the interlinkage of multiple interactions and one that must therefore be reflexively incorporated into the analysis. Both the situatedness of those involved and the act of data collection have an influence on which data are generated and analyzed (similarly, CLARKE, 2005)—even if researchers evoke what appears to be naturalness and situations running their own course. In qualitative network research, there has been insufficient debate on how a reflexive analysis sensitive to situations might proceed. To live up to standards of appropriateness to the object of research and reflexivity in the research process, we stress the need to always systematically include the process of data collection in its chronology while considering the conditions of action (researchers, gatekeepers, interviewers, interviewees, techniques, materials, artifacts, gestalts of the situations in which data collection took place, etc.). Reflecting on interaction extends beyond reflecting on the subjectivity of the researchers. Such reflection demands asking questions such as, Which situational and interactive elements of data collection play which role in the process of gathering data? When and in which sequence (of meaning) are relationships and meanings mentioned in which way? When are interactions or narrations interrupted and how? To what extent does a specific follow-up question in an interview influence which narration about an interaction the interviewee elaborates in which way? When are which frames of reference activated? When are which references made? When do which contrasts become visible? How are all these things interlinked? Which role does the presence of the researcher play or the use of specific materials (e.g., maps, cameras, computers) in a situation? [48]

Networks and their meanings are situationally constructed in an interactive process and on the basis of symbols, even if the researcher deliberately seeks to influence the situation as little as possible (e.g., by means of a narrative prompt). To do justice to networking in processes of ordering in terms of the sense-making and social negotiations involved in situations (see Section 2.2.3), we need to critically question how linguistic categorizations¹³ (such as "friendship" or "closeness") are used and which meanings researchers implicitly attribute to them. Moreover, it is indispensable to systematically document all paths of inquiry

12 A method for exploring how several actors interact to negotiate networks, their boundaries, and specific positions is Net-Map (SCHIFFER & HAUCK, 2010). This method was developed as a means of accessing negotiations and mappings of governance arrangements via focus groups. This visual-participatory approach can be designed to tie in with an interactionist one. *Net-Map* is much better suited for capturing processes of interactive negotiation than the "classical" individual interview. The social arrangements that are most beneficial for Net-Map's interactionist use in group discussions are natural groups (i.e., groups that exist also in everyday life).

13 More than SI, ethnomethodology has emphasized the fact that language is always indexical: SCHÜTZ and LUCKMANN (1973, p.44) called language "a system of meanings" and underscored "that the meanings objectivate a sense produced in communicative processes, and that this sense points back to the original subjective meaning of encounters—of course, without being identical with it" (ibid.).

and analytical condensation (e.g., what leads me as a researcher to "choose" certain situations for exploration and inspection and not others?). [49]

4.4 Interpretative analysis as the inspection of social networks

In dealing with natural data or data generated by allowing the situation to run its course, the researcher faces the question of how these data are to be interpreted in line with interactionist network research. Inspecting social networks for the purpose of theory-building aims to explore and examine relations between analytical elements on the basis of empirical data. Taking the foundations of SI seriously means to conceptualize both social reality and empirical research as interactive processes of interpretation. An interactionist analysis must therefore consider interpretations of different orders and treat all of the researchers' readings of data as "interpretations of the already interpreted" (PRZYBORSKI & WOHLRAB-SAHR, 2013, p.16). In this vein, we must distinguish in the research process the interpretations of the research subjects themselves (first-order interpretations) from the representations generated in interaction in the research process (e.g., via data collected in an interview; second-order interpretations) and from the analytical readings of the researchers as they engage with the data (third-order interpretations).¹⁴ Indispensable for the inspection of data in this case is a methodical approach that involves and reflects on changes in perspective and direction, on the posing of many questions, as well as on the development of different lines of interpretation (BLUMER (1986 [1969])). [50]

An analytical visual tool that can be made fruitful for interactionist network research is mapping. In CLARKE's situational analysis maps of situations, positions, or social worlds are considered as "devices for analyzing relationality" that are "very much part of the Chicago tradition" (2005, p.30). As a flexible instrument, mapping can help to depict interlinkages between various entities and processes of interaction in a way that is sensitive to the situation. In applying maps as an analytical instrument, mapping pursues an approach that is different from data collection by means of network maps. Whereas the latter is first and foremost used as a cognitive aid for researchers and their subjects in the process of data collection and a means of interactively generating representations in the situation of data collection (second-order interpretation), maps in the sense of situational analysis are "devices to materialize questions," "great boundary objects," and "good at handling multiplicity, heterogeneity, and messiness" (p.30). Hence, they form a kind of variable analytic-visual memo that serves the researchers to reconstruct social relationships and networks or situations (third-order interpretation). What must be borne in mind in the process is that visualization of any kind represents an abstraction or formalization. By this means, other data (e.g., textual data) can be "dissected" so as to render relationships and networks visible in the first place. Visualizations at the same time always contain embedded meanings and processes that, paradoxically, are

¹⁴ How to deal analytically with different levels of interpretation or construction as well as the fact that there are divergent versions of social reality has been discussed elsewhere, for instance, with regard to interview data (KRUSE, 2014). It is crucial in this respect to also reflect on the institutionalized positions of the researchers as part of the analysis.

or can be made invisible via visualization (simplified in the form of nodes and edges). For this reason, network research that makes prominent use of visualization requires special sensitivity when it comes to the representation, embedding, and interpretation of network visualizations. For instance, a conclusive visual representation must always be guided by the *primacy of empirical evidence* and reflexively related to the processual nature of social reality and thus also to the research itself. [51]

To date, a fundamental analytical method geared toward network analysis and informed by interactionism is still lacking (an exception is partly qualitative structural analysis [QSA]¹⁵; HERZ et al., 2015). Different strategies have evolved for analyzing data in line with symbolic interactionism. Approaches that employ a related methodology are grounded theory methodology¹⁶ (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS, 1987; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998 [1990]), CLARKE's situational analysis (2005) in particular, but also GOFFMAN's frame analysis (1974). Such method(ologie)s require closer scrutiny as to their contribution to a(n) (interactionist) network perspective. At the same time, we still lack network-analytical methodologies that decidedly link methods of data collection and analysis in the vein of a holistic approach (an exception is DESMOND, 2014). Whereas an interactionist perspective in line with BLUMER (1986 [1969]) is more a heuristic for doing research, the challenge for an interactionist network research lies in designing, experimenting with, and, above all, documenting suitable procedures that are appropriate to the object of research. [52]

15 On the surface, QSA's methodical approach is guided by grounded-theory methodology (especially STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998 [1990]). QSA was developed by analyzing qualitative interviews based on network maps, and it draws on network-theoretical concepts to sensitize the researcher to the structural aspects of different interpretations of networks. QSA initially considers the interview and the map separately. First, the network map (which, when completed, results in an image of the network) is interpreted for structure by employing sensitizing network concepts. The researcher then develops hypotheses with which to focus on interview segments and analyze them sequentially (HERZ et al., 2015). From an interactionist perspective, we suggest, in modification of the QSA proposal, to direct greater attention to the interconnection of map and interview over the course of the data collection in order to more appropriately consider the situatedness of the interview and thus enhance the reflexive quality of the analysis and orient it more toward the object under study]. In our reading, QSA, initially developed on the basis of individual interviews using network maps, can be further developed to be applied to data that rely more on letting the situation run its own course.

16 BLUMER published his methodological principles in 1969; GLASER and STRAUSS had already published their methodological work "The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research" two years earlier in 1967. Neither one of these books made reference to the other (STRÜBING, 2005), although both bodies of work feature many methodological parallels and similarities (e.g., constant comparison as a basic concept underlying the entire research process, looking for minimum and maximum contrasts when sampling, analyzing data, and developing (possible) lines of interpretation). At the same time, we again encounter the premises of SI in grounded theory methodology, especially in the tradition of STRAUSS (1987; see also STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998 [1990]), at least implicitly. Explicit reference has been made to SI in several other versions of grounded-theory methodology, which have been spelled out in more detail in terms of method and methodology especially over the last 20 years (ALDIABAT & LE NAVENEC, 2011; CHAMBERLAIN-SALAUN, MILLS & USHER, 2013; CLARKE, 2005; MILLIKEN & SCHREIBER, 2001, 2012). Grounded theory methodology should therefore by no means automatically be considered the method(ological) extension of SI (for a critical discussion, see HANDBERG, THORNE, MIDTGAARD, NIELSEN & LOMBORG, 2015). Yet it is indeed the most prominent approach to draw on SI as its theoretical foundation, at least partially and in some of its varieties.

5. Interactionist Network Research—an Outline

In this contribution, we have considered the assumptions of SI, with a focus on Herbert BLUMER's classical work and how these assumptions apply to network research. On this basis, we have proposed an approach between interpretive paradigm and network research that—with a few exceptions—has attracted little systematic attention so far. Starting from the theoretical and methodological foundations of qualitative network research as a desideratum, we have explored the question as to which conclusions one can draw from SI for the conception of social networks as well as for the process of qualitative network research. With reference to the basic assumptions of SI, we first outlined a relational perspective of reality that can provide a fruitful theoretical foundation for the concept of a network (Section 2.1). From an SI perspective, social networks can be grasped conceptually as networks of relationships that gain relevance only by being attributed meaning. Meanings are produced, reproduced, or also altered in social interaction. In this vein, social networks are always conceived as being meaningfully structured, interactively negotiated, situated, and processual (Section 2.2.3). An interactionist network perspective focuses on the level of social meaning and is suitable to the specific kind of objects that involve interactive processes of *networking*, be they processes of network formation or social negotiations that are shaped by networks (Section 2.3). This theoretical approach to social relationships and networks—when conceived as a holistic one—yields decided method(ological) starting points. An interactionist network perspective addresses social networks primarily by reference to situations and their multiple interlinkages. At the methodical level, we have proposed exploring situations by using a situation generator and inspecting them analytically, for instance, with the aid of mapping techniques (Section 4). This interactionist approach makes fruitful use of the basic premises of interpretive social research and emphasizes that research itself must be understood and reflected upon as situated and an interlinkage of interactions. Situated research is particularly attuned to taking the interactively generated results of research into account—and in so doing also the role of the researchers and the research process itself—and is sensitive to interpretations of different orders. By spelling this out, we seek to encourage and contribute to a *reflexive turn* in (qualitative) network research. [53]

In this article we have been concerned with developing an interactionist perspective of (and within) a qualitative network research in its own right that goes beyond being merely a counterprogram to standardized network research. We have proposed a theoretical and methodological foundation for and sensitization toward a methodical-holistic approach for the study of social networks from a specific—interactionist—vantage point. In so doing, we have shown a path for countering network research's amnesia when it comes to actors' constructive efforts (SALVINI, 2010). Our approach—crystallized around BLUMER's (1986 [1969]) theme of interlinkage and an interactionist concept of situation—is designed to get a grasp on *social networks as a process of networking*. Interactionist network researchers redirect their attention from structures as forms to the *how* of meaningfully structured and symbolically

negotiated *networking*. In the process, the interactionist approach to social order is anything but astructural (similarly, CROSSLEY, 2010a; DENNIS & MARTIN, 2007; FINE & KLEINMAN, 1983; MUSOLF, 1992; SALVINI, 2010; for an overview, see LOW & BOWDEN, 2020) but represents a shift in perspective toward a processual and situationally sensitive stance in research (similarly, SCHWALBE, 2020). [54]

In contrast to other approaches, we view social networks as a condition, part, and result of interactive processes of negotiation and address actors primarily at the level of social meaning, as embedded in interaction. We see as essential for structuring a qualitative research process that the researcher specify and reflect on the level of meaning that the research questions focus on or the objects of research relate to, as this is (or should be) the basis for crucial methodological and methodical decisions (HOLLSTEIN & ULLRICH, 2003; MRUCK & MEY, 2005). SI thus represents a specific approach to reality that is distinct from other approaches. Its continuous reference to meaning still continues to receive too little attention in network research (FUHSE, 2016). Symbolic interactionists stress a situation's social meaning and the immediate experience of the "'here and now' of lived life, of social relationships" (KELLER, 2012, p.10). From this, we conclude that situations are *one* way of approaching the meaning of social relationships and social networks on the basis of the premises of SI. There have been only a few systematic attempts to provide a comprehensive foundation for qualitative network research. Within phenomenological network research (BERNHARD, 2018; FUHSE, 2008; WHITE, 2008), for example, researchers draw on similar and partly identical principles of the interpretive paradigm (for a comparison of SI and phenomenology, see VERHOEVEN, 1991). What is still lacking, however, is to systematically demonstrate the potential and limitations of as well as overlap and potential for connections between various approaches in qualitative network research. [55]

Finally, an interactionist network perspective also has its limitations. There are objects that can be rendered suitable for qualitative network research but are *not* particularly well suited for being addressed by an SI perspective. They give reason to think some more about the further contouring of qualitative network research. For instance, practices of action in the narrow sense, namely, in the form of physically congealed phenomena, have so far not been sufficiently conceptualized from an SI perspective (STRÜBING, 2005). For incorporating issues of physicality and materiality, practice-theoretical approaches would thus seem more appropriate (RECKWITZ, 2002, 2003). Emotions or the content of texts, pictures, and artifacts should be approached in an appropriate, methodologically well-founded manner. In our view, this applies to stories (WHITE, 2008) that arise from entanglement in networks.¹⁷ For this purpose, an approach more along phenomenological lines would suggest itself (BERNHARD, 2018). Ultimately, an interactionist approach is capable of identifying neither deep

17 In the tradition of WHITE (2008), the meanings of social relationships and networks are considered to be inscribed in stories, which implies that networks are empirically accessible via these stories. In SI, there has nevertheless been little consideration of stories and storytelling (an exception is COUSINEAU, 2020).

structures (as, e.g., objective hermeneutics is) nor basic rules of communication (as in the case of narrative analysis)—both of these are more likely to be situated at the level of "objective meaning" (HOLLSTEIN & ULLRICH, 2003, p.37). What interactionist network research illuminates is the creation and negotiation of social networks, and this precisely is the contribution of a network research that, in the classical sense, is more interested in the formal structure of networks. In the interactionist vein, structures are rules and regularities that are generated, stabilized, altered, or even dissolved in social interaction. [56]

In terms of appropriateness to the object of research advocated in SI, we propose allowing for different methodical approaches to the extent empirically necessary and combining methods. Of course, various combinations, as have also been discussed for *mixed-methods* approaches in network research (DOMÍNGUEZ & HOLLSTEIN, 2014), are conceivable. However, the combination of qualitative and quantitative social research frequently undermines the basic premises of the respective method(ologie)s that are being combined. Avoiding the perils of methodological opportunism (DIAZ-BONE, 2006; SALVINI, 2010) requires one to continually recognize, when combining approaches, the limitations and possibilities of the explanatory power of the results with regard to each of the approaches' basic assumptions about reality (BAUR, KELLE & KUCKARTZ, 2017; SMALL, 2011). Successful *mixed-methods* research in the sense of methodical holism can only be achieved either by protecting the integrity of the respective perspectives or providing a methodological foundation for the methods mix in its own right. [57]

To conclude, we want to discuss the consequences for the further advancement of qualitative network research. SI has enriched network research less in terms of providing specific techniques and procedures rather than offering theoretical and methodological foundations underpinning the basic premises for specific kinds of research objects. The fact that qualitative social research always depends on given empirical reality and by necessity should be viewed as a "developmental laboratory" (STRAUSS, 2006, p.481) is thus inherent in SI. What we need to further jointly develop an interactionist network research as outlined above is additional conceptual and empirical experimentation, documentation, and reflection. In this vein, it would, for instance, be possible (and useful) to further elaborate and systematize the concept of social relationships that has remained unspecified in this article. In principle, it is necessary—and this applies not only to interactionist network research—to develop empirically grounded terminology and concepts to coherently underpin methodologies and methods as well as to be able to differentiate them (SALVINI, 2010). If qualitative network researchers were to accomplish this, this specifically would offer a particular opportunity to enrich network research by drawing on different theoretical perspectives. With our interactionist foundation, we have presented a proposal for the theoretical and method(ological) contours of a distinct qualitative network research in its own right. [58]

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